

*into the*  
LIGHT  
*of*  
DAY

THE FIVE CLANS SERIES

KAROLINE  
RAYNE

# Into the Light of Day

Karoline Rayne

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## Author's Note

This book contains content that may be troubling to some readers. Including and not limited to: Language, graphic sexual content, talk of past child abuse (physical & emotional-MMC), sibling abuse, MMF (with MM content), breath play, unaliving

To all those who think they are unworthy of love...

You are.



# Prologue

Twenty years earlier

Tobias tossed his bag up onto the top bunk and climbed in after it. Laying back he stared up at the wooden ceiling, appreciating the silence more than he thought he would. With five sisters at home things were noisy by default, not that he didn't love them all dearly. However, being the only boy in the family made him feel out of place sometimes.

It had taken months to convince his mother to let him leave home and join the military as soon as he turned fifteen. His father was a little easier to convince since he too had spent some time in service.

“It'll build character, Clara,” his father had argued.

His mother sighed before finally leaning in to kiss his cheek. “Just be safe, my son.”

Tobias wasn't going to look for trouble, that wasn't in his nature but he was happy to be away from home and to have a small place in the barracks to call his own. Though, he wondered where his roommate was having expected him to

already be there. Instead, Tobias was left wondering what kind of person he would be. All he could hope for was someone he could get along with and hopefully be friends, since he didn't have very many of those, generally speaking.

Two consecutive loud bangs almost made Tobias jump out of bed. The door had been thrown open so forcefully he could see the dent in the wall, and then shut with equal force. A deep groan reached his ears and he sat up, his feet dangling over the edge of the bed.

A figure slid down the door, an arm wrapped around his middle, and gritted his teeth in pain. His unruly red curls fell into his face.

“Are you alright?” Tobias quietly asked in an attempt not to startle him. He jumped down from his bed.

The other boy snapped his head up and Tobias was greeted with a pair of soft green eyes.

“I'll be fine,” he muttered, pushing himself to his feet.

“I took the top if you don't mind.”

“Bottom is better.” He fell down onto the lower bunk.

Tobias stood awkwardly, shifting his weight between his feet. Eventually he shoved his hand forward. “Tobias Victorian.”

“Antony Devarik.” He chuckled when Tobias's eyes went wide, his hand dropping. “You no doubt recognize my family name. Yes, my brother is the Chieftain, and no I don't give a shit. Any other questions?”

Tobias sputtered for a moment. Never in his wildest imagination did he think he'd end up as Antony Devarik's roommate.

"No," he muttered.

"Good." Antony fell back against his pillow with a groan. "I'm going to lie here for a little bit."

Tobias nodded, climbing back up into his own bed. He laid there for a moment before leaning over the side. "If you happen to fall asleep, would you like me to wake you when they call for dinner?"

Antony nodded with a small smile. There was something about it that made Tobias's stomach flip.

"I would like that."

Tobias smiled back before lying back down. He went back to staring at the ceiling, wondering now what a wild turn this was. This chance meeting would change his life forever.

## Chapter One

Anthony dismissed the necessity of sleep. Twenty-five years of nightmares, which still lingered in his mind, would do that. He thought he would have gone crazy a long time ago. That something he had seen would finally push him over that invisible edge into madness.

But there he sat, perched on the windowsill looking out into the moonlit gardens below. Leaning his face against the cool glass, twisting the eyepatch around his fingers. His blind eye faced outwards since he feared turning that eye to the room at large. It had become a way to protect himself so that no one could seek up on his right side, especially if he couldn't see them coming.

A notepad rested on his lap with a small piece of charcoal on top. Charcoal was messy, he knew that; his fingers were already stained black. However, there was something about the medium that really allowed him to see and to create. Drawing was his outlet for more than half his life, having kept him sane for so long.

Antony turned his attention to the picture he was working on. His thumb traced along the figure's jaw to help soften the line.

She stared back at him. A stubborn chin, a pert nose, full pouty lips, and the most expressive eyes. Though he drew in black and gray, he knew those eyes to be blue, like the morning sky right before dawn, deep and bright. The soft waves of her hair fell around that unmistakable face.

Whoever she was.

Antony started seeing her in his dreams about a year and a half previous. He didn't know who she was, where they would meet or when. In the beginning, her face was hazy for the longest time, but it came into increasing focus. When she did, Antony took to drawing everything he could remember about her, until he had pages and pages of this girl he didn't know.

The creak of the floorboards pulled him out of his drawing fog. A state he often found himself where the rest of the world no longer existed. He snapped the notepad shut as the door connecting the drawing room with his bedchamber opened.

His lover leaned against the doorframe, strong arms crossed over a broad and lean chest. A loose pair of sleep pants hung dangerously low on his hips and a dark curl of hair fell into equally dark eyes.

"I hope I didn't wake you," Antony said, setting the notepad on the window seat. He went to the sideboard where there was a pitcher of clean water to rinse the charcoal from his fingers.

“Only when I roll over and you are not there anymore,” the other man replied, pushing away from the doorframe. “Was it the nightmares again?”

“Tobias,” Antony sighed. “I appreciate what you are trying to do, but they cannot be helped.”

“You’ve been telling me that for the first six years and now for the last eight. If I hadn’t lost you for five years in between, you would have kept telling me.” Tobias cocked his head to one side.

“And I’ve had them for twenty-four, so I like to think I know what’s going on inside my own head.” It was a blatant lie and Tobias could always see right through it.

Ever since they were made roommates at fifteen years old, Tobias was one of the few people who ever tried to protect Antony. When Antony would return to their room, battered and bruised, he said nothing and offered whatever comfort he could. Antony was forever grateful for that friendship, a friendship that blossomed into something more as they came of age.

“You can believe whatever you want, Antony. But the denial you live in will only catch up with you,” Tobias said. He wrapped his arms around the taller man from behind, resting his chin on Antony’s shoulder.

The warm press of the body against his back was more comforting than Antony ever wanted to admit, even through the material of his shirt. Antony never allowed anyone as close as Tobias.

“It’s not denial, it’s self-preservation.”

“Then why do you torture yourself with that notepad?”

“It helps me process the nightmares.”

Tobias snaked a hand up the back of Antony’s neck, taking a handful of dark red hair and pulling back. Antony groaned; a light kiss pressed to his lips.

“If you let me in,” Tobias whispered. “I could help you.”

“I can’t.” Antony pulled away, separating them.

“Can’t or won’t? There is a difference, Antony.”

“Tobias, we can’t—”

“You saw her again.” It wasn’t even a question.

Antony made an uncomfortable noise, wiping a hand over his face and through his hair. “You say it like I’m doing this on purpose. I have no control over it. Not now, not ever.”

“I know what you keep in that book of yours.” Tobias gestured to the notepad on the windowsill. “It’s full of drawings of her. You can’t get her out of your head. Who is she, Antony?”

“I don’t know,” Antony murmured. It wasn’t a complete lie. He knew what she would mean to him, but not her name.

“Don’t give me that bullshit. I’ve known you too long and better than anyone else, including your sister. So, I will only ask one more time, who is she?”

Tobias deserved the truth, Antony knew that. He only realized for himself what she was going to be and now, being

forced to say it out loud was going to hurt Tobias.

Antony sighed, the words coming out so quiet. “She’s my wife.”

Tobias recoiled like he’d been slapped in the face. “Wow.”

Antony stepped closer and grabbed Tobias by the shoulders, his fingers digging into the hard muscle. “Listen to me. I can’t control what I see or how much I see. I only saw tonight what she would mean to me. However, that could be a month from now, a year, five years. But that doesn’t mean you matter any less.”

Before Tobias could argue, Antony crushed his mouth against his. It took a moment for Tobias’ frozen lips to finally move beneath his. Antony licked the seam of his lips, and when they parted, he slipped his tongue inside. The kiss consumed them. Tobias gripped the front of Antony’s shirt, pulling him closer.

Antony walked them back until the shorter man hit the wall. He kissed down his neck and over his shoulder. Licking and nipping his small puckered nipples, down the firm stomach, earning him a deep groan. Sinking down to his knees, he lightly rubbed a hand across the growing bulge in Tobias’s sleep pants.

“Antony,” he whimpered, threading his fingers through the red curls.

His own dick twitched as Antony eased the waistband down. Tobias always had an impressively thick cock, standing at full



attention. Antony wrapped a hand around the base and leaned in. His tongue teased the slit and the underside of the head. Tobias moaned, his fingers tightening in Antony's hair, something Antony enjoyed. It urged Antony forward, licking up the leaking precum before sucking the whole thing into his mouth.

"Fuck," Tobias cursed, his hips jutting forward.

Antony made quick work of sucking in his cheeks and enthusiastically bobbing his head. He worked his way down until he felt it in the back of his throat. This was when he turned his eyes open to see the look of pure pleasure on Tobias's face and it was all his doing. Antony enjoyed this too much to ever give it up. While he never wanted to admit it, he needed this, he needed Tobias, who was the only stable thing in his life.

"I'm going to come," Tobias panted out with little warning.

His cock twitched in Antony's mouth, who pulled back to suck harder on the tip, drinking down every drop.

Antony hummed deep in his throat and licked his lips, tucking Tobias back in his pants.

Tobias tugged him to his feet, his fingers still in the taller man's hair. Leaning their foreheads together, Tobias sighed.

"You will always mean something to me," Antony murmured.

"I have been by your side for the last eight years and sometimes, it feels like you are pushing me away."

Antony brushed some of the hair from Tobias's face. "No matter what happens, you will always have a place with me. Let's go back to bed."

Tobias just nodded. Their fingers intertwined as Antony led them back to the bedroom. Settling back under the blankets, Tobias nuzzled up against Antony's back again.

Antony closed his eyes and tried to make himself sleep, even if he knew the effort was fruitless. Not having to be alone, helped to settle him more than he expected it to. He felt Tobias's hot breath on the back of his neck.

"I know you will have to marry one day," Tobias murmured. "It just doesn't make it any easier to have to let you go."

Antony didn't respond and continued to pretend to be asleep, fairly certain that he wasn't supposed to hear Tobias's whispers. His heart ached and Antony was going to have to find the courage to tell Tobias that it might be sooner than either of them wanted.

## Chapter Two

*Eight years, five months, twelve days.*  
**E** That's how long it has been since the fire that took her father's life.

That's how long she had to navigate life without him. Without his smile, without his encouragement, without those all-consuming hugs that could make any pain go away.

*Eight years, five months, nine days.*

That's how long it was since she learned the truth of her parentage.

That the father she knew and loved was not really her father after all.

Isobel stood among the stone monuments, her fingers brushing off the foliage debris. She knelt down in front of one as she worked to pick the growing moss from the name which adorned it.

*Rudolf Hartmann*

*Son. Brother. Husband. Father.*

The tears grew thick in her throat.

“Papa.” Her whispered word was lost to the wind. “Why did you have to leave me?”

A light breeze fluttered by caressing her cheek. It was like she could feel him, that he heard her plea. There was nothing Isobel wouldn't do to have her father back, to have just one more day with him. Because the day he died, her world started to unravel.

Standing up she moved over to the next headstone, giving it the same treatment as her father's. Cleaning away the loose leaves, she rested her hand on the cold marble.

*Six years, four months, nineteenth days*

That would be the last time she saw her mother's smile. Though the expression was lost on Johanna a long time before that. Johanna never recovered from her husband's death and Isobel watched her mother slowly slip further and further away from her.

There had been a time where Isobel wondered why she couldn't be enough to help her mother. However, there was no helping Johanna until one day she was simply gone. Isobel was told that her mother's heart was simply too broken and finally gave out. She didn't want to believe it at first. Maybe because Isobel didn't know what it was like to love that hard.

Isobel loved her family, but even she knew that wasn't quite the same as a deep seeded emotional love. But how much

more of her family could she lose before there was nothing left?

She kissed her fingers, pressing them to her mother's stone.

The one on the other side of Rudolf's was new. So new that it hadn't gathered any leaves yet.

*One week, three days*

That's when she said goodbye to her beloved grandmother for the last time. Amalie had been sick for well over a year and Isobel hardly ever left her side. A second mother to her, Amalie filled the void left by Rudolf and Johanna's deaths. Her wickedly clever grandma who always said what was on her mind, much to the chagrin of those around her.

Isobel felt a small smile thinking of Amalie and the last thing she had said to her:

“Don't be afraid to love. Embrace every opportunity and find yourself a husband who will keep you satisfied.”

Shaking her head with a small chuckle, Isobel turned to head back. She barely made it back into the courtyard, when a loud giggle reached her ears and a head of bright red curls ran into her knees.

“Isbel!” The little girl yelled, squeezing Isobel's legs.

Isobel bent down and scooped her up, resting her on her hip. “Where is your mama, Emrys?”

Emrys shrugged, resting her head on Isobel's shoulder, who gave her a kiss. They walked back towards the palace. Isobel

frowned, wondering where Ilaria was, since it was extremely unusual for her daughter to roam around outside unattended by someone. The halls were eerily quiet as they neared the common family sitting room. Isobel grew more concerned as they got closer.

Had Emrys really gotten away from her mother without anyone even noticing?

She set Emrys back on her feet. As she opened the door, Emrys dashed back in with giggles before Isobel even got the door cracked open.

What in the—

“Happy birthday!”

Isobel jumped back, hitting the wall. Glancing around the room, she found her family – her aunt, uncle and cousins.

“What is this?” she whispered in shock.

Ilaria slid next to her and wrapped an arm around the younger woman’s shoulders. “It’s not every day you turn nineteen. We wanted to do something special for you since you do so much for us.”

Isobel gave her aunt a tight hug. “Thank you.”

When she was released, the twins ran up to her next, giving her big hugs. Leopold shoving a small bouquet of wildflowers into her hand.

“We picked these for you,” he said with a toothy grin.

“And this,” Artem declared, handing her a box.

Isobel was almost afraid to open it. The twins were known to get into a wide array of less than pleasant things. She glanced up at their mother and Ilaria smirked.

“Don’t worry, I talked them out of the mouse they found,” she said with a chuckle.

Isobel slowly opened the box, holding it away from her face. The last time those two gave her a box something jumped out. When nothing did, she looked down at a rock. It was easily the size of her fist, smooth and opalescent. For a rock, it was actually very pretty and could definitely be used to make something equally as nice. She gave the twins another quick hug.

“Thank you, boys,” Isobel murmured, kissing each of their cheeks.

They made disgusted faces, wiping the kiss off as they pulled away. It only made Isobel laugh and it felt really good. She didn’t realize how sad she had been before walking into this room. But to be surrounded by what was left of her family, a lump formed in her throat.

She blinked back unexpected tears. Her uncle embraced her next and she buried her face in his chest, much like she always did as a child. His arms wrapped around her and held her close. There was a sense of warmth and comfort in his embrace. He was someone she could always turn to no matter what happened.

“Happy birthday, sweetpea,” he whispered to her.

The use of the name he had called her all throughout her childhood opened the floodgates and Isobel sobbed into his chest. His arms tightened around her as he murmured soft words into her ear. She hardly even heard what he said but it didn't matter.

He was always there for her, regardless of what happened. He was there when her father died, allowing her to sleep in his bed whenever she wanted, to feel close to someone again. He was there after her mother finally slipped away, even if he had already taken much of her care unto himself already. Even when her grandmother died, his own mother, he worried more about her than he did himself.

“Uncle Bash,” Isobel whispered, pulling away to look up into his face. He gave her a small soft smile. “Thank you. For everything.”

“We haven't gotten to the good part yet,” Sebastian responded. “Come sit, we have other surprises for you.”

“As long as the twins didn't actually find something slimy,” Isobel teased as Sebastian led her over to the table.

“Decidedly not.”

Ilaria joined them a moment later, the children already sent to play with their nannies. She fixed them all with a cup of tea.

“There are two other gifts we wanted to give you,” Sebastian started, his fingers tapping a small long box on the table. “But I thought it best to just do it between the three of us.”



Ilaria reached over and took hold of Isobel's hand. "You know we are always here for you and just want you to be happy."

"I know," Isobel replied with a sigh. "It's just hard when the hurt is so fresh."

"We all miss her. She wouldn't want us to be sad for her, but smile at all the memories," Sebastian added.

"Even if she said the most ridiculous things sometimes. Grandmama was just very special." Isobel wiped away a wayward tear:

"Yes, she was," Sebastian said before sliding the box over to her. Isobel frowned as she picked it up. "She wanted you to have this for your birthday and made me promise to give it to you today, not a moment sooner."

"That sounds like her." Isobel flipped open the lid to the box, her mouth falling open. On a thick black velvet band, hung a large red stone surrounded by gold filigree, the light catching it and making it sparkle. It wasn't something her grandmother wore often if ever, but it was Isobel's favorite piece in her entire jewelry box. "How did she know?"

Ilaria reached around, carefully pulling the choker from the box and securing it behind Isobel's neck. "She knew everything. Remember when she figured out I was pregnant before I even knew myself?"

A wiggly smile touched Isobel's lips as she reached up to touch the pendent. "The first time or the second time?"

Ilaria laughed. “Both, I suppose. We want you to be happy too, Isobel. So, that leads us to the gift from me and Bash.” Ilaria gestured to something tucked into the corner of the room out of sight.

Isobel slowly rose from her seat, her eyes growing wider with every step. Kneeling down, she ran her fingers over the smooth polished wood of the trunk. Her name was painted in gold surrounded by some small white lilies. It was beautiful.

“But this is a...” Isobel started but couldn’t finish the sentence.

“A travel trunk,” Sebastian finished for her.

“Why would I need a travel trunk unless,” she paused, turning wide eyes to her aunt and uncle. “You’re not sending me away, are you?”

“Good gracious, Isobel, never!” Ilaria said immediately. “Why would you even say that?”

“I just thought that you wouldn’t want me around anymore. I’m grown up now and since I’m not yours, I’ve just become a burden.”

The words came out faster than her brain could process she was even saying them. She hadn’t meant to. She wasn’t even sure that’s how she really felt but she couldn’t stop the wave that overtook her even if she wanted to. It was like every worst case thought that ran through her mind got blurred out in that second. The last thing she wanted was to be away from her family.

Sebastian knelt down beside her, placing his hands on her shoulders, getting her to meet his eyes. “Listen to me, Isobel. You are mine, even if we choose not to acknowledge it publicly, just as much as my other children. I love you no less than I love them. And even if you were simply my niece, that wouldn’t change the way I care about you. So, I don’t want you ever thinking like that again.”

Isobel nodded. “Yes, Uncle Bash.”

He leaned in and kissed her forehead. “Now do you want to know why we really got you this trunk?”

“Yes, please.”

“We leave in a month to visit Ilaria’s brother in Drakos. The children are finally older enough to travel, and we are going as a family and that includes you.”

Isobel stared between Sebastian and Ilaria speechless. She was finally going to be able to go somewhere? To be able to leave Ulrich, even for a short period of time? The thought alone set her heart racing.

She launched herself at Sebastian, nearly knocking him to the ground.

“Thank you, Uncle Bash. This means more to me than you will ever know.”

## Chapter Three

Tobias turned up the collar of his coat and shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. It was unseasonably cold for this time of year. The smell of snow tickled the inside of his nose but thankfully there wasn't a flake in the otherwise gray sky. It rather reflected his mood, Tobias considered as he walked along the narrow path from the palace down to the upper town.

His head was a mess and his heart was no better. Sometimes it seemed to him that every choice he had ever made in life was going to lead him back down this road. Torn between sorrow and heartbreak. The promise of a future and then the roadblock that was forever going to hold him back. He considered retirement many times; to leave the military behind, to leave his position behind. To move away from the palace and back into town.

He had written his resignation letter barely a day after receiving his post. It currently sat gathering dust in a drawer in his office but it was there. His way out if it ever came to that.

But what would he do then?

Tobias knew he had no practical skills outside of military tactics and weapons usage. Nineteen years of training and discipline was not so readily replaced.

He turned down a narrow side road that led along the outskirts of the town center. It was quieter here and he could move faster without being stopped. The people he knew meant well, but he didn't have the patience for small talk. Instead, he walked briskly down the side alleyways until he reached the last row of homes on the hill that overlooked the lower portion of town. The road there continued to lead down to the docks.

A small gray house sat at the end of the row, its wooden roof a little more worn than the others with paint that had begun to peel off. Tobias sighed with a shake of his head. He wanted to repaint the damn thing over the summer when it was at least warm out. Now, it would be cold and tedious work. He stopped in front of the door and saw the curtains in the side window flutter. Before he even got the chance to knock, the door was pulled wide open.

“Look what finally decided to come home,” Ophelia hissed when she saw him, crossing her arms and leaning her shoulder against the door frame.

Tobias felt his molars grind together. He and Ophelia were the closest in age of all six siblings, as they were barely a year apart. Though he greatly enjoyed being the slightly older of the two.

“Are you going to let me in?” Tobias asked, mirroring her posture. “It’s cold out here.”

Ophelia snorted. “Why are you here?”

“Aren’t I allowed to come visit my favorite little sister?” He pinched her cheek as he shouldered past her and into the main room.

“I thought I was your favorite, Toby,” Daphne pouted from her place on the floor, a massive quilt sprawled out in front of her.

Tobias leaned down to press a light kiss to her forehead. His youngest sister was indeed his favorite but he wouldn’t let the other four sisters know that.

“What are you working on?” he asked.

Daphne smoothed her hands over the multicolored fabric, depicting a sunrise over the water. “Something for the bazaar next week. I have several small ones already but thought a bigger showpiece would be nice.”

“It’s been a family effort,” Ophelia interjected, retaking her place on the other side of the quilt. She picked up a corner and stabbed her needle into it. “Not that you know anything about it.”

“Ophi!” Daphne explained. “Our brother is a very important person now that he’s been made Commander General.”

“Oh yes, forgive me for forgetting how important you are now, Toby,” Ophelia sneered. “Maybe if I sucked Antony Devarik’s dick, I could be important too.”

Tobias literally felt his jaw drop open. He couldn't quite comprehend what had just come out of his sister's mouth. Was this really what people thought of him? He knew how hard he worked, how much he sacrificed to earn his place. Antony offered him the position eight years ago, but Tobias resisted until he knew he earned it three years later.

Even Daphne stared at her sister with wide eyes.

"Ophelia," Tobias started slowly. "I don't know—"

"I lost my position because of you!" Ophelia yelled back. "The little girl who I watched; her mother decided she didn't want me around anymore. That my relation to you would only end up causing them problems."

"That's absurd," Tobias bit out. "What do I have to do with your job?"

"Nothing! That's my point. You live in your own little bubble up there in the palace, you don't realize what people are whispering down here. They worry Antony will eventually snap like most of his wretched family and will be no better than Maxim was. And my employer worried that if something happened, that I would go complaining to you and then have to face the wrath of Antony Devarik." Ophelia threw her hands up like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Tobias groaned, running a hand over his face and through his hair. Getting into a fight with Ophelia was the last thing he wanted when he decided to come here.

“But Antony isn’t like Maxim,” Tobias tried explaining but it even sounded weak to his ears.

Just as Ophelia went to say more, a door to another room in the house creaked open.

“What are you two yelling about now?”

Tobias whipped his head around to find his mother standing in the doorway, a dish towel draped over her shoulder and her apron covered in flour. He couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face. Crossing the room in a few short strides, he enveloped her in a tight embrace.

“Mama,” he said, kissing her cheek.

She smiled back up at him. “Are you hungry?”

Tobias nodded his head with a chuckle. His mother had a distinct penchant for feeding people, not that Tobias objected.

“I will be right along, Mama,” he whispered to her. He then turned back to his sisters. “Please, Ophelia, a word.”

Ophelia rolled her eyes with a huff, but got up anyway. The pair moved to a quieter corner of the room. Tobias tried to keep his posture relaxed but what Ophelia had told him didn’t sit well at all.

“I know you don’t want to hear it, but I’m sorry. My position and those I affiliate with should not have any bearing on the way you are treated. I know how much that job meant to you and I will do everything to make this right.”



“And I know how much yours means to you,” Ophelia replied quietly. “You’ve earned everything you have ever received, Toby and I’m sorry for insinuating otherwise. I envy your happiness.”

Tobias sighed. If only he were actually that happy. “Don’t be envious of me. It’s harder than it seems. But I will make this up to you, Ophelia. I promise.”

They shared a quick embrace before Tobias excused himself to seek his mother out in the kitchen.

Clara Janus Victorian had always been a force of nature, at least in Tobias’s mind. There was nothing she couldn’t do, especially after bearing six children. Even now when they were all grown and four no longer lived at home.

Tobias was close to his father as the only two men in the house but he held a certain affection for his mother. Clara was there for him through everything. When he thought Antony died all those years ago, Clara was there to help him pick up the pieces. To find a way to live again after losing someone who had become very special to him.

Tobias sat down at the small table in the corner of the room. Clara came bustling over with a tea tray and set it down in the middle of the table.

“You want something to eat? I have some soup, there is bread and cheese or I think I have a piece of that cherry cake you love so much.”

“The cherry cake would be great,” Tobias replied with a smile. “Only if you will join me.”

Clara scurried away to get the cake before joining Tobias at the table. She reached for the teapot and filled both their cups.

“You don’t have to ask me to spend time with my favorite son.”

“I’m your only son.”

“That’s not the point, Toby. You know I miss you when you aren’t here. I enjoy when you visit and you don’t come nearly as often,” Clara protested even as she slid the piece of cake across the table.

Tobias quickly stuffed a piece into his mouth to keep from having to answer right away. Of course, he liked coming to visit, yes, he didn’t come as much as he would like, but sometimes life simply got in the way. He worked too much, he knew that, but it couldn’t be helped. And whatever free time he had; he’d much rather spend it in bed with Antony.

He swallowed his cake with a hearty mouthful of tea. “I know, Mama. I will endeavor to visit more often.”

“Good. Your father would want to see you too. Will you be staying long?” Clara asked.

“Unfortunately, I’m just passing through,” Tobias answered. “I left a little early so I could come here but I’m on my way to the docks. Antony’s sister is coming to visit and bringing her entire family.”

“How many children does Ilaria have now?”

“Three, twin boys and a little girl.”

Tobias and Clara talked about anything and everything. Before long, he could hear the bell toll the hour. He didn't really want to leave, preferring to stay until at least his father got home, but he couldn't linger that long.

Rising from his chair with the intention to depart, the door to the kitchen flew open. Half expecting Ophelia or Daphne to come racing into, Tobias was surprised to see his eldest sister, Rafaela.

“Toby!” She cried when she saw him, rushing over and giving him a tight squeeze. “I wasn't expecting to see you here!”

“Well, hello to you too,” Tobias chuckled, returning her embrace.

“I'll leave you two for a moment,” Clara said, heading for the door. “I want to see the progress the other two have made on that quilt.”

Clara was gone a second later.

Rafaela dropped the basket she was carrying onto the counter. “What brings you around these parts of town so early in the day?”

“Passing through. You?”

“Dropping off a few things from the market Mama had asked for. I stopped by this morning and she asked me to run the errand for her. Which is fine,” Rafaela said. “Xavier is setting up for the party tonight. I do hope you are coming.”

Tobias groaned. How could he have forgotten? “That is tonight?”

Rafaela tilted her head to the side as she regarded him. She had this uncanny ability to see right through him and in many ways was like a second mother to him. Though, sometimes the eight years between him didn't feel all that big.

“Toby, it's not like you to forget,” Rafaela chastised him with a small chuckle. “Besides, we are having a party since you'll be having a fancier one up at the palace tomorrow. And you know that it does my business well to have you and Antony show your faces.”

“To prove we are just as depraved as the rest of them?” Tobias lifted a brow, even as the corners of his lips twitched.

Rafaela and her husband, Xavier owned the more notorious tavern and inn in the lower town. They had a few employees but Rafaela did almost all the cooking, while Xavier ran the front of the house. It was popular with travelers who came in through the docks, as well as those with more decadent tastes. When Tobias was discovering certain things about himself, his sister encouraged him to come to one of their parties. It became a safe place for him and any number of others who could explore in a safer and more controlled environment.

Eventually, Tobias convinced Antony to come along with him and together they were really able to find themselves.

“You know that is not what I meant.” Rafaela swatted his arm. “It does you both good to show up every once in a while.”

“I will talk to Antony,” Tobias said. “His sister is coming into town. I actually stopped here before I am to greet them down on the docks. He might not be persuaded away but I might still come anyway.”

“Invite them too if you want,” she had offhandedly.

Tobias had to resist the urge to laugh. “You do realize, Antony’s sister is married to the Chieftain of Clan Ulrich, right?”

“Of course, I know that! Doesn’t mean they can’t be invited.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Tobias didn’t stay very much longer. Rafaela gave him some more information for the party before they parted ways. He also bid his other two sisters and mother farewell, before heading back out into the cold.

The trip down to the docks was fairly straightforward and he knew what ship he was looking for. He spotted it towards the end of the pier. There at the base of the gangplank was a rather petite figure with the most stunning golden hair he had ever seen. She turned a little in his direction to talk to the little girl bouncing around at her feet.

Tobias stopped dead in his tracks. The cut of her jaw, the slope of her nose, the full lips pulled back into a smile, looked familiar to him.

He knew that face.

A face he had seen any number of times in Antony's drawings.

She had finally come.

## Chapter Four

Isobel was determined to make the most of this trip. She wanted to enjoy every moment of not being at home. To enjoy the fresh air, to explore a new place and meet new people. Every clan was a little different, something distinctly unique, and she wanted to know all about Drakos.

There was no doubt that Isobel loved her aunt, Ilaria had come to mean so much to her. Yet, Isobel realized she knew so little about Ilaria before she came to Ulrich. It wasn't necessarily any of her business but now being here in Drakos might give her an insight.

Emrys bounded up to her and grabbed hold of her hand.

“Come on, Isbel!” The little girl protested tugging her to the gangplank.

Isobel laughed as she followed Emrys down to the bustling dock and continued to bounce around as their belongings were unloaded. She could see Ilaria still up on the deck, chasing the twins around, trying to choral them to disembark. Sebastian

was still barking out orders, the life of a Captain would never leave him, Isobel thought with a chuckle. As much as he tried to leave that life behind, Isobel was convinced he never could.

She smiled down at Emrys, taking the girl's hand to get her to hold still for even a second. Out of the corner of her eye, Isobel caught sight of an approaching dark figure. His hands were stuffed into his pockets and long dark pieces of hair fell into his equally dark eyes. She felt a thrill run down her back when their eyes met and he paused, staring at her so intently she was sure he was looking right through her.

Isobel was sure that no one ever looked at her the way he was in that moment. Such intense interest and curiosity shined bright in those deep eyes, even if the look on his face remained placid and unreadable. He was handsome, Isobel decided after a moment, even as they locked eyes. He was tall, a good head more than she was and the oversized coat couldn't hide long, lean limbs. The strong cut of his jaw gave his face a more angular appearance than she had originally thought.

Emrys tugged on her arm, forcing her eyes away.

“Who's that?” Emrys whispered to her.

Isobel shrugged, in an attempt to be unaffected. “I'm not sure.”

“Tobias!” A voice behind Isobel yelled out.

Ilaria skirted around her and pulled Tobias into a tight embrace. He hesitated for a moment before returning the gesture.



“It’s good to see you too,” he replied with a chuckle.

“Where is that brother of mine?” Ilaria asked.

“He sent me to greet you instead,” Tobias commented, shoving his hands back into his pockets. “There is an ongoing issue with the farmer’s guild that has had him in meetings all day. Though he wanted to express his regret at not being able to meet you personally.”

Ilaria snorted. “Well, regardless of his excuses, I’m glad to see you again, Tobias. I trust all is well.”

“Indeed.”

“Isobel,” Ilaria said, waving her over. “I want you to meet General Tobias Victarian. He is like Josef is back home.”

Isobel held her hand out. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Tobias grasped her hand and brought it up to his lips. “Pleasure’s all mine.”

Isobel felt the flush on her cheeks. His words were soft and smooth. Her skin tingled where he had touched it. There was just something that sent her pulse racing. No man had ever affected her this way. But then again, no man had ever looked at her as anything other than a child. However, the way Tobias looked at her, it made her wonder.

Sebastian joined them a moment later, each of the boys hanging off one of his arms. They laughed and made small talk, but Isobel heard very little of it. Her mind was spinning and she had to keep herself from staring at him, but even that proved to be more difficult than she imagined.

“Isobel,” Ilaria called her name, and pulled her out of her fog. Isobel simply hummed in response. “Tobias was offering to show you around town.”

“If you would like,” Tobias was quick to interject. “I know after so many days at sea, stretching my legs was always a nice distraction.”

Isobel felt a small smile spread across her face before she could stop it. “I would love to.”

“Excellent.” Tobias returned her smile and offered her his arm.

They bid a quick farewell to Ilaria and Sebastian before heading up the dock. Her hand slid into the crook of his elbow and easily followed along beside him. They walked in a companionable silence, which was only broken when Tobias pointed out a few things to her as they passed.

“Do you know my aunt and uncle well?” Isobel asked, in an attempt to get him to start talking. She wanted to know everything there was to know about him. His name had come up in conversation only a select handful of times over the years, but then Isobel paid the idea of him little mind. Now, she wanted to know.

“Quite well,” Tobias replied, steering them off the dock to follow the canal along the coastline. “More so after that unfortunate incident with your uncle eight years ago.”

“When Uncle Bash was kidnapped?”

“Mostly after that but yes. I had served as a messenger and aided your aunt in getting him home.”

Isobel pressed her lips together. Despite having only been ten years old, she remembered it quite well. But then again being dangled around by a madman was difficult to forget. She’d never forget his startling green eyes. “I do not or did not wish harm upon my uncle, but I’m glad, I didn’t end up in his place instead.”

“What do you mean?” Tobias asked, his other hand coming to rest on top of hers.

Isobel quickly recounted that night or as much as she chose to remember it. Of wanting to see her uncle as the next best comfort than her father. Running into the man with the bright eyes and effectively being used as bait. The memory of almost being kidnapped had a habit of lingering longer than she would have cared.

“I’m surprised you and I didn’t run into each other back then,” Tobias commented when she finished her tale.

“I’m not,” Isobel chuckled. “They kept me firmly away from all of it after that night. I didn’t even know that Aunt Ilaria’s brother was even in residence until some years later.”

Tobias stopped walking and turned to face her. “So, you haven’t actually met Antony?”

“No,” Isobel shook her head. “Aunt Ilaria talks about him quite a bit, but I’ve never met him in person.”

“And what does she say about him?”

Isobel tilted her head to the side. This was a strange string of questions. “I don’t know what kind of information you are fishing for, General. Aunt Ilaria talked of Antony like any sister would of a brother. And if you are concerned about what she said about you to me, there is very little for me to say. All I know is that you and Antony are close friends outside of your working relationship and nothing else.”

“Good, because then you won’t mind if I do this.”

“What—”

Before Isobel could even get the sentence out. Tobias wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her flush against his chest. His mouth was on hers in a heartbeat. His lips soft and sweet as they slid back and forth over hers.

Isobel couldn’t move. She could breathe, let alone process that this entirely too attractive for his own good and older man was kissing her in the middle of the street. His hand came to cup her jaw and she found herself spiraling into the kiss, until she was kissing him back with equal fervor. Any care or caution thrown to the wind. Her fingers found his hair, tugging him closer and when he gasped, her tongue peeked out to meet his.

She could count the number of times she had been kissed in one hand, but this kiss made all the other ones virtually nonexistent. But the thrill of this kiss, to be kissing probably the last person she should, made it all the more daring and exciting.

A soft sigh escaped her when Tobias finally eased away, his forehead leaning against hers. His arms were still tightly around her body.

“Forgive me,” his whispered words breathless. “I shouldn’t —”

Isobel pressed the tips of her fingers to his lips, their eyes meeting. “If I hadn’t wanted it, I would have pushed you away.”

He took her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist. “I would hope so.”

Her heart skipped a beat. Could this even be happening right now? She wanted to have an adventure, to explore and learn new things. She wasn’t expecting it to come in the form of the Commander General of Clan Drakos.

He smiled back and carefully let her go, his hand reaching out to grasp hers. “Are you hungry? I know a place around the corner if you’d like.”

Almost on cue, her stomach gave a rather unpleasant sound, and she flushed. “Seems we have the answer.”



Tobias knocked heavily on the door to the Fiery Dragon.

“It doesn’t look like they are open,” Isobel commented quietly beside him.

“Because they technically aren’t yet.” He gave two more rough knocks with his fist before the small window in the door

slid open. “Let me in, dickhead.”

A deep chuckle resonated from the inside before the lock was pulled free and the door opened. A rather tall, robust looking man filled the doorway. His dark greying hair was cut short to his scalp and thick muscles bulged in his neck and shoulders.

“Little early, aren’t we, Toby?” The man laughed, even as he stood aside to let them in.

“I have no desire to see your face any sooner than is necessary,” Tobias quipped even as they shook hands and thumped each other on the back.

Isobel watched the exchange with growing interest, though she twisted her fingers together in front of her.

“Who is this pretty little thing?” The bigger man asked as he regarded her.

Tobias took hold of her hand again and pulled her further into the still darkened tavern.

“This is Isobel,” Tobias gave the first introduction. “She is traveling and visiting from Clan Ulrich. Isobel, this is Xavier, the proprietor of this establishment and husband to my eldest sister. So, I have the misfortune of calling him family.”

Xavier pumped his shoulder. “You like being able to call me brother.”

Tobias snorted. “Only when I’m in need of a barbarian.”

Xavier gave a hearty laugh that almost startled Isobel out of her boots. “The army couldn’t handle me anyway. If you are here in search of a meal, Rafaela left some soup on the fire before she left on her errands. There might be some bread left from breakfast too.”

“That would be lovely,” Isobel responded as she looked around the space.

She didn’t think she’d ever really seen the inside of a tavern before. Though, it was clear they weren’t close to opening for the day. All the long wooden tables were pushed up against the walls with the chairs placed here and there. A warm fire burned in the hearth. And they obviously interrupted Xavier from refilling the back of the bar area with clean glassware and metal tankards.

Isobel felt Tobias’s eyes on her as she looked around but if he noticed the look of wonder on her face, he didn’t say anything. Xavier disappeared back into the kitchen for a moment before returning with two large bowls of soup and tankards of ale with a decent sized chunk of bread. He set it all down on the high bar top and pulled over two chairs for them.

Isobel took one chair and waited for Tobias to join her at the other, before digging into the thick and hearty stew.

“You will have to pass my compliments on to your sister,” Isobel remarked. The food was delicious after so many days at sea.

“You can thank her tonight,” Xavier commented from where he continued to stack drinking glasses.

“Oh? What’s happening tonight?” Isobel asked.

“Nothing,” Tobias responded all too quickly for her liking.

“Did Toby not invite you to the party?” Xavier cocked his head to the side.

Tobias conveniently shoved another spoonful into his mouth before setting it down. “I hadn’t gotten the chance yet. Though I’m sure after so much travel you would be too tired to attend.”

“I trust you will be here too?” Isobel asked with a grin. She had always wanted to go to a real party.

“Naturally,” Tobias said.

“Are you bringing Antony too?” Xavier asked. “I’m sure he will enjoy this pretty one as much as you will.”

“Spirits perverse me,” Tobias muttered, wiping a hand over his face. “Xavier, one more word out of you and I’m going to have to punch you and I’d really prefer not to have to do that again.”

“Because you hurt your hand more than it hurts my face?” Xavier gave another robust laugh.

“I’m sure Antony will be otherwise occupied tonight,” Tobias said through ground teeth. “But if you want to come back later, Isobel, I’m sure I can have it arranged.”

Isobel smiled and leaned in quickly to lightly peck Tobias on the lips. “I would love that.”



While Isobel wanted to meet Antony too, someone her aunt had talked so much about, a place like this was probably the last place she should do it.

## Chapter Five

*F*<sup>uck.</sup>  
Antony was going to kill him.

Correction, Antony was going to cut off his dick and then kill him.

*Fuck.*

Tobias splashed the freezing cold water onto his face before looking at his pitiful reflection in the mirror. The water still dropped from the tip of his nose as he shuttered. He grabbed the nearby towel, wiping his face and the back of his neck.

The thought of going to dinner that night, sitting beside Antony and looking Ilaria and Sebastian in the face, made him almost physically ill. Firstly, he never should have kissed Isobel. Secondly, he should not have offered to bring her to his sister's party. Based solely on the sweet way she kissed him, he could tell she had little experience in anything outside of kissing. Tobias wasn't sure if that worried him or thrilled him.

A pair of arms slipped around his waist, pulling him out of his disturbing thoughts.

“You’re distracted tonight,” Antony murmured, kissing the back of Tobias’s neck.

Tobias shivered, leaning back against Antony’s bare chest. “I’m worried.”

“Don’t be,” Antony whispered. His arms tightened around Tobias. “It’s not like Ilaria and Sebastian are strangers.”

“It’s not about that. Obviously, we know each other, but this is different.”

“Because I want to acknowledge you as more than just a friend?” Antony asked. “That you are important to me.”

The guilt rolled through Tobias’s gut. He carefully pulled away and reached for his shirt. “You don’t have to do this, Antony. Not for my sake.”

“Your family knows about me, why can’t mine know about you? I only have one sister compared to your five.” Antony cracked a smile and gave a small chuckle.

Tobias’s lips wobbled but he couldn’t quite manifest a smile. “I know.”

Antony reached up, cupping Tobias’s jaw in his hand. Leaning in, he nipped at his lower lip. “I thought this is what you would have wanted. I know I’ve held you at arm’s length for far too long. But I want my sister to know about you, about us. I have a deep affection for you, Tobias, I hope you know that.”

“I know,” Tobias whispered. The words grew thick in his throat. “My family knows that we don’t have a conventional relationship. Rafaela can attest to that personally. But Ilaria,” Tobias stopped with a shake of his head. The unbidden tears pricking at the back of his eyes. “She will not understand.”

Antony peered at him intently, even with only a single eye, Tobias felt more transparent than if it was two. Antony’s thumb trailed over the smooth cheeks. “You do not give Ilaria enough credit. She and Sebastian are into some equally twisted things and don’t ask me how I know that.”

“But they love each other above all else. A blind man could see it. Antony, you can tell them whatever you want about us, if them knowing will make you feel better. However, don’t do it because you think it is what I want or what I need.”

Antony stared at him for a long hard moment. The emotion swirling in his pale green eye. Tobias could see the fight Antony fought with himself. The same fight he had seen for the last eight years. After everything Antony endured in his life, he still struggled with his feelings. He still struggled to express his emotions in such a way that helped him. Tobias always knew where he stood with Antony, but the lines over the last several months had grown more fuzzy and hazier.

Maybe because Tobias was himself worried about what he would lose when Antony decided he was not what he needed anymore.

“Then let me be what you need,” Antony whispered after a while.

Tobias sucked in a harsh breath through his nose. Antony very rarely used that small vulnerable tone. For Antony to use it now, in this incredibly personal moment, meant he was struggling even more than Tobias realized.

His hand shot out, grabbing Antony by the throat. Tobias didn't apply enough pressure to cut off his air, but enough to leave him panting. He pulled him closer until their noses touched.

"Is this what you wanted?" Tobias asked, using his free hand to run through Antony's wild red curls. "Has someone been feeling neglected?"

"Never neglected," Antony responded softly. "I simply want to make you happy."

"Oh, you do. Don't ever doubt that." Tobias pressed a light kiss to Antony's lips.

Falling back into this role came easier than Tobias had expected it to, especially after the day he had. He knew he should tell Antony about Isobel. That she was the face Antony saw, how they were already connected, that Tobias himself had already kissed her. But Tobias knew that spitting out all that information would do more harm than good. No, Antony needed to meet her without any pretext, or assumptions.

Maybe inviting her to the party wasn't such a bad idea after all. The setup wasn't ideal but it got them away from the palace and into a place that was safe for them and for Isobel. Tobias and Antony had shared a woman between them before, not overly frequently, but it was known to happen on occasion.

So, the risk could very well end up in complete disaster but it was one Tobias was going to have to take.

“Rafaela is having a party tonight,” Tobias remarked. He removed his hand from around Antony’s neck and trailed his thumb over that lower lip. “If we are up to it after dinner, we can go. And there might be someone new for us to play with.”

Antony quirked up a brow. “It’s been a long time since we last shared.”

“It has but I think you will like her. But now, we should finish dressing to meet your sister for dinner.”



Antony twisted the stem of his wineglass between his fingers with a smirk on his face. Ilaria was regaling him with one of many stories of her children, of how the twins had gotten into something or another.

“Sounds much like us,” Antony chuckled.

Ilaria scowled. “I didn’t have an affinity for bringing in every bug I found.”

“That is not my point,” Antony commented, leaning forward to rest his hand on hers. “You and I did have a habit of finding trouble.”

“This is true.” Ilaria squeezed his hand back before trying to stifle a yawn. “I’m sorry. It’s been a long couple of days.”

“I’m glad you and I could catch up, just the two of us. It’s been too long, Ilaria.”

Ilaria stood from her chair and Antony followed. She pulled him into a tight embrace. “I know life took us in opposite directions, Antony, but you will always be a part of me.”

“As you are to me. Maybe we shouldn’t wait so long to see each other again,” he teased, tapping her on the nose.

“I couldn’t simply drag babies along with me and this was all still too new for you. But we will make up for the lost time. But for now, I should probably find my bed.”

Antony walked her to her bedroom door before bidding her a good night. There was no part of him that was surprised when Ilaria insisted on staying in her old childhood room. He knew what that space meant to her, and then to her and Sebastian. The thought of ever stepping back into his own rooms was almost panic inducing.

He paused outside that door just passed his sister’s. The rooms that had once been his own, with a shared door between him and his beloved twin. Antony couldn’t imagine what life would have been like without her. He laid his hand on the cool wood and swallowed hard. Her twins were now in there. Those two beautiful little boys who would never know the horror Antony himself had suffered behind that door. In that place that was supposed to be safe for him. The scars his body still carried seemed to pulse and itch.

He needed to put as much space between himself and that forsaken place.

His current rooms, which he shared with Tobias, were in a completely different wing of the palace but still close enough

to all the places he needed to be. Antony had refused his old rooms, but he also refused to live in those of his father and his elder brother. If it wasn't for Ilaria and her sentimental attachment to that space, Antony was sure he would have had the entire thing gutted and made to service a different function.

Once he was back in his room, he leaned against the door to catch his breath. Antony reminded himself that ghosts couldn't hurt him, that the memories of the past were simply just that. Things that had already happened that couldn't be changed. All he could do was look forward.

Antony undid the buttons on the front of his jacket and tossed it over the back of a chair. Tobias had already left for his sister's, telling Antony he would meet him there after he procured their guest for the evening.

Antony still couldn't believe that Tobias had found someone for them. He hadn't been lying when he said it had been a long time since last they shared. The tingle of anticipation ran through him as he changed into something a little looser and more comfortable. Pulling the cloak over his shoulders, Antony raised the hood to hide his face. A six-foot four red head with an eyepatch was not something Antony could readily hide about himself, but he tried regardless.

The walk down to the tavern on the docks was quiet since it was already rather late. But Antony enjoyed the solitude of it, a moment to allow himself to reflect. Not something he liked to do overly much since he didn't even like being in his own head sometimes.



Antony was immediately greeted at the door by Xavier, who grinned so large, Antony was almost concerned.

“I’m glad you could make it,” Xavier said, slapping Antony across the back.

“You know I always try,” Antony replied, shaking the other man’s hand. Antony might have had the height but Xavier was easily twice his size. “Is Tobias here already?”

Xavier nodded. “And wait until you see what he found for you. Pretty little thing, I wouldn’t mind sharing when you’re done.”

Antony snorted with a roll of his eye. “We’ll see about that.”

Xavier let him slip past and Antony immediately went looking for Tobias. The air in the tavern was warm and hazy from the fire. It made it a little difficult to see but it added to the ambiance of the room. Antony found Tobias at the end of the bar, a rather busty blonde beside him. It was an odd choice even for Tobias, but Antony stopped dead in his tracks when she tilted her face back with a laugh.

He knew that face. Every dip and every angle.

He had seen it for well over a year. How was it that Tobias had found her before he could?

Antony couldn’t move, he almost couldn’t breathe from the pure shock. She was real and she was here of all places.

Tobias whispered something in her ear before he stood. Crossing the space, Tobias slipped up behind Antony, bringing his lips to the other man’s ear.

“Do you see what I see?” Tobias spoke loud enough for Antony to hear him over the room, but still for his ears only.

“Yes. How did you find her?” Antony didn’t even know how the words escaped his mouth.

“She found me, I suppose. But you must listen to me very carefully, Antony,” Tobias said but Antony could hear the waver in his voice. “I brought her here for you, if she is in fact the woman you’ve been seeing. I want only what’s best for you and if she is that, then I must accept it. However, I wanted you to meet her without assumptions and without pretext. She will recognize you but you will not exchange names. I will stay for as long as I know she is safe with you.”

Antony slid his hand back and tangled his fingers with Tobias. “I want you there, no matter what.”

Antony could feel the smile when Tobias kissed his neck. “Then I will stay. But you also need to know this - I kissed her when we first met. But she is innocent, Antony. In every way. So, if we play tonight, it will be on her terms, not mine.”

## Chapter Six

The tavern was different at night than it was during the day. It was loud and crowded but it pulsed with an excitement Isobel had never felt before. Even though she huddled close to Tobias's side and held on tightly to his arm. The room was warm with a light haze, a fiddler tucked into a corner playing loud enough for people to hear but not overpower the conversation.

It wasn't the ambiance of the room that struck as much as it was the other people present. In a wide array of dress or in some cases undress. Isobel wasn't so isolated that she hadn't seen these things before. Of course, she had, but seeing a woman with her dress pulled down past her breasts while the man beneath her feasted on them, was new.

Her hand drifted up to her throat where her grandmother's necklace lay. Amalie would have fit right into a place like this or at least she would make it appear so. Isobel almost blushed at all the crazy things she would no doubt say about it. That was one of the things she loved and missed most about her

grandmother, she never held anything back. She spoke her mind and said whatever it was she wanted to say, whether serious or funny. She had been the one to teach Isobel not to take life too seriously.

“Never lose the joy, Isobel,” she said after Isobel had a particularly sad day. “Every new day is a chance to start over. To wake up and decide what you want to do, who you want to be. Seize every new experience and enjoy life.”

Well, being in this place really was a new experience. Amalie’s words still rang in her ears as Isobel sucked in a deep breath.

Now was the time to really start living. Nobody here knew her, what her name was, who her family was, she was simply just herself. And somehow the thought alone was incredibly liberating. Isobel knew her grandmother would have encouraged her, despite everything, to be young and have fun and maybe be a little reckless. A thrill ran through her.

Yes, she was going to be free and open minded, impulsive and reckless. She needed to start living life for herself to find out what she enjoyed most and to take it with both hands.

Her fingers dug deeper into Tobias’s arm as he weaved them through the crowd to the end of the bar. Isobel hopped up into one of the stools, with her back against the wall and Tobias leaned his arm on the bar beside her.

“You made it!” A woman yelled from the other end of the bar. She scurried down to them and leaned over to kiss Tobias’s cheek.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” he smiled at her, before turning his attention to Isobel. “I want you to meet a new friend of mine. Isobel, this is my eldest sister, Rafaela. She is married to Xavier who you met this afternoon when we came for lunch.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Isobel said. “Your soup was delicious.”

Rafaela grinned. “Thank you, dear. It’s nice to meet a friend of Toby’s since he doesn’t have many of them.”

“Raf,” Tobias hissed.

“What? It’s true, anyway can I get you something to drink? I think we still have some of that concoction Xavier was tampering with all summer, that you liked so much, Toby.” Rafaela hurried off without another word.

“She’s nice,” Isobel commented. “Are you close?”

Tobias nodded. “There are two other sisters between us but she and I have always had a special bond.”

“How many siblings do you have?”

“Five sisters.” Tobias chuckled. “Our father was happy for one boy so he didn’t feel quite so outnumbered in his own home.”

“That must have been wonderful,” Isobel said wistfully. “I never had any siblings.”

“You can have one of mine.”

Rafaela returned a moment later with two glasses. She placed them down on the bar. “I hope you enjoy it. And

here..." she slid a key across the bar top to Tobias. "If you need it later."

"Thank you." Tobias pocketed the key.

Isobel picked up the cup and stared down into the pale pink liquid for a moment, memorized by the tiny bubbles that danced on the surface.

"It's only juice," Tobias commented. He obviously saw her hesitation. "It's predominantly apple juice with a little raspberry and strawberry. Xavier had been playing all summer to figure out how to get the bubbles like some wines do."

Isobel took a small sip. It was sweet and tart, the bubbles tickling her nose.

"It's delicious, but I am old enough to drink real wine, you know," she teased, leaning forward to place her hand on his arm again.

His eyes danced with a certain humor. "If you weren't I wouldn't have brought you here in the first place. On nights like this, with parties like this, they actually don't serve alcohol at all."

"What kind of place is this?" Isobel asked. She was almost afraid of his answer but she was determined to have a good time regardless.

"A safe place," Tobias offered. He paused, taking a slip from his cup. His hand came to rest on top of hers. There was certain level of seriousness mixed with the mischief of his expression. "A place for people to come and learn. About

themselves, about each other. People with more unconventional tastes and preferences. Rafaela and Xavier set this up to allow for a greater level of comfort. Nobody judges here.”

“And it’s purely sexual?” Isobel asked before she could stop herself. She bit her lip.

“Not always but it can be.”

Her tongue felt heavy in her mouth. She couldn’t quite believe what he was saying, but she saw his earnest sincerity. Her heart pounded against her chest as the revelation slowly sank over her.

As strange as it was, given the context, Isobel thought of Amalie and knew exactly what she would say.

She leaned in closer, her breasts brushing against Tobias’s arm and she felt his breath catch. “Did you bring me here because you want to have sex with me?”

“No!” The word came out so fast, but he quickly back pedaled. “I mean, yes. Maybe... *fuck.*”

Tobias groaned, running his hands over his face. Isobel tilted her head back with a laugh. His eyes quickly scanned the room and must have found something in the crowd. Whatever it was seemed to calm him, even if he didn’t really answer her question.

He brought his lips to her ear instead. “Hold onto that thought for just a moment.”

Isobel watched him get up and walked to another man who stood alone in the crowd. Trying not to stare was harder than she thought it would be. She tried to hide a lot of it in her cup as she took another sip. Good thing she did because once she saw who Tobias was talking to, her throat went dry.

Thankfully Tobias stood behind him, giving Isobel an unhindered view. He was taller than Tobias if that was even possible, but equally broad across the chest and shoulders. The black of his attire made him stand out against some of the more flamboyant colors around her. But it was his face that had her swallowing thickly. He had a strong narrow chin, thin lips and a prominent nose. Dark auburn curls fell on the right side of his face, covering most of it.

However, it was the way this new man gazed at her, the heat in his eye was unmistakable. This gave her pause when it sank in that he was only looking at her with one eye. As he and Tobias started coming her way, she realized that he was hiding an eyepatch behind all that hair.

Antony Devarik.

Though she had never seen him before in her life, she recognized him. She asked Ilaria once what her brother looked like when her aunt was talking about him. Somehow Ilaria's description of a very tall redhead with an eyepatch, didn't quite do him justice.

Isobel knew she shouldn't be as surprised as she was to see Tobias and Antony together, given their relative positions. But it was the comfortable feeling between the two men and the



way their fingers entwined together when they came back to her.

Tobias introduced them, as awkward as it was without names.

Antony took her hand when she offered it, kissing the top of it. The same shiver of excitement ran through her like when Tobias had kissed her hand earlier in the day.

“What brings you to a place like this, Angel?”

With her elbow on the bar, Isobel rested his chin on her first. “Maybe looking for some trouble.”

Antony chuckled, the sound deep and smooth. “You might have just found it.”

Isobel smiled. Even if she knew who he was and he didn’t know about her, did it really matter though? She was an adult and so was he. Just because there was a mutual connection, it didn’t mean anything. They weren’t actually family.

Isobel turned her attention back to Tobias. “You never answered my question before.”

Tobias’s eyes grew wide when Antony asked, “And what was that?”

“I asked him if he brought me simply because he wanted to have sex with me.”

Antony gave a howl of laughter. “Did you now? And what did he say?”

“Nothing yet.” Isobel cocked her head to the side.

Tobias rubbed his hand over his jaw and back around his neck. “The thought has crossed my mind, but that wasn’t the entire purpose.”

Antony continued to grin like a fool. “I think he’s worried about what I would say about it.”

“Why is that?” Isobel asked.

Antony slid up closer to her side, wrapping an arm around her waist. He brought his lips down to her ear. “Because you cannot take just one. If you decide to play, you get both of us.”

Isobel suddenly felt dizzy. The heat of Antony’s body against her side and his words swirling in her mind. She wanted something fun, who knew she’d end up with two. For whatever reason, she didn’t care. To have the attention of both of these attractive men.

She was going to seize the opportunity with both hands and not let go. Even if it was only for one night.

“I want both. But,” she paused, staring down at her hands.

Two sets of soft fingers touched her cheeks. A pair tucked under her chin and lifted her gaze back up. She met Tobias’s dark eyes as Antony ran his finger along the curve of her jaw.

“There is nothing to fear from us,” Tobias murmured. “You hold the reins here, we do what you want, how much you want.”

“Tonight, it is all about you,” Antony continued. “If it becomes too much all you have to do is tell us.”

Communication is key since we are new to each other. But we'll make you feel things you never thought possible."

Isobel was sure she never wanted anything more in her life than this moment right now. She had only been with one other person and only once, since he promptly left town soon after. However, that experience was hardly gratifying for her. He was a boy who cared more about himself. Tobias and Antony were men who felt like they were offering her the world. Maybe they were. Maybe this was finally the liberation she was looking for.

But one question still plagued the back of her mind.

"Is this a habit of yours?" She asked. "Sharing, I mean."

"It's happened a time or two," Tobias responded. "We both enjoy a woman as much as we enjoy each other."

Isobel nodded, even as she still chewed on her lower lip.

Antony cupped her cheek in his hand and turned her head to meet his gaze. "You still have questions. Ask us anything and everything. If you are not comfortable or committed to this new idea, we need to know."

"How does this even work? Like one at a time or do you both, you know, stick things in places?" The words spilled out before she could stop them and she had to fight the following blush.

Tobias chuckled while Antony only continued to smile.

"This is going to be fun," Antony said, taking his hand from her face and reaching for hers. "Let's go somewhere quieter

and we can talk in more detail.”

Isobel sucked in a breath through her nose and laid her hand in Antony’s. Tobias came up on her other side and together the three of them walked through the crowded room. Her heart hammered with each step but the excitement of the unknown overwhelmed anything else.

## Chapter Seven

**T**obias pulled the key Rafaela had given him from his pocket to unlock the door, before ushering the other two inside. Isobel followed closely behind Antony, though he had yet to relinquish her hand.

The room was rather small but it had a cozy feeling. A small fire burned in the fireplace, casting the room in a warm soft glow. A nest of blankets and pillows covered the floor in front of the fire, while there was a decent sized bed tucked into a corner.

The three of them settled in the pillows on the floor with Isobel firmly in the middle. They sat close but they didn't impede on her personal space, only each reaching to hold a hand. It somehow brought her more comfort than she thought. They weren't just going to jump on her, they respected her and she could feel that already.

“So how does this work?” Isobel asked.

“Let us worry about that,” Tobias replied. “You control this but I’m in charge.”

Antony kissed her hand again, turning it over to nip at her inner wrist. He snickered when her lips fell open. “Don’t question it, Angel. We’re in good hands with him.”

“But what about—” Isobel was cut short when Tobias pressed a finger to her lips.

“Listen closely, kitten. I promise you are safe with us. Normally, I don’t like using these words but tonight it will be easier and faster. If you want us to slow down, just say so. If you want it to stop, tell us to stop. There will be no hurt feelings, because your comfort and pleasure mean more to us than anything else. Do you understand?”

Isobel swallowed thickly with a nod of her head. She shivered when a pair of lips brushed up against her neck.

“I understand,” she whispered.

Tobias tilted her face up again to meet his eyes. “You still have questions.”

Isobel gnawed on the inside of her cheek. “Only one. Am I expected to take both of you at the same time?”

Tobias smirked, running the backs of his fingers over her cheek. “While I would love for us both to fill your little holes, we’ll start with one at a time. You’ll take his cock and then you’ll take mine.”

Before Isobel could protest and even get another word out, she found herself on her back in the blankets. Antony stretched

out beside her and with a hand on her hip rolled her to face him. She stared into Antony's face for a moment then he bent down for a kiss. His lips were soft and warm, teasing and tasting. The light flick of his tongue against hers. He cupped her face in his hand, his thumb brushing over her cheek and then down her neck and over the slope of her shoulder.

She sighed against his mouth. Her hands came to rest on the hard planes of his chest, even if it was still hidden beneath a shirt. She tugged on it gently, even as he continued to kiss her. This slow glide of lips was starting to make her dizzy.

Antony pulled away from her long enough to reach behind him and pull his shirt over his head. He tossed it over his shoulder before coming back to her, softly kissing her neck.

Isobel gasped when she felt a second bare chest press up against her back. Tobias buried his nose in her hair even as his hands came around to the front. His nimble fingers quickly plucked at the ties on the front of her dress. Soon it was falling from her shoulders, leaving her in her thin silk slip.

Antony felt a path of hot open-mouthed kisses down her neck and across the top of her straining cleavage.

"So beautiful," he muttered, his thumb flicking over one hard nipple.

The movement sent a shot of heat between her thighs and she moaned.

That must have been all the encouragement they needed. The straps of her slip slide down her arms. Without any warning

she found herself in her back again, Tobias's mouth descending onto hers in a hard demanding kiss, stealing the air from her body. She trembled as Antony's fingers traced over her breasts, rolling the aching peak with his thumb.

Isobel was gasping and panting by the time Tobias pulled back. He grinned at her for a moment, his own hand finding her other breast, massaging and squeezing the soft flesh. Their hands were warm and large, but she was still barely contained by them.

"Where were you hiding these luscious things?" Antony asked, pinching her nipple.

"They're too big." Isobel groaned. They were always getting in the way. She might have inherited her hair color from her mother and her light blue-gray eyes from her father, but her breasts were one-hundred percent her grandmother.

Tobias gave another appreciative squeeze. "There is no such thing."

Isobel wanted to protest further but before she could, they ducked their heads and licked her nipples at the same time. As any more rational thought was quickly forgotten. Her own hands were everywhere over their broad muscled chests, through the coarse hair to curve around the back of their necks. She could feel her arousal starting to pulse and wiggled her hips, hoping to find some sort of friction.

All she earned was a deep growl from both men attached to her chest. She could feel the hard pressure of their erections against her outer thighs. Tobias scraped his teeth against her



skin, earning him another deep moan. He took the hand from behind his neck and caught it down to press against the all too evident bulge.

Her eyes grew wide. “Oh shit! That’s not going to fit.”

Antony chuckled, taking her other hand and pressing it against him. “You will be well prepared for us, Angel.”

Isobel whimpered. She had never been so aroused in her entire life. Yes, the sheer size she felt under both her hands was mostly terrifying but it was outweighed by how much she wanted it. By how much she wanted to be filled.

A hand slid up the inside of both her thighs as Tobias and Antony kissed her neck. Her legs fell further apart when a finger trailed along her slit.

“Fuck,” Tobias groaned in her ear. “You are already so wet for us, kitten.”

Her eyes fell shut and she tossed her head back. Her heart hammered as she fought to breathe. She didn’t know where she ended or they began. Having two sets of hands and mouths all over her body made everything too hot. A long deep moan reverberated in her chest when a single finger pushed inside. Another worked tight circles around her clit.

“Please,” she moaned, though she didn’t know what she was asking for.

“Do you think you can take more?” Antony’s voice appeared in her ear, even as a second finger joined the first.

Isobel's eyes snapped open, her back arching off the blankets beneath her. She grabbed a muscular bicep in each hand. The coil in her stomach grew tighter and hotter with each stroke of the fingers inside her and against her throbbing clit. It didn't take long before she was seeing stars. The pleasure raced through her veins like fire. Her mouth fell open and she was sure she didn't make a sound other than a sharp intake of breath,

Laying there boneless, Isobel turned her head to the side to see Antony bringing his wet hand up to his lips. He sucked a single finger into his mouth with a groan.

"You taste so good," He murmured before holding his hand out. Tobias licked the other wet finger, pulling back with a smile.

Antony hooked an arm beneath her knees and another behind her shoulders, before lifting her up like she weighed nothing. He took a few careful steps over to the bed before depositing her on it. Standing back for a moment, he stared down at her, Tobias joining him.

She couldn't even begin to imagine what she looked like to them. Her golden hair spread out everywhere, her breasts heaving with each intake of breath, the wetness sticking to her thighs from the orgasm they just wrung out of her. She might not have been able to move much, but she wanted more, she needed more. She had never felt so free in her entire life.

"Do you think she's ready for us?" Antony asked, turning his attention to Tobias, even as he started to undo the ties on the

front of his straining trousers.

Tobias placed his hands on his hips with an almost predatory smile. "I think so."

There was something about the way they talked about her, like she wasn't even there. Normally, she would have found it rude and degrading. But it only seemed to reignite the fire even hotter than it was before. Isobel leaned up on her elbows to take them in better. Both had divested themselves of their boots and pants, now standing at her feet completely naked. She bit her lower lip with a groan.

Yes, she had felt them underneath her palms, but having two wildly erect cocks wanting her made her mind spin. They were both equally impressive - Antony had more of the length while Tobias definitely had more of the girth.

Tobias approached the bed first, crawling up, making sure she felt every inch of his warm, hard body. He settled above her, one of his thighs beside her head. He ran his fingers through her hair, over her cheek and her lips.

His fingers continued the downward path, over her neck and across her shoulders to her arms. The feather-like touch caused her skin to shiver and the small hairs stand on end. He took hold of her wrists and pulled them above her head, holding them against his thigh with one hand. The other trailed back down to her breast, giving her already aching nipples a distinctive tweak.

She was so distracted by Tobias that she trembled when Antony grabbed hold of her thighs. He wrapped his long arms

around them and tugged her closer to the edge of the bed, stretching out her restrained arms. She couldn't move even if she wanted to. He kept one hand behind her knee and the other went to his cock.

He gave it a few light strokes then rubbed it through her wetness, and tapped it against her clit.

“Please, stop teasing me,” she pleaded, her voice strained.

“Is this what you want, Angel?” Antony pushed in just the head of his cock.

“Yes!” She hissed, knowing there was still a lot more to come.

Antony braced his arms on the bed, leaning down to press their chests together. His lips trailed over her forehead and down the slope of her nose, before pulling her into a deep kiss. She was so lost in the feel of his mouth and tongue that when he pushed the rest of the way in, she gasped.

“Oh shit!” she cursed loudly, making Antony chuckle.

Isobel tilted her head enough to watch Antony's cock slide all the way out and thrust back in. If she didn't see it with her own eyes, she would have thought he'd never fit. But damn he did and it felt amazing. He was soft and gentle, giving her enough time to get used to the immense fullness. When she lifted her hips up, he got the hint.

Taking each of her knees in his hands, he stood back up to his complete height. The look of pure ecstasy on his face shined through his one eye. The flex and ripples of his arms

and chest were mesmerizing and he worked his hips that much harder.

Her head thrashed back and forth and her toes started to curl. If she thought his fingers were good, his cock was even better. She was quickly spiraling to another hard release.

The brush of Tobias's lips at her sweaty temple, while his fingers tightened around her wrists. His breath was hot against her ear. "You take his cock so well, kitten. Are you going to be so good when you take mine?"

Something between a moan and a whimper escaped her mouth, but she wasn't forming words no matter how hard she tried. She shuddered as she fell apart, her insides clamping down around Antony. He growled as he held still to let her ride it out, before pulling out and spilling his cum on her lower stomach.

Tobias released her arms as Antony fell down beside her, dragging her back against his heaving chest. He kissed the top of her bare shoulder.

"You are amazing, Angel," he murmured against her skin.

All Isobel could hum, her eyes drifting shut. Her pulse pounded in her ears. Just when she thought she was settling back down to earth, she felt a warm wet tongue on her stomach. Peeling her eyes open again, she stared down to find Tobias's dark head. He peered up at her as he licked away Antony's cum.

"Holy shit," she whispered.

Tobias chuckled as he kissed up her body to take her mouth with his. She could still taste Antony on Tobias's tongue.

“Are you ready for me?” He asked.

Isobel nodded as her arms wound around his shoulders, pulling him closer until his chest was against hers. Antony stayed at her back, his one arm wrapped around her and under her breasts while the other trailed down her thigh. He took hold of her knee and pulled it up, giving Tobias enough room to move against her. The tip of his cock nudged her swollen clit and she shivered. Her nails dug into his shoulders and she buried her face in his neck.

His hips canted forward, easily sliding through her still soaked pussy. His girth stretched her further and she moaned. She was grateful that Tobias had decided to go second, she couldn't imagine starting with him. But it still felt so good. Tobias worked in short, hard thrusts, her clit rubbing against his pelvis. Antony peppered her cheeks, neck and shoulders as he held her tightly to him.

It didn't take long because of how sensitive she already was and him pressing against all the right places. She cried out for a third time and felt completely wrung out. When she finally stopped pulsing, Tobias carefully pulled out and erupted in between them. A long growl of satisfaction rumbling from deep in his chest.

The three laid entangled in a mess of sweaty limbs and panting for breath. Isobel couldn't quite wrap her mind around what had just happened. But she didn't even care. She had

never felt so wanted or so desired in her entire life. These weren't boys who wouldn't leave her alone. These were two grown, important men.

And she was determined to keep them. Damned be the consequences. She refused to think of those right now. Tomorrow she'll have to face this night in the light of day and hope they wouldn't regret it. She sure wasn't.

## Chapter Eight

**F**or the first time in longer than he cared to remember, Antony slept. True and utterly restful sleep. There were no images dancing through his mind, not even a flicker. Nothing of ill will was trying to sabotage his rest.

Antony rolled over in bed, happy to be in his own bed. He stared up at the canopy above him with the stupidest grin on his face. He let out a quiet chuckle.

“Someone is cheerful this morning,” Tobias muttered from beside him, before burying his face deeper into the pillow.

Antony leaned on his side, propping himself up on an elbow. His fingers ran through Tobias’s hair and over the slope of his neck, the curve of his shoulder. The lightly tanned skin was smooth beneath his touch. Inching forward, he pressed his lips to that shoulder.

“Thank you,” he murmured against Tobias’s skin.

Tobias peeked an eye up from the pillow. “For what?”

“For last night. You didn’t have to do that.”



Tobias leaned up on his arms to look Antony in the face. “And you didn’t have to share.”

“Tobias, I wanted you there. You are a part of me. Much like I told her last night, it’s either both or nothing. Because I will not lose what you and I have together. For my own sake and as selfish as it sounds, I need you in my life.” Antony closed the distance between them and lightly brushed his lips against Tobias’s. “I will never not need you.”

Tobias pulled back after a moment. “When you have a wife, you won’t need me.”

“Why are you convinced that my having a wife will change anything between us?” Antony asked. He pushed himself up to lean against the headboard, the blanket pooling around his waist.

Tobias mirrored his posture. “Are you still going to share your bed with me every night and not her? Let me have sex with her and not know if her child is mine or yours?”

“You had no problem having sex with her last night.”

“That’s not the point, Antony. Last night might have been a mistake. I don’t regret what happened, because I know you needed me there. However, I should not be interfering with your future.”

Antony’s molars ground together. He shoved the blankets away before standing and starting to dress. His blood pounded in his ears and he couldn’t tell who he was angrier at – Tobias

for speaking truths he didn't want to hear or himself for his own selfishness.

Not that Antony felt entitled to anything. It was just after twenty years of being denied the most basic of human dignity and barely living, now that he could stand on his own two feet, he wanted more. He needed more from his life. With his art, with Tobias he found a way to live again, but he found himself wanting. Wanting more, needing more. Seeing her might have started this but she wasn't going to break everything he worked for.

Antony rested his hands on the small dresser, making the mistake of looking at himself in the mirror. He avoided the damned things for a reason, the sight of his own face always made his stomach curl. Maybe it was the blind, milky eye that was a constant and continuous reminder of his suffering or the faint burn scars from a fire that changed the lives of so many. Of the faceless little girl whose father he had taken from her.

He caught sight of Tobias perched on the edge of the bed, his shoulders hunched together as he stared into Antony's back.

Before he could stop himself, Antony balled up his fist and hit the mirror hard enough for it to shatter. Splinters of glass bit into his skin, and a small amount of blood bubbled to the surface. Antony stared dumbfounded at his own hand, before his knees hit the stone floor. A pained noise escaped his throat and a few tears slid down his cheeks.

Tobias was at his side a second later, wrapping his arms around Antony's shoulders. Antony, in turn, buried his face

into Tobias's neck, taking the comfort he knew he didn't deserve at the moment.

"Forgive me. I..." Antony trailed off. He didn't know what to say. There was nothing he could say to make the pain in his chest and in his hand go away.

"You don't have to explain yourself to me." Tobias pulled away enough to start picking the glass from Antony's hand. "We might have gotten ahead of ourselves this morning. You might change your mind, when you meet her outside of whatever happened last night. She might think differently of you."

Antony winced, a particularly large piece of glass falling to the floor. "What makes you say that?"

Tobias shrugged. "In the harsh light of day, things can always change, Antony. There is nothing to be done about it. But I wouldn't worry too much."

Antony waited until Tobias had pulled out all the glass and wrapped it in a clean cloth, to help stem the bleeding. He then asked, "Since you apparently know who she is, when will we see her again?"

"Tonight, at the ball. I made sure she received an invitation."



Antony couldn't think of anything he hated more than large amounts of undivided attention. Why he thought it was a good idea to have a very public party was beyond him? He couldn't

even remember whose stupidity had suggested such a thing. He understood the importance of being seen and fostering good will and all that nonsense.

It didn't mean he had to like it.

The formal jacket itched around the collar, the chain laid upon his shoulders felt heavier than it normally did. The chain and the eyepatch always made him stand out, if his red hair didn't.

Instead, he leaned against a far wall and watched everyone milling around and having a good time. Tobias was wandering around somewhere, being a better host than Antony would ever allow himself to be. At least Tobias's official title as Commander General, allowed for him to be more present without casting more suspicious than were necessary. Besides, Antony knew that Tobias had invited his sisters and whether any of them would actually show up would be a small miracle.

Speaking of sisters, Antony caught sight of his as she slid into the room. She might have blended in a little bit if it weren't for her oversized husband beside her. While Antony rivaled Sebastian in height, Sebastian was simply bigger in every other way. One of the main reasons, Antony always wanted to stay on the man's good side.

Antony skirted around the perimeter of the ballroom, until he was almost directly behind her. Leaning down, he spoke into her ear.

“Good evening, sister.”

Ilaria screamed and whipped around to glare at him.

“Don’t do that!” Ilaria swatted at his arm. “You know I hate it!”

Antony chuckled before kissing her cheek. “You know I can’t help myself.”

Ilaria pinched him, giving him a smug look. “Just don’t do it again.”

“You do realize that telling me not to do something is only going to get me to do it more,” Antony commented.

“You are no better than my seven-year-olds.” Ilaria scowled.

“While that might be true, your twins have exceedingly better parents than us.”

“Did you actually just pay me a compliment?”

Sebastian snickered beside them. “If you two are going to stand here and taunt each other endlessly, I will leave you to it. I’m going to go find Isobel.” He pressed a light kiss to his wife’s cheek before disappearing into the crowd.

“Isobel?” Antony found himself asking. The name was like an itch in the back of his head that he couldn’t quite scratch.

“Sebastian’s niece.”

The realization slowly started to sink in and Antony felt his blood pressure spike. He stared at Ilaria like he’d never seen her before in his life.

“You brought her here?” Antony hissed.

“Of course, we brought her. She is all the family Sebastian has left. He could not leave her behind if the rest of us were coming here,” Ilaria explained it like it was the most logical thing in the world. Yet, it made Antony’s head spin.

“You shouldn’t have brought her here. To her, I shouldn’t even exist, not after,” Antony paused and swallowed hard.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Antony. It’s been eight and half years. And it was Sebastian’s idea for her to come along.”

Antony ran a shaking hand through his hair. “Just because your husband has forgiven me for what I did, doesn’t mean she does or she should. Spirits persevere me. Ilaria, I’m the reason her father is dead.”

“Antony, you can’t think like that. It was a tragic accident and—”

“It matters to me.”

Ilaria rested a hand on his arm and gave it a comforting squeeze. “I know and I’m not trying to discredit your feelings, because I know how hard it was for you. I’m simply surprised you don’t already know she’s here. She went walking with Tobias yesterday after we arrived. I would have thought he would have told—”

“Tobias knows she’s here?” Antony practically shouted, unable to hold in his surprise. He shook his head, trying to clear it. He couldn’t do this, not tonight and possibly not ever. “I know you mean well, sister, but it is best that we do not meet. I’ll talk to Tobias on my own. Excuse me.”

Antony turned on his heel and walked away before Ilaria could protest. He often wondered if Isobel knew the truth of her father's death. It was a guilt Antony carried in the base of his heart. No matter how much time passed, it was not something he was ready to forget.

He caught a flash of gold and silver as he kept close to the wall. Snapping his head up and out of his dark thoughts, he saw her there. Her golden hair falling in waves about her bare shoulder, the silvery dress she wore clinging to her full figure and flaring out at the hip. Maybe his night wasn't going to turn out as horrible as he imagined.

"Angel," he whispered to himself as he headed in her direction.

She caught sight of him too when she gave him a soft smile.

"I didn't think I would find you tonight," she remarked when he drew closer.

Antony took her offered hand and brought it to his lips. "I hoped we'd meet again. Though, I think it's time you give me a name, Angel."

"But what if I like you calling me Angel?" She asked, peering up at him with those bright blue eyes.

"I suppose that could be arranged."

"Isobel!" The name rang out behind them.

She jumped, staring wide eyed over Antony's shoulder. He didn't have to turn to recognize that voice. It cut through him like ice cold steel and he suddenly felt sick to his stomach.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered to him in the quietest and saddest little voice. It was quickly covered up by a more dazzling smile. “Uncle Bash.”

Antony wanted the floor to open up and swallow him whole. Anything to get him out of this situation and away from the revelation that he had sex with his sister’s niece.

“Antony?” Sebastian’s voice carried through the haze that was growing in his mind.

Antony hummed in response, making the mistake of lifting his eye to hers once more. The sadness he saw reflected back at him made his chest ache.

“I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure of meeting.” Antony didn’t know where he found the strength for words and relatively neutral ones at that. He wanted to scream, laugh, throw up or any combination thereof.

Sebastian stepped closer to Isobel’s side, wrapping an arm around her.

“My niece, Isobel Hartmann,” Sebastian started. “Isobel, this is Antony Devarik, Ilaria’s brother.”

Isobel dipped into a light curtsy. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. Aunt Ilaria has told me so much about you.”

“Good things, I hope,” Antony remarked.

Whatever he was feeling about this new turn of events he was going to have to shove deep down until he was alone. At which point, he was going to scream and curse every divine entity he knew. How was it that fate could be so cold and so



cruel? That he finally found the woman he saw and subsequently drew for over a year, for her to only be the one he wished he'd never have to face. The one whose life he single-handedly turned completely upside down.

In his mind, he still wanted to believe Isobel Hartmann was still a heartbroken ten-year-old child. Not the most gorgeous and alluring woman he had ever met.

“Only good things, I assure you,” Isobel replied.

“Would you be interested in a walk around the room with me?” Antony didn't even know why he had asked, but he needed to get her alone. Or at least away from Sebastian.

Isobel flicked her eyes open to Sebastian's for a moment and when he nodded, she smiled back at him again.

She held out her hand. “I would like that.”

Antony took her hand and tucked it into his elbow. He turned his attention to Sebastian. “I will have her returned to you forthwith.”

As soon as Sebastian turned his back to return to his wife, Antony's grip on Isobel's arm tightened. In an attempt to not draw too much attention to themselves, he tugged her along, his long legs eating up the space. He grabbed the handle of a side door and after yanking it open shoved her inside.

Antony was going to get his answers and try not to panic in the process.

## Chapter Nine

Tobias was determined to find her first.

Of the incredibly stupid ideas he had, this was currently highest on the list. Maybe he let his better judgment get the better of him. Maybe, despite everything, all Tobias wanted was to make Antony happy. Seeing Isobel and realizing who she was, made him irresponsible and reckless. He hadn't thought of the ramifications of who her family was in relation to Antony's. Of how Antony would perceive that relationship.

It didn't quite sink in for him until Antony's breakdown that morning. It was so long since he had lost control like that. To see Antony so beaten down and discouraged, hurt more than Tobias thought it would. He couldn't let Antony find out the truth without him there to work him through it.

He caught sight of Antony talking with Ilaria before he stormed off. Tobias sighed, that was probably the safest place to start.

Ilaria smiled when she saw him.

“Good evening, ma’am,” Tobias greeted her, taking her offered hand to kiss the top.

Ilaria chuckled. “You know you don’t need to call me that anymore.”

“I know, I can’t help myself sometimes.”

“We’re practically family, Tobias. My brother cares about you a great deal,” Ilaria commented.

Tobias cleared his throat, clasping his hands behind his back. “I don’t know—”

“It’s okay,” Ilaria interrupted, placing her hand on his arm. “As I’m sure you are aware, Antony and I correspond every month. Do you think in eight and a half years, he wouldn’t have told me even a little bit about you? So, I wasn’t surprised when you came to dinner last night. Though, I was expecting something.”

Tobias felt the tips of his ears burning. “What were you expecting?”

“It doesn’t matter now. All I want, after all these years, is my brother’s happiness. He’s found a piece of that with you.” Ilaria paused. Tobias followed her line of sight to find Sebastian approaching. “His heart is still very fragile, and I wouldn’t want him or you hurt in the process.”

*I’d be more worried about him breaking my heart.*

The thought ran unbidden in Tobias's mind. And he shook his head to clear it.

"I hope," Ilaria continued before Tobias could even say anything. "That you and I can become better acquainted while I'm here."

"I hope that as well," Tobias responded, once he could find his words.

Sebastian joined them, sliding an arm around his wife. She leaned into his side and smiled up at him. The affection was clear on both their faces. That's what he wanted, Tobias realized. That deep unbreakable kind of love.

"I thought you went to find Isobel."

Ilaria's statement was like ice down his back.

"I did. We also ran into Antony and he invited her to walk with him," Sebastian said.

"Well, that was nice of—"

Tobias felt his stomach drop to his feet and he could no longer hear whatever it was Ilaria was saying.

Antony knew and Tobias had to find him.

After quickly extracting himself from the conversation, Tobias took long quick strides across the ballroom. He tried not to bring undue attention to himself in his haste. His eyes searched the area for any sign of them.

There was a small sitting room right off the ballroom and Tobias was sure that's where they disappeared to. He stopped

before the door and sucked in a deep breath. Aside from not being sure what he would find, to the fear that Antony had locked the door, Tobias had to keep a level head.

He needed to be completely in control.

The deep resonance of Antony's tone carried past the door when Tobias opened it.

"I am practically twice your age!" Antony shouted.

Isobel huffed. "What's your point?"

Tobias shut the door behind him with a soft click. Neither of them had noticed his presence as he quickly twisted the lock. No interruptions.

"You are still a child," Antony ground out.

"I'm of age, if that is your concern. And if you are so worried about how old I am, shouldn't you have asked before you fucked me last night?" She planted her hands on her hips.

Tobias had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. Girl had spirit, he gave her that. He stayed by the door, watching the scene unfold, not wanting to interrupt if he didn't have to.

"And that's exactly the problem." Antony ran a rough hand through his hair.

"You make no sense." She shot back.

Antony made a pained noise in the back of his throat before his long legs ate up the space between them. He grabbed her chin in his hand, staring down into her face.

“Because your uncle would kill me, if he ever found out I touched you.”

Isobel pulled herself away with a scowl. “My uncle does not dictate my life.”

“Yet, he is married to my sister.”

“Again,” Isobel said with a huff and a sigh. “What is your point? We are not related nor are we family.”

The agitation Tobias saw, the wild look that began to form on Antony’s face. Tobias had seen this before. More times than he cared to remember. After the breakdown of that morning, Tobias didn’t know which way Antony was going to fall. If he would completely and utterly shut down, suppressing all his feelings or if he was going to explode, unable to see any sort of logic. Neither was a good thing for him.

However, Tobias knew exactly what Antony was holding himself back from. From confessing his involvement in Rudolf Hartmann’s death. It was something Antony simply could not let go of, no matter how much Tobias tried to convince him otherwise.

Tobias leaned back on the door making a loud enough noise. He needed to make his presence known, otherwise they wouldn’t appreciate him eavesdropping on their conversation so long.

Isobel and Antony jumped apart like they were caught by someone else. Tobias could see the way Antony’s shoulders

tensed together. The fire that burned in his eye gave Tobias a slight pause.

“I suppose I have you to thank and to blame for this,” Antony growled. “You knew and did not tell me. You both knew. Was I the one meant to be made a fool?”

“Antony, you know it’s not like that,” Tobias replied, seeking his voice calm and steady.

“Then what is it, Tobias? You deliberately withheld this information from me. You of all people who should know what this information would mean to me. I’ve trusted you for more than half my life. I can’t—” Antony cut himself off and a tick worked in his jaw. “I can’t deal with this right now.”

All Tobias could do was stand there and watch him leave. The door slammed behind Antony as he went out into the hallway instead of back into the ballroom.

His own heart pounding in his chest. When Isobel tried to get around him, Tobias snatched a hold of her arm.

“Don’t,” he murmured with a shake of his head.

“We can’t just leave him like that,” Isobel protested.

“We have to. Please believe me, this is for the best. Antony,” Tobias paused, licking his lips as he considered his next words very carefully. Tobias was certain that Isobel didn’t know the kind of trauma Antony had suffered through in his life. As a result, he didn’t really know how much to actually tell her. “Antony has had a tough life, where his emotions and feelings have not been acknowledged or validated. It is best that he has

the distance to process this surprise without our interference, at least initially.”

Isobel turned to him with a frown and crossed her arms. “Did we make a mistake by not telling him?”

“I don’t know,” Tobias responded, raising and dropping a shoulder. “I thought... I honestly don’t know what I was thinking.”

He knew exactly what his intentions had been no matter how innocent he wanted them to be. There was so much that Isobel didn’t know, that she couldn’t know. At least not yet. There was no doubt she would think him insane if he told her that Antony had seen their marriage. That Antony had been obsessing over the idea of her for over a year. All Tobias wanted was to ease that transition knowing Antony would get hung up in their family relation.

That was a mistake. And now, Antony was angrier than Tobias had ever seen him.

“Tobias?” Isobel’s small voice broke through the haze of his mind. “Do you think he can forgive us?”

He draped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer to his side.

“I hope so.”



Antony didn’t return to the party.



How could he? How could he stand there and pretend like nothing happened? That the carefully built façade he built around himself and his heart were beginning to show cracks? To be unnerved, unraveled and every frayed nerve left bare and raw.

He couldn't face a room full of people who meant well but knew nothing about him. And he liked to keep it that way. That was comfortable; that was safe. To hold everything and everyone at such a distance that he couldn't run the risk of getting hurt again.

Maybe Ilaria would understand. His twin who knew him better than he knew himself, who had suffered alongside him for so many years. But yet, he felt like he couldn't, shouldn't talk with her about Isobel. The thought sent another wave of nausea through his gut. No, he couldn't do that.

Instead, he let his feet take him where they willed. Antony's own sense of self-preservation kicked into full force and there was only one place he could go.

He stared hard at the wooden door to the long forgotten linen closet. It squeaked terribly on its hinges but it didn't matter as Antony yanked it open and then shut behind him again. There was a small space between the shelving and the wall where he had made a nest of sorts for himself a long time ago. Now, a grown man, and a rather tall one at that, Antony still wedged his body in that small space. Taking his jacket and chain, laying them carefully on a higher shelf, before curling into himself and pulling the threadbare blanket over his head.

It was old and gray, though it had once been a more vibrant shade of yellow. He still liked to pretend it smelled of honey and lavender, of his sister who had been his only comfort. That no matter how broken and battered he felt, that she was always there with a smile for him. To make him feel like his life mattered. That everything he suffered and everything he endured was worth it because she was safe and she was happy.

But with Ilaria gone and remarried, Antony spent several long years wondering if it had all been worth it. He knew it was, but now that he could finally step out of his own personal darkness, he couldn't. Instead, he found a contentment in his position, knowing that he was actually helping people. And he had Tobias.

A painful lump formed in his throat and he tried his best to swallow it down. As upset and angry as he was, deep down he knew it wasn't Tobias's fault. He gave so much and expected even less in return. Antony knew he hadn't done nearly enough to earn that loyalty and dedication. He relied on Tobias, he needed him like a plant needs water to thrive. That was a relationship he wasn't willing to sacrifice for anything.

Antony sat up, his blanket falling around his shoulders and he leaned back against the wall. A certain sense of uneasy calm settled over him. He had been so sure of what he had seen when it came to Isobel, but fate couldn't be so cruel to put her in his path like that. Besides, he knew better than anyone, that what he saw was never absolutely certain. That it could still change or be changed. Antony knew he would have to marry eventually and produce heirs, otherwise his title

would revert back to his tormentor, the older brother who despised him before all else. Someone Antony would make sure never saw the light of day again. He couldn't do that, not to his people or to his sister.

But his wife didn't have to be Isobel. It couldn't be Isobel. And there was only one way he knew that he hoped to push the idea from his mind and his subconscious.

Upon standing, he carefully tucked his blanket back away and grabbed his things from the higher shelf. He made a hard line to his rooms, his legs moving with a strength he certainly didn't feel.

Opening the door to his rooms, he was less surprised than he anticipated to find Tobias already there waiting for him. The other man just looked up from where he sat upon a sofa, his fingers twisting together.

Antony said nothing, dumping his jacket and chain on an empty chair. He crossed the room in a few long strides to his desk. There on top rested his sketchbook. The one full of his drawings of the woman who plagued his dreams for over a year. Of Isobel.

Without another word, and before he could change his mind, he snatched up the whole damn thing.

A small fire burned in the hearth in the corner of the room to help chase away the chill the place usually held. Antony stood there for a moment, staring into the dancing flames. And then without another thought or consideration, he threw the entire pad into the fire, watching the paper curl and turn black.

## Chapter Ten

Isobel perched a small pair of glasses on the tip of her nose. The thin gold wire looped around the pinchers in her hand, wrapping around until the small stone was encased within. Twisting the wire around, she snipped off the excess before threading it through a fine chain. She pushed the glasses to the top of her head as she dangled the new pendant in front of her.

The morning light through the window caught some of the opalescent shimmer of the stone. It was a small chunk from the rock the twins had given to her for her birthday. Isobel knew she wanted to do something with it, to have a memento that was more than just a garden rock. She was pleased with her efforts as she laid it out on the table and started to clean up her supplies.

Isobel hoped it would have calmed the swirling maelstrom in her mind. After Antony stormed out of the room, the previous night, Isobel went back to following her uncle and aunt around for a little while longer before retiring to bed. Not that she could sleep, staring up into the ceiling wondering when

everything had gone completely sideways. There was obviously something else going on with Antony than the simple shock of who she actually was. She had to believe that things would eventually smooth over and they could make amends. At least for Ilaria's sake even if she didn't know what was going on. But Isobel wasn't about to jeopardize the incredible relationship she had with her aunt for sex... with her twin.

Isobel groaned and dropped her head down onto the wooden table. Spirits, it all sounded so ludicrous and absolutely absurd when she thought about it that way. It had been fun and eye opening, but that was all it could be. Isobel knew that, even if she couldn't explain why the thought of doing exactly that made her sad.

Gathering up the rest of her things, she went to stow them back in her travel trunk. She was glad to have brought them. Working with the metal and the wire gave her a sense of calm and purpose she hadn't found elsewhere in her life. While, there was a value to making beautiful things, it didn't feel like enough. Isobel had learned all she could when it came to that simpler metalwork. She wanted more, she needed more. But she was too afraid to ask for it.

The thought of being able to really forge useful things, especially of the sharp and pointy variety, sent a thrill through her system. It would be hard and it would be dangerous, but she didn't care. Isobel had only ever breathed a thought of it once out loud. To her grandmother, almost six months before she died. Amalie simply smiled and warned her of the

difficulties of such a task. Neither she nor Isobel ever mentioned it again.

Maybe after this trip and they went home, Isobel might work up the courage to talk to her uncle about it. She never doubted Sebastian's love and devotion to her. But despite his reassurances, Isobel still felt like an outsider in her own family. Especially once her grandmother was gone. Sebastian and Ilaria never made her feel uncared for or unloved. And yet, the treacherous thoughts pushed at her brain again. They didn't happen often but when they did, it made her feel sadder than she ever wanted to be.

If they did love her as much as they claimed and Sebastian had taken her care unto himself for the last eight and a half years, why would he not acknowledge her publicly? That she was in fact his child, no less than Emrys was or the twins. He had always been that father figure in her life even when her own was still alive. She wanted that, she wanted those feelings acknowledged. If someone could remarry, why couldn't she have a new father? And her biological one at that.

Isobel didn't even realize she was crying until a tear dripped from the tip of her nose onto the table. She angrily wiped it away with the sleeve of her dress as a knock sounded at her door. Looking at the small ticking clock on the mantelpiece, she realized how late she was to breakfast.

"Isobel?" The strong voice made a sob catch in her throat. Of course, it had to be him.

“One moment,” she called out. She tried to get the rest of the tears off her face and took several calming breaths before going to answer the door.

But seeing Sebastian standing there, a confused frown on his face, made her crumble all over again. He caught her around the waist before she could hit the floor and pulled her tightly to his chest.

“What’s wrong, sweetpea?” he asked gently, brushing the hair away from her face.

Isobel chewed on her lower lip and burrowed deeper into his embrace. If there was any time for honesty, it was now. Though, she would regret the way the words came out.

“Why didn’t you want me?” Her voice was small and broken, muffled by his jacket.

He carried her over to the couch, with her still clinging tightly to him.

“Isobel, what are you talking about?” He asked gently. “I’ve always wanted you.”

“Then why can’t you be my papa too? Like you said you were.”

Isobel hiccupped as he peeled her off him and stared down into her face. She knew her eyes were red and her cheeks puffy but she didn’t care. She needed to know.

“I am.” The confusion laced his few words.

Isobel vigorously shook her head. “Why do I have to keep pretending I’m just your niece?”

Sebastian’s features softened. “Oh, sweetpea. You have always been more than just my niece.”

“Then why can’t I be your daughter too?”

“Is that what you want?” Sebastian asked, wiping some of her tears away with the pad of his thumb.

Isobel nodded vigorously. “Very much.”

“Then we will make it so.”

She gaped at him for a moment as his words slowly started to sink in. “Just like that?”

“Just like that. You have to know how much I care about you. In my heart, you are and always will be my first-born, no matter what.”

“Why didn’t you claim me after Papa died, then?” Isobel found herself asking.

She had a very vivid memory of the morning she learned the truth of her parentage. Confused would have been an understatement, but she wasn’t so ignorant to understand what her mother and uncle were trying to tell her. It took a while longer to fully come to terms with it and to have a full realization of the sacrifice Sebastian had made so she could even have life.

“I couldn’t,” Sebastian started slowly.



Isobel grasped his hands and gave them a tight squeeze. “I’m not a child anymore, Uncle Bash. Please.”

Sebastian sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I don’t even know how much you know from back then, but I shall endeavor to start at the beginning. I knew your mother before Rudolf did. Johanna worked on my ship for several years and she and I grew friendly—”

“You had sex with her,” Isobel interrupted with the tilt of her head. “I do know where babies come from.”

“It’s simply an awkward conversation to have.” Sebastian paused to clear his throat. “Anyway, I know I couldn’t love her like she deserved to be. So, I let her go. She met Rudolf the next time we were in port and they married less than three months later. They were both so incredibly happy and I couldn’t want more for her and my brother. However, they married knowing there was a very good chance Rudolf wouldn’t be able to father children because of his injury. But for a year, they tried. When Rudolf came to me the next time I was in town, I had honestly thought he had lost his damn mind.”

Isobel gave his hands another squeeze. “I can’t even imagine.”

“He was asking me to impregnate his wife, a woman who I knew and cared for, for a time. As insane as it all sounded then as it does now, I said yes. For your parents who wanted a child before anything else, who trusted me to help them on a way they couldn’t trust anyone else. Before anything could happen,

I agreed to a very specific list of terms between Rudolf and myself. For as long as he was alive, you were his daughter. I had no parental claim, I had no say in your upbringing. I was nothing more than an uncle you became attached to. I couldn't be and I wouldn't be anything more. We did, however, agree that we would tell you upon either of our deaths. I always expected to be lost at sea long before Rudolf would die naturally.

“So, after that fire and he lay dying in your mother's arms, he reminded me of my promise. I couldn't do it, not without your mother's incessant begging that I do. As I'm sure you remember that morning, I didn't want to do it that day but I was left with little choice. I needed you to understand what I really was to you. Even now, Rudolf will always be your father and I want you to remember him that way. I didn't claim you back then because I wasn't forcing myself into my brother's place in your heart or in your life. Acknowledging you also meant acknowledging what Johanna and I did. I cared about her, yes and I did until she died, but I wasn't replacing Rudolf for her either.”

“Then why not after she died?” Isobel whispered.

Sebastian signed, his shoulders dropping further. “I didn't want to cause more upheaval in your world. You had already gone through so much. But if I had known that this is what you wanted, believe me, I would have given it to you a long time ago. I'm sorry, sweetpea, you deserved more and we lost these years from my own reluctance.”

“No.” Isobel threw herself into his arms again, holding onto him tightly. “I might not have been able to call you my father, I never felt any less loved by you. Thank you, Uncle Bash, for everything, because without you, I wouldn’t be here.”

They remained embraced for a couple minutes longer before Sebastian slowly eased away, wiping his thumb over her cheek.

“Let’s go meet your aunt for breakfast before she thinks we disappeared. We have a surprise for you.”

“Oh?” Isobel asked, perking up at the idea of that. She couldn’t possibly guess what in the world he was talking about.

Sebastian grabbed a hold of her hand and tugged her off the sofa. She took big steps to keep up with his long strides, but she didn’t care. The excitement of the unknown and the heart to heart they just had, made everything else slip away.

They entered the small sitting room a couple of doors further down the hallway. The twins hardly looked up from their plate of food while Emrys ran over and attached herself to Isobel’s leg.

“Good morning to you too,” Isobel chuckled, ruffling the little girl’s hair.

Isobel caught sight of Ilaria on the far side of the room, talking to a woman she didn’t recognize. Her hair was dark, darker than her aunt’s, and pulled back into a tight braid. Her

equally dark eyes peered over at her and Isobel flushed, realizing she had been caught staring.

Sebastian took a hold of her arm again and steered her over to the pair.

Ilaria beamed, patting the empty spot beside her.

“Isobel, I want to introduce you to someone,” Ilaria began.

Isobel settled down beside her aunt, her confusion only intensifying.

“Sylvia Victarian.” The woman smiled and held out her hand. Isobel gave it a tentative shake. “You no doubt recognize my family name. Toby is my younger brother.”

Isobel bit back a chuckle, she couldn't have imagined anyone calling Tobias “Toby”.

“It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“You as well,” Sylvia smiled. “From what I hear, you have an interest in my field of work. I'm one of the few female blacksmiths in all of the Five Clans. I've been corresponding with your aunt and uncle over the last month. I'd like to see some of your work, but I'm willing to offer you an apprenticeship if it is up to my standards.”

Isobel felt her mouth drop open and the tears gathering in her eyes again. Her heart pounded in her chest and in her ears.

“How?” She managed to squeak out.

“How do you think?” Ilaria asked, draping an arm around Isobel's shoulders. “Your grandmama could never keep

anything to herself. She knew this is what you wanted even if you only mentioned it to her once.”

“Ilaria and I thought it was better here than back at home,” Sebastian continued. “She had reached out to Antony, and through Tobias, we found Sylvia.”

Sylvia grinned, tapping her fingers on the table. “You don’t want to learn from a man. No offense, Captain. But knowing how to work with our more limited stature and with breasts always in the way.”

Isobel let out a chuckle. “No doubt. Can I get a few things to show you now?”

“Of course.”

Isobel felt the biggest smile cross her face. She couldn’t quite believe this was actually happening. Before leaving the table, she gave Ilaria and Sebastian the biggest hugs. “Thank you.”

Scurrying away from the table, Isobel headed to the door. No sooner had she pulled it open, she ran headlong into a hard chest. An arm shot out to steady her before she could fall to the floor.

Instead, she stared up into the steely face of Antony.

## Chapter Eleven

“**W**hat if they don’t like me?”  
“Will you stop worrying? They will adore you.”

Tobias gave Ophelia’s arm a tight squeeze as they headed down the hallway. After the incident with Ophelia losing her job on his behalf, Tobias felt the need to make it up to her. To find a way to give his sister back what she lost. The shock on her face when he told her where they were going was priceless. He mentioned the idea to Antony earlier that morning to see if Ilaria and Sebastian could use more assistance with their children.

Antony chuckled. “Have you seen their twins?”

That was enough for Tobias who immediately sent a message off to Ophelia. Thankfully, his sister was curious enough to show up quickly. Antony already left for breakfast with his family a few minutes before Ophelia finally arrived.

In the meantime, they walked along together until they reached the sitting room where everyone was already gathered.

Tobias shouldn't have been as surprised as he was to see Antony grabbing hold of Isobel's arm to keep her from falling. The two men spoke little to each other the night before after Antony had so unceremoniously burned his entire sketchbook. Tobias knew Antony hadn't slept afterwards.

Isobel righted herself, clearing her throat. She muttered a word of quiet thanks before pulling her arm back, dashing out the door and down the hall.

Antony shook his head before stepping into the room like nothing ever happened and that worried Tobias more than he expected it too. He watched as Antony greeted his sister with a small kiss on the cheek before he was set upon by the twins. Each grabbing one of his hands to yank him away and over to their growing pile of rocks in a corner. Their fascination with their uncle amused Tobias to no end.

A squeeze at his arm reminded him of Ophelia's presence.

"Toby?" She whispered, pulling him out of his own head.

He plastered a smile on his face before leading her over to Ilaria. Whatever fears Ophelia had about her help being accepted or wanted was quickly dispelled as soon as Tobias made the introductions and she sat down.

Emrys blinked at her slowly for a moment. "You're very pretty," the little girl eventually said.

In less than five minutes, it was like Ophelia was always part of their inner circle. Emrys had crawled into her lap with her head on her shoulder and was already fast asleep. It gave

Tobias's aching heart a moment of reprieve knowing that whatever indirect damage he might have caused could be so easily fixed. Here his affiliation with Antony was welcomed and led to a quicker and more comfortable level of trust.

Isobel returned some minutes later and was hunched over the small dining table with Sylvia, peering over a pile of small metalware. If Antony noticed her return, Tobias couldn't tell. There were suddenly far too many people in that parlor to try and keep track of everyone and everything.

He was going to try though. If almost twenty years of military experience taught him anything it was to always keep an eye on everything. Tobias leaned against a far wall by himself, nursing a cup of tea. It had long gone cold, but he didn't particularly care all that much. His solitude didn't last long when Ilaria slid up next to him.

"Thank you," she said to him. "Though, I don't think that even begins to cover it."

Tobias tilted his head to the side. "For what?"

Ilaria swept a hand across the room. "For all of this. You've brought a real smile to Isobel that I don't think I've seen since before her grandmother passed."

"Sylvia will be good for her."

"I hope so. For Ophelia too, I think Emrys is already quite attached to her. I will never say no to more help with my children, I know they are a handful but I wouldn't have it any other way." Ilaria smiled, resting her hand on Tobias's jacket



sleeve. “And for Antony. He’s finally starting to come out from behind the wall he built around himself. Eight and a half years ago when I found out he was even still alive, I couldn’t imagine finally being in this place. Watching my own twin brother playing with my twin sons. He wouldn’t be where he is without you, Tobias and I wanted to make sure you knew that I see that.”

Tobias never considered himself all that important but listening to Ilaria made him see it too.

He took the hand on his jacket and raised it to his lips, kissing the top of her hand. “Thank you. You don’t know how much I needed to hear that.”

“And don’t forget it!” Ilaria laughed. “I know you come from a big family of your own but Antony and I didn’t have that. Being here again and seeing that we can has meant everything to me.”

Tobias went to say more but the words died on his tongue. There wasn’t more to say, really. But it was the messenger he caught sight of in the doorway that stopped him. He quickly excused himself from Ilaria before going over to the door. The messenger panted for breath as he shoved the crumpled paper in his hand towards Tobias.

“Urgent message for you, General.”

Tobias frowned as he grabbed the letter. Turning it over, he inspected the dark purple blob of wax, if there was a recognizable seal, he didn’t see it. He snapped it open and felt the color drain from his face as he read the contents.

*Fuck.* This was bad.

“Antony.” He called out across the space, every head snapping in his direction even if he didn’t address them. He didn’t yell but he wasn’t used to raising his voice either. “A word. Now.”

Antony’s brow furrowed as he climbed to his feet and quickly crossed the space.

“What is this?” He asked as Tobias shoved the letter in his direction.

“Duty calls.”

Tobias watched the expression change on Antony’s face as he read the short missive. The frown deepening and the anxiety swirling through his one eye.

Once he was done, Antony folded up the paper and tucked it into his jacket. Turning his attention to Tobias, he squared his shoulders and set his jaw. This Tobias recognized when Antony shoved away everything to be the Chieftain, the leader he needed to be.

“We can send aid and supplies,” Tobias began but was interrupted when Antony shot him a stern look.

“No. I have to go. We have to go. One hour, maybe two.”

Ilaria approached them with Sebastian right over her shoulder. “What’s the matter? Can we help?”

Antony let out a noise between a growl and a pained whimper, his arms coming to wrap around his middle. When

he spoke, the words were hard and cold.

“Three nights past, Marivynn, a small village near our northernmost border had the barn that held their winter stores burn to the ground. Without immediate intervention, they will likely starve.”

“Why can’t you send aid then?” Ilaria asked.

“I feel obligated to help them,” Antony whispered.

Ilaria lightly touched his shoulder and he jerked away. “Talk to me, Antony. Let us help you help them.”

“Isn’t Marivynn two days ride from here? Surely, we don’t have to travel so far when the weather can turn any day,” Tobias interjected, trying to defuse an escalating situation. He could see the frantic and desperate look in Antony’s eye.

“I have to go. Marivynn,” he stopped, sucking in a deep breath. “Marivynn was where I went when I died.”



Antony couldn’t feel anything more than a dull numbness. This feeling of desperation and emptiness. Going back to Marivynn was like going back to his own personal hell. Like a wound that scabbed over and once picked at again started to fester. The very thought of having to step into that town again made his stomach ache.

Reentering his room, he pulled the patch from his eye and went over to the side table. There was still a little bit of cold water in the pitcher and he splashed it over his face and the

back of his neck. The chill made the hairs stand on end but somehow the ice-cold temperature soothed him.

Much like it had in Marivynn.

Antony growled and pushed away from the table. Tobias stayed by the doorway, leaning against the wall.

“You want to talk about it,” he offered gently.

“Not particularly.” Antony moved from the side table to the couch, dropping down and burying his face in his hands. “I never thought I’d ever have to go back there.”

“No one would fault you if you didn’t,” Tobias remarked, dropping down beside him. Reaching for Antony’s hand, he intertwined their fingers. “You never even told me where you were or what you went through in the time we all thought you were dead. That was not a darkness I want you to have to relive. So, I don’t know why you feel so compelled to do so.”

Antony’s head fell back against the sofa and stared up at the ceiling, his grasp tightening around Tobias’s. Around his anchor to this world.

“Maybe I still enjoy the pain too much,” Antony mused out loud. “It’s not a want to have to go back, it’s a need. There were those who showed me even the smallest piece of kindness and for that, I cannot, I will not forget them. Besides whether it’s Marivynn or any other village for that matter, if they belong to Drakos, they belong to me. It is my duty and my honor to serve them.”

“No one doubts your dedication.”

“They doubt my sanity and I can’t hold that against them. Not with my family’s track record.” Antony’s head rolled to the side so he could better see Tobias. “And I will prove every day that my taking over was the best option for everyone. It is time I finally face some of my demons and that starts in Marivynn.”

Tobias ran his fingers over Antony’s cheek. “And I will be with you every step of the way. As your General, your friend and your lover. Whatever happened in Marivynn, then or now, will not break you.”

Antony leaned over until their lips barely brushed each other. “Thank you.”

Tobias’s touch trailed from his cheek into his hair and grabbing a handful, yanked Antony closer. “I’m so fucking proud of you,” Tobias murmured before crushing their mouths together.

Antony felt like he was drowning. Lost to the whirlwind of feeling he knew he had been suppressing. With Tobias the numbness and cold disappeared and Antony would do anything to hold on to that.

Easing back, he rested their foreheads together.

“I’m sorry about last night,” Antony whispered. “I—”

Tobias pressed a finger to his lips. “It is enough. “We still need to talk about it but when we come back. Put some distance between us and that situation, and we can reevaluate it upon our return. Now, we have work to do.”

If there was anything that would keep Antony fully distracted, it was trying to live up to his position.

## Chapter Twelve

If there was anything that could lighten Antony's mood, it was watching his oversized brother-in-law try to get on a horse. Antony leaned against the stable door.

Sebastian invited himself on their expedition and Antony wasn't going to argue. He was another reasonable and sensible brain to figure things out. Ilaria almost insisted on it anyway. She now had Ophelia, so her husband being gone for a couple of days would not be remiss. Tobias also insisted on at least two guards to accompany them as well.

Five was more than a large enough crowd in Antony's opinion. He would have gone by himself if he didn't think Tobias would follow after him regardless.

Tobias came to stand beside Antony with a pair of reins in his hand. "Do you think we should just put him in the cart?"

Antony snorted. "I'd say yes, but you know he won't."

"I know you two are talking about me over there!" Sebastian yelled from the other side of the paddock.

Antony crossed the small grassed space, Tobias following behind him with their own horses.

“I can try to find something smaller if you want,” Antony offered.

Sebastian scowled. “I spent twenty years out at sea, when do you think horse riding was practical for me?”

“Never, by the look of it.”

“Are you two going to help me so we can start moving or just laugh at me all day?” Sebastian asked with an exasperated smile.

Tobias handed off the reins to Antony, who quickly mounted his own horse. Titus, the rust-colored stallion beneath him, gave an excited noise, tossing his mane back and forth. Antony leaned forward in the saddle, rubbing his hands over the horse’s neck. He didn’t ride much anymore but it was still something he found enjoyment in. It had taken him a while to get used to it again and become as proficient as he had been before the loss of half his vision.

The docile mare he and Tobias had picked out for Sebastian was growing short on patience. Apparently, even Luna had her limits. However, there really wasn’t much else of a choice aside from a pony meant for a child.

It took another solid five minutes but eventually, Tobias got Sebastian up onto the horse with some basic instructions. They were finally ready to get on their way.



While anxiety still coursed through him, Antony was impressed with how quickly everything came together. Since he was taking Tobias with him, he left his High Chancellor in charge in his absence but had told Ilaria to keep an eye on the man just in case. A wagon full of food and supplies was put together and ready to go when they left. Having the wagon would slow them down more than Antony would have liked, but he wasn't about to show up empty handed in a place with little food.

They rode mostly in silence, only making a little small talk between them when they paused around midday to rest the horses. Antony didn't feel much like talking anyway, his mind running a mile a minute. It was either the stress and the worry about what he'd find in Marivynn or subconscious flashes of Isobel. Even though he had burned his sketchbook, it didn't mean that all those pictures weren't burned into his memory instead. Having actually met her and touching her, Antony knew it would take more than a few burned pages to get her out of his head.

The thought of drawing her from life instead of from inside his head sent his pulse racing. He wanted to think of her with a dress buttoned up to her throat, covering every inch of her. No, the visualization of such a moment manifested itself much differently. Instead, he saw her laid out on his bed, tangled in the sheets and completely naked. The rosy tips of her nipples begging for his tongue. Her golden hair spread out on his pillow like a halo.

Like an Angel.

His Angel.

*Fuck.*

Antony readjusted in his saddle, which was without a doubt, the worst place to get a throbbing erection. He tried to push her as far from his mind as he could but it was more difficult than he anticipated. Especially now that he knew what she felt like beneath him, the softness of her skin, the smoothness of her hair, the scent of orange and jasmine that clung to her. This was knowledge he wouldn't have had if he hadn't given into temptation. If he hadn't let go and embraced what was offered so freely to him.

The breeze was cool against his suddenly overheated cheeks and the first flakes of snow flitted down from the darkening sky. The white speckles collected on Titus's mane.

No matter how hard he tried, Antony couldn't stop thinking about her. One of the things that he couldn't quite figure out was - if she knew who he was, how could she be so willing? How could she have slept with him knowing who he was? It wasn't a question he had the answer to and he doubted even Tobias had an actual answer either. However, it was something he was going to have to find out when they returned home.

They rode in companionable silence for at least another hour, before Tobias called a halt to the party at the top of a hill.

"It will soon be too dark to track safely. There is an inn a couple more miles up the road where we can stop," Tobias explained.

“And you are certain they will have room for us,” Sebastian asked.

Tobias nodded. “They are friends of my sister, Rafaela. Most of the innkeepers within our clan have a cooperative where they will support each other as needed. So, she knows many of them.”

“Let’s get moving then.” Antony turned his horse back down the path. He would be happy to be back on his feet again and to spend the night in a bed.

Thankfully, when they arrived at the inn, it was quiet and they had enough space for everyone. The two guards would stay together in one room. Sebastian was afforded a room of his own while Antony and Tobias opted to stay together.

If the innkeeper, Marius, and his wife, Violette, recognized Antony, they didn’t mention it. Though Antony could feel her eyes following him.

“If you’re hungry, I can bring you something to eat,” Violette offered. “Hot water and fresh towels.”

“Thank you, that would be appreciated,” Sebastian replied with a smile.

Antony needed to get out of the public room, even if there was no one else there. There was something about being out in the open like this that made his skin itch. It was different when he was home and had control over his surroundings. Here he didn’t and he didn’t like it.

Tobias stayed behind a moment to settle up their bill that night since they wanted to leave by dawn and didn't want to have to wake anyone. After grabbing his bag from the pile in the floor, Antony walked behind Sebastian and the guards, following Violette up the stairs to the rooms above. Of course, his was the last one at the end of the hallway.

Violette pulled out the key to unlock the door and then turned to him. Her head tilted to the side for a moment as she regarded him. Antony said nothing, the itch intensifying up the back of his neck. This was exactly why he avoided going out in public as much as he possibly could. He was forever being stared at.

“Antony Devarik,” Violette finally said and Antony gave nothing more than a small nod. “I thought I recognized you. You look very much like your father.”

“You knew my father?” Antony found himself asking, even if he wanted nothing more than to disappear into his room.

“Not formally, no. But everyone knew Artem Devarik. He's come through here every once in a while, always nice and friendly. I was sad to hear of his passing.”

Antony had to keep from snorting. He remembered little of his father, besides the fact that he had been dead for almost thirty years.

“Thank you. Now, if you will excuse me.”

Antony didn't even bother taking the key from her. He slipped through the door and shut it behind him with a

resounding thud. Tobias no doubt would get a key and that was good enough for him. Hopefully, the poor old woman didn't think him too rude but he couldn't do this right now. He already had too much swirling around in his head without some random lady telling him he looked like his long dead father.

Artem Devarik was no more than a name to Antony. A name that seemed to haunt him wherever he went. He had been six when his father died and remembered very little about him. Antony knew Ilaria had much more vivid memories of their father. But yet, Antony didn't feel like he was missing much. Instead, he suffered twenty years under the control of his elder brother.

Antony shivered as he stepped away from the door. He turned up the small oil lamp on the bedside table to give the room a little more light. The space was small but cozy. A pair of chairs set along a far wall with a small table between them. The bed looked comfortable even if there was a good chance his feet would hang off the end. One of the downsides of being unnecessarily tall.

Undoing the long line of buttons on the front of his jacket, Antony tossed it on one of the chairs before sitting down to yank off his boots. He was already feeling better when the door creaked again.

Tobias shouldered the door open. His own bag slung over one shoulder and a tray of food balances in his hands.

“What did you say to that poor woman that has her thinking you hate her?” Tobias asked, setting the tray down on the table.

“Nothing,” Antony replied. Tobias shot him a look and he released an exasperated sigh. “Seriously, nothing. Apparently, she had seen my father a handful of times and decided she needed to tell me. I can’t talk about him, you know that.”

Tobias nodded. He too quickly made himself comfortable before taking the other chair. Taking a chunk of bread from the tray he ripped it off with his teeth.

“No, there was no reason to be rude about it,” Tobias said after a while.

“I wasn’t rude. I extracted myself from the conversation and disappeared in here. What are you going to do? Punish me for it?” Antony took one of the grapes from the tray and popped it into his mouth.

Tobias smirked. “You might enjoy that too much.”

“Very true,” Antony admitted. He took another grape and chucked it at Tobias, who caught it before it could hit him. “Damn your reflexes.”

Tobias ate the grape. “You know you can’t surprise me like that. Are you looking for punishment or are you just looking for attention?”

“I didn’t think the two were mutually exclusive.”

Tobias shook his head as he pushed back from the table. Antony did much the same, wondering what he had gotten

himself into or how much he needed the comfort only Tobias could offer him. To have this closeness with someone who understood what he was going through.

With a knee on either side of Antony's thighs, Tobias straddled his lap. Antony wrapped his arms around the smaller man and pulled him closer until their hips were flush with each other and their chests pressed together. He closed his eyes when Tobias slipped the eyepatch off, running his fingers through the unruly curls. Their breathing fell into sync, their foreheads touching, their noses bumping together.

"Everything will be alright," Tobias whispered to him.

Antony managed a small nod. "I never thought I'd be bringing you there. There are parts of me that I've hidden all these years. Things I have pushed down and repressed because it was easier than trying to deal with them. I owed you an explanation for my disappearance a long time ago. But I couldn't talk about it and thankfully you never asked."

"I was never going to push you for more information than you were willing to give." Tobias paused, trailing his lips over Antony's cheek. "But when you're ready, you know I'm always here to listen."

Antony tightened his hold, pulling Tobias that much closer, his hands sprawled against his muscular back. He knew he needed to do this, no matter how much he didn't want to have to relive those years.

"I need to tell you about Marivynn."



The sky was a perpetual shade of dark grey and the wind held a cold, damp chill. It felt like it wanted to snow even if it had yet to fall. Tobias shivered, wishing he had remembered to grab his jacket. But even the cold couldn't stop the intense pounding in his chest, his heart breaking and bleeding. His feet staggered and he leaned heavily against the outer stone wall of the inn.

Tobias waited until Antony was practically asleep before murmuring something along the lines of wanting to check on the horses. Antony nodded, burrowing deeper into his pillow.

Once the cold night air hit him, everything that was spoken in the last hour came back to him like a massive wave. His stomach clenched so tightly, he was glad he hadn't eaten a full meal. The bile burned the back of his throat and he swallowed hard to keep from throwing up. Tobias slid down the wall until he was on the hard dirt ground. His teeth sank into his knuckles until he finally couldn't keep the painful sobs from breaking free of his throat. The tears finally ran freely down his cheeks.

His poor broken boy.

Tobias still didn't know what strength he possessed not to break down in front of Antony. He couldn't, he knew that. Allowing that feeling to bubble to the surface would serve neither of them. The words that came out of Antony's mouth when he described in quite vivid detail the five worst years of



his life were utterly heartbreaking. He might as well have stuck his hand into Tobias's chest and ripped out his own heart.

But this gift of information Antony had given him was both a blessing and a curse. A curse of knowledge that he now wanted to forget. His teeth sunk harder until he finally broke skin. The metallic taste of blood on his tongue.

Tobias didn't know how long he sat out there in the cold, crying and cursing every deity he could think of. Wondering how anything like this could have happened to the sweet boy he met all those years ago. Meeting Antony at fifteen years old had completely changed his life, even if he didn't know how at the time. Antony, who even at that age was too tall and gangly, walked into their newly shared rooms and barely made eye contact with him. Then all those nights Tobias spent wiping the blood from Antony's face without asking any questions and getting no answers in return.

Until they finally kissed at nineteen. Tobias already knew that this man was more than just a friend and roommate. Even if Antony's devotion wasn't directed towards him and was reserved for his beloved sister, Tobias couldn't fault him for that.

Tobias heaved a heavy sigh when the tears finally stopped and he was sure there was no moisture left in his body. He needed to go back inside and back up to bed. Tomorrow was going to be an even longer day and Tobias had to be Antony's rock like he always had been. Wiping the blood on his hand on

his pants, he scribbled the tears from his face. His legs were tired and shaky when he re-entered the inn, taking the steps up to their room two at a time.

Antony was exactly where he had left him, curled up in bed. Stripping down, Tobias climbed under the blankets. Like a moth drawn to a flame, Antony immediately nuzzled closer in his sleep, pulling Tobias's body back against his.

If this wasn't going to last forever, Tobias would take as many moments like this as he could. To savor the warmth and the closeness they shared. It was in the safe cocoon of Antony's arms that Tobias too found his rest.

## Chapter Thirteen

Antony pulled his horse to a stop at the top of the hill, looking down at the small village below. The sense of dread dropped into his stomach, lodging into a tight ball. Somehow, he felt lighter and more at peace than he thought he would.

After pouring out everything he had been holding back for so long to Tobias the night before, he felt less burdened with information. He hadn't anticipated telling Tobias as much as he had but as soon as the words started escaping his mouth, he couldn't stop them even if he tried. It was such a cathartic release. He should have said something a long time ago, whether it was to Tobias or to Ilaria.

Tobias and Sebastian pulled up in their horses beside him. Swallowing hard on the lump that formed in his throat, Antony turned his attention to Sebastian.

"Before we go down there, there is something I need to tell you," Antony started carefully. Sebastian just waited patiently for him to continue. "You will learn some things today that

will be difficult to understand and to comprehend. Things I went through all those years ago, years I would much prefer to forget. If I didn't want you to know, I think I would have objected to your coming but you need to know. You deserve to know after everything you and I have been through in the time we have known each other. My sister loves you more than anything else in this world and you saved her from her own darkness. This is mine. I know there will be no secrets between you and Ilaria, but after what you see today, think very carefully on what you want to share with her."

Sebastian frowned. "After all this, you wouldn't want to tell her yourself?"

"I—" Antony started before sucking in a harsh breath. "I can't. I can't tell her to only see that sadness and guilt in her eyes. Everything I have ever done was for her, I ended up here for her. Because for as long as I was here, she was safe. She will inevitably blame herself for my suffering but I chose this. I chose to protect her, I chose her happiness over my own."

Sebastian reached over and gave Antony's shoulder a tight squeeze. "I understand and thank you for trusting me with this."

"Thank you." Antony laid his hand on top of Sebastian's. "Thank you for loving her and giving her the life, the happiness she always deserved."

"You deserve that same happiness, Antony."

Antony shrugged. "Maybe I will someday. When I can finally put all this behind me."

He felt Tobias's eyes burning into the back of his head. Antony would be lying if he didn't find a certain level of happiness in his life, because of Tobias. But even Antony knew that he was constantly pushing things away, afraid of that hurt, that pain again. The feelings of abandonment that still haunted him.

Turning his horse from the hill, they went down into town. Not much had changed in the nearly nine years he had been gone. They stopped just on the outskirts and dismounted. They left one of the guards with the cart while the other one followed behind. Antony intended to walk on foot and pray that anyone who might recognize him would step out. Though he was certain that more than half the town didn't even know he was there until the end.

The sun was slowly setting along the distant horizon, the early evening hours casting a soft glow to the snow topped buildings. The ice crunched beneath their boots. Antony led them in the direction of the nearest tavern since they would still be open this time of day and usually had the most information.

What few people were about the streets stepped out of their way, some murmuring to each other and pointing. A phenomenon Antony was quite used to everywhere he went.

"Antony?" The yell made him whip around. He barely had a second to register who it was before she threw herself into his arms. "You actually came."

"Of course, I did," Antony murmured into her hair.

Pulling back, he looked down into her face. The dark hair and sea green eyes that reminded him so much of his sister. Her face was softer and rounder than he remembered, and her figure filled out from the slimness of youth. He wiped away the tear that trailed down her cheek.

“No one believed me,” she whispered. “I told them if we wrote to you, you would come. That you wouldn’t forsake us.”

“You wrote to me?”

She nodded. “I knew you would answer.”

“Charlotte,” Antony murmured, pausing and biting the inside of his cheek. “Your uncle—”

Charlotte shook her head, taking his face between her smaller hands. “He’s dead, Antony. These past five years.”

A massive weight felt like it had been lifted from his shoulders. Antony didn’t think he would have been this happy to hear of someone’s death. Except for the death of the man who had been in league with Maxim and had caused just as much damage.

“Then who—”

“Gabriel Emersyn,” she answered, not allowing him to continue.

A throat clearing behind him, reminded Antony that they weren’t alone. He took a hold of Charlotte’s hand and tugged her along with him.

“Charlotte, I want you to meet some people. First, Ilaria’s husband and Chieftain of Clan Ulrich, Captain Sebastian Hartmann. And my Commander General, Tobias Victarian.” Antony didn’t miss the way her eyes grew wide at the name, but ignored it for the time being. “Gentleman, this is Charlotte Bellvix—”

“Emersyn,” she added, quickly. “Charlotte Bellvix Emersyn.”

Antony whipped to stare at her, his mouth falling open. “You married him? When? How?”

Charlotte looped her arm through Antony’s. “Come back to the house. You are all probably tired from your journey and I’ll explain everything over some soup. Gabriel should be home by that point as well. It’s been too many years, Antony.”

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Antony nursed his glass of wine, leaning a forearm against the hearth of the fireplace. He could hear Charlotte’s friendly chatter with Sebastian and Tobias. If she was surprised by Tobias’s presence, she didn’t show it. The thought of them actually meeting and interacting with each other was not something Antony ever thought would happen. They knew of each other, and yet there seemed to be nothing but a comfortable connection forming. The whole thing was completely surreal in Antony’s mind.

While he was greeted warmly and familiarly by Charlotte, Antony was left to wonder what kind of reception he would receive from her husband. Gabriel Emersyn, the name alone

gave him a bit of a shudder. He did not fear the man, then or now, but to face him again was not something Antony anticipated.

The door to the drawing room creaked open and Antony jerked his head in that direction. He recognized Gabriel in a heartbeat and the two men locked gazes.

“Antony Devarik,” Gabriel whispered. “What are you doing here?”

Charlotte got up from her place and approached her husband, grabbing a tight hold of his hand. “I wrote to him. We need his help.”

“And you came?”

Antony inclined his head. “Naturally. Despite the past, this village still belongs to Clan Drakos and I am the head of Clan Drakos, am I not?”

“Of course! I just never... I mean, I can't...” Gabriel struggled for words before he stopped altogether. He took his wife's hand and pressed a kiss to the top of it. Approaching Antony, he stopped a foot short and dropped onto a single knee, his head bowed in supplication. “Forgive me. I know I do not deserve it after all this time, but I ask for it anyway.”

“There is nothing to forgive.” Antony held out his hand and while Gabriel hesitated, he eventually took the grasp. He was hauled back up to his feet. “I hold no ill will towards you, Gabriel Emersyn. You did what you must in order to survive, much like I did. The sins you think you carry are not on you



but on the man who called himself both your mentor and my jailer.”

Oliver Bellvix. The name hung like a cloud over them. One that none of them would ever speak again. He served as the village’s magistrate for well over two decades, Gabriel eventually becoming his deputy only months before Antony arrived. Maxim had chosen Marivynn because of Oliver, because of the reputation he had for stern demeanor and penchant for violence. They were too similar that way. Charlotte was Oliver’s niece who lived with him after her parents died and was the only one to show Antony any sort of kindness. Even if Gabriel had tried when his superior wasn’t looking.

“Thank you,” Gabriel murmured. “I should never have doubted you.”

“We have been through a lot together, the three of us.” Antony gave Gabriel a hard pat on the shoulder. “But what is in the past can stay there for all I care.”

Antony’s attention was suddenly drawn to the door again but from the corner of his good eye, he saw a small head pop through. The little boy couldn’t be any older than five or six years old.

“Mama?” The little boy asked when he saw a room full of strangers.

“Come here, my love.” Charlotte bent down to scoop him up as soon as he rushed over. Picking him up, she balanced him on her hip. “There is someone I want you to meet.”

“Charlotte,” Antony started but couldn’t get any more words out.

She stopped in front of him, Gabriel stood by her side, an arm wrapped around her waist.

“This is our son. He will be six in a couple of weeks,” Charlotte explained, smoothing away some of the unruly hair from the little boy’s face. She turned her attention to the child, kissing his cheek. “Why don’t you tell our friend what your name is?”

“Antony,” he murmured before turning his face into his mother’s neck.

Antony reached out to grab a hold of the mantelpiece to steady himself. It was like a sharp blow to the chest and Antony soon found himself out of breath.

Charlotte excused herself to get the child up to his bed. As soon as she was out of the room, Antony gazed at Gabriel.

“Tell me you didn’t,” he said, his voice a harsh whisper.

“We named our son for you.”

“You shouldn’t have.”

Gabriel shrugged. “Charlotte and I always admired your strength, Antony and we wanted to honor that in the only way we knew how.”

Antony didn’t know what to say. So, the only thing he could do was a muttered thank you, until he could really process this new information.

Charlotte returned a few minutes later and they all circled around a table. Tobias sat on Antony's one side with Sebastian on the other. Charlotte and Gabriel across from them. They are a simple meal with a comfortable small talk that avoided the topics no one wanted to talk about but knew was eventually going to be inevitable.

Once dinner was complete, Antony forced everything else from his mind to focus on the real reason he was there.

"Tell me about the theft," he said, leaning back in his chair.

Gabriel hooked his fingers together and rested them on top of the table. "As I'm sure you are aware, we keep a surplus of essential foodstuffs. The building in which it is normally housed does need some repairs made. There was a plan in place to do it as soon as spring. Now, it will have to be rebuilt. I was awakened in the middle of the night about the fire. We didn't realize anything had been stolen until we were finally able to put the blaze out and there was almost nothing left inside."

"And you are sure it wasn't burned?" Sebastian asked from his place.

"No," Gabriel answered with a shake of his head. "There were no ashes, nothing to indicate anything had been burned other than the building."

Tobias tapped his fingers on the table. "Do you have any idea what could have set the blaze?"

“Also, no. It was a storage building so there was no fire inside or even a lantern. There is no purpose to it since no one goes there at night and only a few people have keys to it anyway.”

“And all those keys have been accounted for?” Antony asked.

Gabriel nodded. “Yes. Only I and my deputy currently have the keys and his were still at home when he came running to the fire.”

Antony nodded. None of it was making any sort of sense to him. Who would set fire to an empty building especially after what was inside was taken? Unless whoever did it was trying to send some sort of message but whatever that would be evaded him.

“I want to speak to your deputy in the morning,” Antony said after a long moment of thought. “I also want to see what’s left.”

“Antony,” Charlotte murmured, getting his attention. “Are you sure you want to go there?”

Antony took a long swallow of his wine. Did he really want to? Of course not. Should he? Yes. Could he look at the outside and the interior of a burned-out building, wondering if the room in the basement still existed. If his own personal hell was what he remembered it to be?

There was only one way to find out.

“Yes.”



The barn was no more than a weathered old building. At one time there was ivy growing up on the side and in the spring would have the most beautiful white and yellow flowers. Now the leaves were either shriveled from the cold or burned and black. What glass might have been in the windows had long fallen out and were shattered in the frozen grass. The large double doors blew open and hung from their hinges.

The whole place had a particularly depressing feel about it. Antony had to look at this place with a distance and an ignorance to figure out what had caused the fire. To remain indifferent and objective. But just looking at the old gray stone and wooden structure brought back feelings he long wanted forgotten.

He felt Tobias's hand on his back and Charlotte at his shoulder. It grounded him and kept his heart from jumping into his throat. Maybe Antony had to deal with the impending doom he felt first, to finally face what he had dismissed so many years ago.

“Is it still there?” Antony asked, barely above a whisper.

Charlotte's hand tightened. “Untouched from the day you left.”

“Why?”

“You know why. Uncle refused to do so, thinking you would be forced back eventually,” Charlotte explained. “And once he

died, I couldn't do it. Not with the way things were and not without your knowledge. It wasn't my place to erase this."

Antony gazed down at her. "Even with everything you went through here?"

"I suffered less because of you."

His lips pressed into a thin line and he gave a slow nod.

"I want to be able to move past this," Antony finally admitted after a long moment. "But being here again, it hurts so fucking much."

"One step at a time," Tobias remarked beside him.

Antony gave a grim nod before forcing his feet forward. Tobias and Charlotte trailed behind him with Sebastian and Gabriel not far behind.

Very carefully, Antony pushed the broken door open and stepped into the decaying structure. His feet carried him numbly to the back left corner and jumped a few times until he heard the telltale rattling. Getting down into his hands and knees he brushed away the dirt and debris until a wooden hatch was exposed on the floor.

"It's unlocked," Gabriel said, stepping forward. "As soon as he was dead, I had the lock dismantled and the keys destroyed."

Antony didn't respond though Gabriel's comments brought him even the smallest level of comfort. He grasped the metal ring on the front and with a firm twist and yank, the door

creaked open. Standing back, he stared into the darkness below.

Once he looked up again, Antony found Sebastian's gaze.

“You want to see why I insisted that whatever accommodations you gave me was always better than what I had?” Antony asked.

Without waiting for an answer, he slowly descended the narrow stone steps. The first time he was here coming unbidden into his mind.

*The shove comes at his back. With the cloth around his eyes and the ropes around his wrists, he doesn't know what is happening until he falls. Tumbling down the stairs. His head smacks against the stone, and bites into his arms. He feels the warmth of the blood seeping into his hair when he finally hits cold hard ground. Then the slamming of the door and the loud click of the lock. Then he is left in the darkness.*

Antony remembered managing to get the blindfold off, though it didn't matter considering how dark it was. Or the following hours he spent trying to untie the rope with his teeth.

Stepping off the final step into that hole, Antony glanced around with a certain sense of impending panic. The ten feet by ten feet space somehow did feel bigger than he recalled it to be. Then again after so many days that he spent there the claustrophobia was doomed to kick in eventually. A small amount of daylight streamed in through the two small and thin windows at the very top of the walls.

Too high to get to and too narrow to escape from. Antony had tried. More than once.

A small hand slipped into his and he glanced down at Charlotte at his side.

“You are not trapped here again, Antony. We are not trapped here.”

Antony nodded.

“How long were you here?” Sebastian murmured.

Antony gestured to the tiny white chalk marks on the distant wall beside the steps. “One thousand, six hundred, forty-five days. Four and a half years. I made a habit of marking the day and sometimes to keep myself sane, I’d sit on the bed and count them.”

“Fucking shit!” Sebastian exclaimed.

Somehow the reaction made Antony chuckle.

Everything was still where he had last left. The lumpy mattress on a small platform, with the flat pillows and threadbare blanket. Beside the bed was an overturned bucket covered in four years of accumulated candle wax. A table with a single chair was pushed against a second wall. But it was the third wall to his left that drew his attention. He squeezed Charlotte’s hand before approaching that wall.

*He sets the chalk aside and steps back. His sister stares back at him in as much vivid detail as he could remember. Somewhere outside of these four walls, he knows she’s alright.*



*He didn't realize he is no longer alone until a hard fist connects with his temple. He hits the floor like a sack of potatoes, his head throbbing and his vision swirling.*

*"What the fuck is this?" A harsh voice yells before a booted foot smashes into his ribs. All the air escaping his body and curling into itself.*

His finger's trailed over the lines of Ilaria's face. The portrait was no bigger than his own hand.

It was several long moments before Antony spoke up. "She was bigger. Until Maxim found her. He threw a bucket of water in it to wash it away. The stone absorbed so much water and I couldn't draw on it again for over a week. And when I did, I made her smaller, less obvious. It was my reminder of why I was here. If I was here, she was safe." Antony paused, drawing in a shaking breath before turning, his one eye catching Tobias's attention. He felt the burn of tears he hadn't cried. "I would have put you up there with her. But they didn't know about you. They couldn't know about you. They used my love of my sister against me, to keep me locked in this hole. But you. I wouldn't give them more than they already had. I never wanted you dragged into this mess."

Tobias took the three steps it took to cross the small gap between them. No sooner were Tobias's arms around him that Antony finally felt his knees give out. Tobias helped him over to the bed where they sat down together. Charlotte scurrying over to take his other side.

“We don’t have to stay here,” she said to him. “If this is too much.”

Antony snorted even as a tear escaped his one eye but got trapped inside his eye patch.

“When was it not too much?” He asked her. “You were the only good thing about this place.”

*He lays in his bed, staring up at the ceiling. His face throbbes, his body bruised and broken. The sound of the key in the latch startles him out of his head. He didn’t know how much more he could take. But the soft sounds of small feet are not what he was expecting.*

*A face leans over him and peers down into his face. She is young, her round face with bright blue-green eyes is framed by dark curls. She looks so much like the one person he never wanted to see here.*

*For a moment he thinks he’s actually dead. Reaching up he touches her cheek but she is real. A name escapes his lips in a pained whisper.*

*She shakes her head. “Charlotte. My name is Charlotte. Let me take care of you.”*

She tended his injuries, brought him food and when no one was looking, snuck him things like extra chalk, books and the occasional cookie. It was these little things that helped him through. While his brother and her uncle endeavored to treat him like some sort of animal, Charlotte allowed him to retain his humanity.

Charlotte gave him a small smile, much like the day they met. "I had to make sure they didn't kill you."

"Sometimes I wish they had," Antony muttered.

She grabbed him by the shoulders and gave him a shake. "Don't ever say that. You never deserved what happened to you, Antony. None of it, do you understand?"

Antony bit the inside of his cheek. She spoke the truth, he knew that but after so long, sometimes it was hard to believe. But maybe he was finally getting there.

"I know," he finally admitted. "I'm forever grateful to you, Charlotte. I hope you know that. Without you, I think I would have lost more than my sight."

"I will never forget that," she responded.

Sebastian cleared his throat from the far side of the room. Antony lifted his eye to look at his brother-in-law.

"I can tell you if you wish, but it is not easy to hear."

*The leg of the wooden chair beats against his back as he tries to protect his front. The words spewed by his attacker sinks into his brain.*

*Worthless.*

*Stupid.*

*Disgusting.*

*It sets his blood boiling even if he knows better than to react. He lifts his head in a defiant sneer. A fist hits his face first, jerking his head back. The chair leg comes next, breaking as it*

*strikes him. Pieces of wood breaking and sent flying. A large splinter catching his eye, forcing him to release a pained scream. The fist hits him again, in the eye scratched by the splinter.*

*He falls, huddled to the floor, his hand clutching at his face as the blood runs down. The screams rip from his throat until he is too hoarse to make another sound.*

Antony words trailed off, getting stuck in his throat.

“That’s how I found you,” Charlotte interjected. “What was it? Two, three hours later?”

Antony shook his head. “More like four or five. The blood on my face had dried by then. I could tell right away I’d never see again from that eye. It’s all completely dark. No light, no shadows, no colors. Nothing.”

Charlotte patted his knee. “And you’ve been just fine since.”

Fine was an interesting choice of words, because he was sure he’d never be “fine” again. However, Antony held out hope for some sort of normal eventually.

They didn’t stay in that basement any longer. After talking about his eye, Antony knew he had to put as much space between himself and that room as he could. Walking back upstairs, he sucked in a deep breath of fresh air, even if it was still mingled with smoke from the building. Yet, it felt better. To be able to walk out of that place of his own volition and free will.

Once they were back outside, Antony gaze up at the building one last time. Then turned to Gabriel.

“I will finance the building of a new storehouse for you on two specific conditions.” He waited for Gabriel’s nod. “That you fill in that room. I don’t care with what material as long as it is gone and cannot be used again. As well as tearing down the rest of this building. It’s too burned to be fixed and there should be no reminder of any of it.”

Gabriel grasped the hand Antony held out to him. “Done.”

A certain weight felt like it had been lifted from Antony’s shoulders and for the first time in his life, he felt like he was finally ready to move on. To put the idea of this constant nightmare behind him. To look to the future and his own happiness.

Now, that would be a novelty he never thought he could have.

## Chapter Fourteen

The forge was so much hotter than Isobel even anticipated. Something she realized was ridiculous to think - of course, it was going to be hot. It was exhilarating and she couldn't get enough. This was a high she was going to be chasing for a long time to come.

Sylvia set her hammer aside, wiping her forehead with her sleeve. Isobel took the still glowing metal and quenched it in a nearby bucket of water. Holding it up again, she took in the nearly foot long blade, catching the light of the fire. It was a marvel really to watch something begin as almost nothing to see it turned into something practical and useful.

"You've done well," Sylvia commented. She dunked a ladle into a bucket of clean water and took a long drink. She then offered it to Isobel. "Most complain about the heat by now."

Isobel shrugged, downing the cool water. "It's all part of the process, right? So, what's the point of complaining about something that can't be changed? I will just have to endeavor to wear lighter clothes."

Sylvia laughed, tossed her arm over Isobel's shoulders before steering her out of the forge and into her small living space in the back.

It was a comfortable little house, Isobel realized as she settled into one of the kitchen chairs. It was light and open, the kitchen leading to a small sitting room in the back. There was a small private bath off to one side, with a bedroom beside it. A long winding set of stairs led up to a second floor that was more of a loft and storage area.

Sylvia set a kettle of water by the fire, busying herself with finding something to eat.

“If we come to a mutual agreement and you choose to accept what I'm willing to offer you, we can fix up the upstairs so you have a private place to stay.” Sylvia rifled through a basket of produce. She pulled out two apples, setting them on the table.

“A place to stay?” Isobel repeated, the words not quite sinking in.

“Of course.” Sylvia also retrieved a half a loaf of crusty bread and a small crock with soft cheese. “I wouldn't expect you to travel down here from the palace everyday nor do I relish the idea of you traveling home after dark.”

Isobel felt her pulse escalating. Could it all be happening so soon? “Does that mean you're willing to take me on as an apprentice?”

“That’s the idea,” Sylvia said with a smile. She sat down across from Isobel, resting her arms on the table. “I know it’s only been since yesterday but I’m impressed with your meticulous work with the wires and your enthusiasm as a whole. You didn’t complain about the heat and held that handle so still even when I hit it as hard as I could. Toby vouched for the character of your uncle and aunt and I trust his judgment. Besides, I like you. You have a good head on your shoulders. There aren’t many women like us who want to do this kind of hard work and I admire that about you. You have no idea how many young boys I turned away over the years. If you are willing to accept, we can discuss terms and expectations.”

“Yes!” Isobel all but shouted before she could even think of what to say. Heat crept up her cheeks and she cleared her throat. “I would like that very much. I never thought this would be possible for me. So, thank you for giving me this chance.”

Sylvia reached across the table and gave Isobel’s hand a tight squeeze. “We all deserve to be happy and pursue the things we love. I wouldn’t take you on if I wasn’t certain of your success. We’ll have to find a way to thank Toby for bringing us together.”

This time Isobel couldn’t hide the giggle at hearing Tobias’s familial nickname. “Forgive me, I can’t imagine Tobias ever being called Toby.”



Sylvia grinned. Standing up she retrieved the kettle from the fire, pouring the hot water into a teapot. “He is my baby brother. Better than when he couldn’t get his own name out and called himself Tobs for half a year. Despite there being six of us, we were all incredibly close. Still are in fact.”

“That must be nice to have such a large family,” Isobel commented almost whimsically. She had been an only child for the first eleven years of her life before she had her little cousins. But even then, she didn’t start spending any significant amount of time with them until after her mother died.

“I can take you to meet them all if you want, at some point,” Sylvia offered.

“That would be lovely.”

They spent much of the remainder of the afternoon, drinking tea and talking. Isobel was all too ready to agree to whatever terms Sylvia might have for her. The thought of having a room to herself outside the confines of a palace felt like the world was opening up to her. A small salary and chances to earn commission if her skills improved enough was more than she could have asked for.

The feeling of happiness and excitement didn’t leave her when she went back to the palace later that evening. Ilaria was waiting when she arrived. Isobel couldn’t help throwing herself into her aunt’s arm and giving her an impossibly tight hug.

“Thank you,” Isobel whispered. “Thank you for everything.”

Pulling back, Ilaria gave her a smile. “I trust it went well then?”

“Better than well. Thank you for listening to Grandmama when she said crazy things.”

“Of course. She might have been a little crazy but she loved you so much and always wanted the best for you. I’m only glad I could play a small part of it.” Ilaria gave her another hug. “Now, why don’t you go take a bath since you reek of sweat and smoke. Then you can tell me all about it after the children go to bed.”

Isobel agreed before scurrying off to her room. She pulled out a fresh nightdress and her velvet robe and laid them out in the bed. Quickly stripping out of her smelly dress, she made a note not to wear wool in the forge ever again. Her hair was braided and tied into a tight knot on the top of her head. Washing her hair was an adventure unto itself and she didn’t have the energy for it at that moment.

Thankfully, she had a small bath attached to her room. In less than five minutes she was sinking into the tub of hot water, the bubbles tickling her nose. She was happy she remembered to bring her favorite perfumes of orange and jasmine. There was something comforting about the scent, it reminded her of home. Of the warm embrace of her mother, who she had very much loved.

Despite all the problems Johanna had after her husband’s death, it never stopped her from loving Isobel any less. Even if that love became stifling. Isobel could never begrudge her

mother that affection. And yet, sometimes Isobel allowed the thought to flick through her thoughts - why wasn't her love enough for her mother? At the time, she had been told that Johanna's heart simply gave out, from her heartache and grief. However, Isobel wasn't so young to not realize what her mother had gotten herself into. It was one of the reasons Isobel avoided liquor when she could.

Isobel closed her eyes leaning her head back against the edge of the tub. She didn't want to think about this again. Even if she still wondered what it was to love that deeply.

Pushing the tragic thoughts of her mother from her mind, Isobel started to wonder what the men were up to on their expedition. Sebastian insisted on going with Antony and Tobias. Isobel couldn't fault him for his curiosity. But it was the other two that sent her head spinning.

She was going to have to find a way to get Antony over whatever hang-up he had about who she was. They weren't related, which had long been established and it's not like he knew her as a child. Yes, he might be almost twice her age, but she didn't care. After the one sad experience she had, the night with Antony and Tobias was easily the more exhilarating experience she ever had.

She sank deeper into the hot water. She could still feel their hands on her body, the press of their lips against hers. A small sigh escaped her. The tips of her fingers trailing over her breasts and down her stomach. She imagined it to be Antony's long tapered fingers caressing her skin, while Tobias pinched

and rolled her nipple. It sent a jolt of lightning through her veins and her thighs clinching together.

Isobel knew she shouldn't be doing this. Thinking about them was bad enough, let alone both of them together again. Her hand now buried between her legs, working her aching clit in hard fast circles. Chasing the high she had felt the other night, but even this wasn't going to compare. She bit her lower lip, concentrating on that feeling.

Picturing Antony hovering over her, fucking into her hard and fast, while Tobias held her wrists over her head. Then the image shifted to Antony lying beside her, caressing her face as Tobias took her from behind, his hands digging into her hips.

Her back arched, a deep groan reverberating from her throat as she saw stars behind her eyelids. She breathed heavily through her nose, slowly coming back down.

They had quite possibly ruined her for all other men.

Her cheeks were hot and flushed. She didn't know if it was from the hot water or the realization of what she had just done. But damn did that feel good and she needed more than she expected. Now, the trick was to get them to do it again in real life when they came back.

Isobel quickly finished washing up and getting out of the tub. She dressed and brushed out her hair. Thankfully, her aunt's room was right down the hall from hers. Maybe she could talk to her about these wild feelings she was having but to find a way not to have Ilaria figure out who she was walking about. That was going to be the trick.

Ilaria answered her door right away when Isobel knocked. They settled in together at a small couch by the window, a tea service on the table before them.

“I trust today went well?” Ilaria asked, serving them both.

“Very much. Sylvia offered me the apprenticeship!” Isobel couldn’t keep her excitement from bubbling to the surface.

“That’s great!”

Isobel nodded. “I know it will be hard work and initially to be so far from home for at least a year, but I can’t wait to see what’s in store for me.”

“Me too. You will have to write, your uncle will be disappointed if you don’t,” Ilaria said with a smile.

“Of course! As often as I can.”

Ilaria went to say more when the door between these rooms and the next, banging against the wall. The two women whipped around to find Leopold chasing after his twin who was clutching a book tightly to his chest.

“Let me see it!” Leopold shouted, trying to trap his brother in a corner.

Artem ducked behind a chair, sticking his head around the corner and sticking his tongue out. “It’s mine. I found it!”

“No, you didn’t! I found it, you just helped me reach it,” Leopold protested.

“Well, it’s got my name on it.”

Ilaria rolled her eyes with a sigh before turning her attention to her children.

“Boys! You will come here this instant!” Ilaria yelled louder than both.

The twins hung their heads and shuffled over to their mother. Nudging each other as they went and muttering who was to blame for getting into trouble.

“Sorry, Mama,” they muttered in unison as they came to stand before her.

“Now,” Ilaria started, settling back into the couch. “What is the meaning of this? Especially when you two should be asleep.”

Artem nudged Leopold with his elbow, prompting the latter to speak first.

“I found it,” Leopold replied. “Behind one of the rocks in the fireplace, it looked a little off, but I couldn’t reach it on my own. So, Artem helped me with a chair to get the rock out and behind it we found this book.”

Isobel tried to hide her grin in her teacup as she watched the exchange. Her little cousins’ obsession with rocks, clearly had no bounds.

Artem held the book out towards Ilaria, when she held her hand out. “But it has my name on it, Mama.”

“But your name is Hartmann, not Devarik, stupid,” Leopold muttered beside him.

The leather-bound tome was small in size but still was relatively thick. Isobel peeked over to see the name engraved into the cover: *Artem Devarik*. She frowned looking up at her aunt who stared numbly down at the book in her hands, her complexion going even paler than normal.

“Boys,” Isobel stepped in when Ilaria could say nothing. “Come on, let’s get you back to bed.”

“But...” Artem protested.

Isobel gave them a stern look. “No, buts. Now, bed.”

Both boys pouted as they scurried back off into their room. Isobel followed behind to make sure they followed her instructions. Once they were both tucked back in, Isobel went back to Ilaria. If she had moved, Isobel couldn’t tell.

Isobel reached for Ilaria’s empty hand. “What is it?”

Ilaria sucked in a rough breath. “Artem Devarik was my father. He died when I was six years old. I don’t have many memories of him anymore but I remember this. It was his personal journal.”

“Why would he have hidden it?” Isobel asked.

“I don’t know. I assumed it was lost or Maxim burned it. But Father had it hidden in Antony’s old rooms. It was his intention for Antony to find it but he clearly never did or if he had, he never told me.”

“If Antony had found it, why wouldn’t he have told you?”

Ilaria shrugged, running her fingers over the dusty cover. “By the looks of it, it doesn’t seem like it’s been opened in the thirty years since his death.”

Isobel bit her lip, trying to think of a way to help. “Do you want me to read it to you?”

Ilaria shook her head. “I think I need to talk to Antony first and we should probably look at it together. But I do want you to hold onto it for me.”

Isobel took the small book and tucked it into the pocket of her robe. “Dare I ask why?”

“So, I’m not tempted to read it before he gets home,” Ilaria chuckled.

Not that Isobel wouldn’t be tempted but she loved her aunt too much to disrespect her privacy. Now, there was even more need for Antony to come home soon.



## Chapter Fifteen

**T**hey stayed in the village for only another two days before starting their trip back home. Tobias was more than ready to have his own bed back after being away for almost a week. But this trip was too important. Seeing Antony in the place that had almost quite literally broke him, further shattered Tobias's heart. It's difficult to know and then to see someone you care about being tormented like that. Even if it had been so many years ago.

They bid Charlotte and Gabriel a friendly farewell. Antony extended them an invitation to visit anytime they wanted to. Tobias greatly hoped they would eventually take Antony up on his offer. It would do him well to have more friends.

The decision was made to stay at the same inn they stopped on their way there. The innkeeper and his wife were happy to see them again. Antony tried his best to be more friendly, but Tobias could see that it wasn't as easy on him as he would make it look. Though, Tobias was proud of the effort Antony

made. After having a quick meal, the pair retired to their room. Tobias was more than happy to get some sleep.

He woke in the middle of the night to the sound of light scratching. Reaching his arm out, he found the sheets empty and cold. A frown formed on his lips as he tried to pry an eye open.

“Don’t move.” The gravelly voice reached his ears from the other side of the room.

“Look at who’s giving orders now,” Tobias quipped, but he didn’t move.

The scratching continued for a long moment before it stopped. Tobias lifted his head from the pillow, catching sight of Antony at the small table on the other side of the room. The small oil lamp turned up only enough to cast the room in a light glow for Antony to see but not intended to wake Tobias up in the first place.

Despite having burned his sketch pad, there were several pieces of paper sprawled across the surface of the table, some in crumbled up balls. Tobias had slipped the papers and a tin of pencils into Antony’s bag before they left. This was the only way Antony knew how to cope and despite his current attitude, Tobias wasn’t going to let him go without. Good thing he hadn’t.

“What are you working on?” Tobias asked, swinging his legs off the side of the bed.

“Nothing,” came Antony’s short reply, though he didn’t look up from his work.

“Did you sleep at all?” Tobias tried a different tactic.

Antony shrugged. “Enough for it to plague me for the last two hours.”

“Something new?”

“What are you looking for?” Antony asked, finally setting the one pencil aside. He dusted away some of the loose shavings from the paper.

“Clearly, this has you upset and I’m trying to help.” Tobias ran his hand through his messy hair.

Antony finally looked up, a fire in his gaze that Tobias hadn’t seen for a long time. It wasn’t anger but something else entirely.

“Then why are you in my head now too?” Antony bit out through clenched teeth.

“What are you talking about?”

Antony collected up all the scattered papers, shuffling through them before pulling out two different pieces. He set the rest of the pile aside, laying the two on the table. “Look.”

Tobias shook his head. Asking too many questions at this point wasn’t going to help him. Rising from the bed, he approached the table, looking at the pictures Antony left out. His mouth went dry, his pulse escalating to a dull roar in his

ears. Antony's art had always been very lifelike but this. This Tobias never expected.

He reached out to touch the first, but pulled his fingers back. Even in the gray pencil, he recognized himself immediately. And the other two for that matter. There was no mistaking it even if he tried. His face was half obscured by a fistful of long hair, pulling back to his nose. Isobel's neck was elegantly arched back, Antony's lips pressed to it. This was closer and only from the shoulders up, even if it was quite obvious, they were naked.

It was the second one that took his breath away when he turned his attention to it. The faces were the same, if only that much smaller. However, it was the bare twisted limbs that left nothing to the imagination. With Isobel in Antony's lap, her legs wrapped around his hips while his hands cradled her breasts. Tobias pressed up against her back. She had one hand braced in Antony's shoulder, while the other reached back to curve around Tobias's neck. He still had a firm grip in her hair, his fingers digging into her hip.

Tobias swallowed hard. There was no doubt in his mind that the drawing also insinuated that they were both buried deep inside her. This was easily the most erotic thing Tobias had ever seen in his life. He had never seen Antony draw like this before.

Tobias cleared his throat, trying to focus on anything other than the picture in front of him and the blood in his body rushing south.

“Say something,” Antony prodded, his voice still very low.

“This- this is what you dreamed about?” The statement came out like an awkward question.

“Yes. It’s never been like this.”

Tobias snapped his head up to meet Antony’s gaze. “No?”

“No.” Antony shook his head. “I would dream of her but never more than seeing her in a familiar space. But tonight, to dream of fucking her again, with you—” he stopped, a low groan pulling from his chest as he shifted in his chair. “Not even drawing it has gotten her out of my head or my dick.”

Tobias’s eyebrow shot up when Antony pushed back from the table. His cock strained against the thin material of his sleep pants, a wet spot already forming.

“How long have you been sitting there like this?” Tobias asked.

“At least two hours and after all of this,” Antony paused long enough to gesture to the array of erotic art in front of him. “I might explode without even having to touch anything.”

Tobias stepped closer until he was standing between Antony’s sprawled legs. “You want help with that?”

Now, it was Antony’s turn to gape. “Why aren’t you more upset by this?”

Tobias didn’t immediately respond but dropped down to his knees, trailing his hand up the back of Antony’s calves.

“I should be. I should be angry and jealous that you are thinking of someone other than me. That the thought of fucking that girl has you this painful aroused.” His hands trailed up Antony’s inner thighs and prying them further apart. “But I’m not. I might have been in the beginning, but now that we have met her and know her, I can’t be. After everything we have been through the last couple of days, you deserve every happiness, Antony. And if that means having her as a part of us, then I can’t stop it from happening.”

Antony panted for breath as his erection popped free, hot and heavy against his stomach. “What about you wanting to leave if I marry?”

“I won’t. I can’t.” Tobias knew why he couldn’t, but he wouldn’t say it. Not now. He didn’t even want to admit it to himself let alone opening up his heart in such a way and hope it didn’t get stepped on. No, he wouldn’t say more.

“But—” Antony protested but stopped short with a moan.

Tobias ran the tip of his tongue along the underside of Antony’s cock.

“You’re going to have to be a lot quieter if we are going to do this here.” He circled the tip. “Unless you want the entire inn to find out what kind of dirty slut you are. Because I’m going to fuck you until you beg me to stop. Maybe I will, maybe I won’t. But you will only be able to think of me the rest of the ride home tomorrow after I wreck your pretty little hole.”

“Please,” Antony released in a pained whisper.

Tobias took great satisfaction at watching Antony twitch, the sweat gathering across his forehead and the hard plains of his chest and stomach.

“Hands on the armrests and don’t move.”

Antony’s knuckles turned white as he gripped the chair and Tobias took him all the way down to the back of his throat.

“Oh fuck.”

If he didn’t have an entire mouthful of cock, Tobias might have smiled. He hollowed out his cheeks, bobbing his head up and down enthusiastically. It didn’t take much before Antony was biting down into his lower lip, trying to hold on whatever noises wanted to escape him. Tobias peeked up at him. Seeing the pleasure and the pain twisted into Antony’s face made his own cock swell and pulse painfully.

Tobias pulled off right before Antony could finish. A talent he liked to think himself quite apt at. Climbing up to his feet, he grabbed Antony by the back of the neck and yanked him into a hard kiss.

“You are mine,” Tobias growled against his mouth when he pulled back enough for air. He nipped the other man’s lower lip. “Now, back to bed.”

Tobias stepped far enough back for Antony to skirt around him and lay back down. He leaned up his elbows and Tobias could feel his gaze as he rifled through the travel bag. Finding what he wanted, he set the jar of salve on the bedside before shucking off his own sleep pants.

“Are we really going to use that?” Antony asked with a bit of a smirk, nodding his head to the jar.

“You have a better idea,” Tobias growled, fisting his cock hoping to relieve some of the tension. Otherwise, this was going to be over before he wanted it to be.

He crawled up Antony’s body, leaving light licks and nips as he went. A shiver ran down his spine when their erections finally brushed up against each other. There was a good chance he could get them both off by just grinding together, feeling their skin rubbing together but he wanted more. He needed more.

Tobias pulled Antony back into another deep kiss as their hands roamed each other’s bodies. Over the hard muscles, every ridge and dip. Their chests pressed together and heaving with every intake of breath. Tongues dueling in and out of each other’s mouths.

Easing away, Tobias settled back on his heels, his hands trailing over Antony’s thighs. He reached for the jar, popping the lid off. The contents were soft, smooth and fragrant. Tobias scooped some up, using it to prepare Antony to receive him, pushing in one finger to the first knuckle.

“Hurry up,” Antony groaned.

Tobias felt his lips twitch. Taking two fingers and shoving them in as quickly as he could. The tight ring of muscles squeezed him hard.



“You like that?” Tobias asked, his voice rough. He twisted his fingers and rubbed hard on that spot which would render Antony speechless.

Antony tossed his head to the side, biting into the pillow to keep from crying out. Tobias enjoyed watching the way the pre-cum oozed from the top of his lover’s cock and dropped down the shaft. Leaning forward, he licked it away, earning him another strangled noise. Taking more of the salve, Tobias coated his own cock and carefully extracted his fingers. One of Antony’s long legs draped over Tobias’s shoulder as he inched forward.

The feeling of sinking into him felt more like home than anything else Tobias had ever known. He held still once he was completely sheathed, enjoying the overwhelming feeling. He gave one hard thrust of his hips.

A deep guttural noise came from Antony’s throat and Tobias’s hand shot out to cover his mouth.

“Hush,” Tobias whispered, leaning forward until their noses touched. “Are you going to be a good boy and keep your voice down or do I need to keep my hand over your mouth?” Antony shook his head the best he could and Tobias chuckled, emitting a low moan of his own. “You feel so good wrapped around my cock. So hot. So tight.” Each word punctuated with a rough snap of his hips.

Antony’s hands found Tobias’s forearms, holding on to them dear life, his nails biting into the skin. Eventually, Tobias took one hand and gave the palm a long, wet lick. He brought it

between his bodies and wrapped Antony's hand around his own cock. With their hands still intertwined, they gave hard fast strokes together. Tobias sinking in deeper with each flex of his hips.

His hand fell away and their lips touched. Rubbing together, enjoy the closeness and intensity of the moment. Tobias would never get sick of this feeling. Of being so close to the one he cared about the most. To know that every moan and sigh was for him and him alone.

His heart pounded in his ears and in his chest, the throb of his pulse resonating deep into his cock. Antony was close, he could tell with the way he arched his back off the bed and clenched his teeth so tightly together. He unraveled first, the deep moan trapped in his throat as every muscle in his body taint and straining. His cock throbbing in their hands and twitching until it exploded, cum coating their hands and dripping down to his belly.

Tobias followed a moment later, pulling out just in time for their cum to mingle together on their skin. As much as he would have enjoyed watching his cum leak out of Antony's abused hole, he liked the idea of this better. For them to be covered in each other.

Tobias gave Antony one last long kiss as they came down from their high, panting for breath. They flipped down next to each other, both staring up at the ceiling.

“Thank you,” Antony murmured after a long moment.

Tobias rolled to his side, leaning up on his elbow, his free hand threading through the fine hairs on Antony's chest.

"For what?"

"For knowing what I need more than I do myself."

Tobias cupped the other man's cheek, tilting his head until their gazes locked. "That's my job, isn't it? I will always take care of you. Are things going to get complicated? Yes. Will they get messy? Absolutely."

Antony turned his head to kiss the palm. "Where do we go from here? I can't keep having these graphic sex dreams."

"I don't know," Tobias admitted. "But wherever this goes, we go together. We'll figure it out. We always do."

## Chapter Sixteen

Antony was more than aware of how much time he spent staring at those drawings. He should burn them like he did with all the rest but something about them gave him pause. It took years for him to reach this level of proficiency, to make everything seem like a moment snatched out of time. He prided himself on his attention to detail, to get exactly what was in his head onto a sheet of paper.

The sketches were sprawled across his desk, where he had tossed them as soon as he returned home. He'd been sitting there staring at them for the last hour after Tobias left to deal with some work that popped up in his absence. Antony picked up the one that was the close up of their faces. There was something about the expressions that gave him pause. He trailed his fingers over his own image, smudging some of the pencil. Then to her.

Isobel.

He still refused to believe that the woman he had been envisioning for so long would be her. Maybe this was his

penance, his chance to atone for the wrongs he had done. The look of sheer ecstasy in her expression told him everything he needed to know. The same look she gave him when he had her beneath him, panting and writhing. What he wouldn't do to see that again.

Antony shook his head, before dropping it to the back of his chair. He didn't need this right now and had half a mind to go bed and hope he didn't see this again. Just as he resolved to do just that, there was a knock at his door. He frowned. Tobias would have just let himself in and no one else would visit this late at night.

Calling out to them regardless, he swept the pictures from his desk. There was barely time to stuff them into a drawer before Ilaria came rushing in through his door. The tracks of tears streaming down her cheeks made his heart ache.

Sebastian talked to her.

Antony caught her easily around the waist when she threw herself into his arms. Her face buried in his neck, her shoulders shaking with the force of her sobs. He ran his hands over her back.

It took her a few moments to calm down before she pulled back and punched him hard in the arm.

“Ouch!” Antony protested. “What was that for?”

“How dare you! Why would you do that? Why would you martyr yourself for me?” Ilaria shouted at him, hitting him again.

“I was only trying to protect you. You are my twin.” Antony grabbed her by the shoulders so he could stare down into her face. “No matter what happened, the time, the distance, you kept me alive. You kept me going. Every bruise I had, every scar I received, even my own fucking eye, was worth it. Do you hear me? I would do it all again, over and over to know that nothing would touch you.”

Ilaria sniffed as another tear rolled down her cheek and Antony wiped it away with the pad of his thumb.

“But that doesn’t tell me why?” she whispered.

“Because I love you, sister. I haven’t and never will love anyone the way I love you. We shared a womb for nine months. I might have been born before you but I would always look after you.” Antony wrapped her tight in his arms again, leaning his chin on the top of her head. There was one last truth he needed to tell her, the last piece to all of this so maybe they both could finally put the darkness behind them. “I didn’t know what was going to happen to me when I hypothetically died. I just knew that I wasn’t going to see you anymore. And for that I knew you would be better off. I couldn’t tell you at the time because I didn’t want to cause you that much more pain.” Antony paused a second time. He didn’t like having to bring up Ilaria’s long dead first husband, who had gotten caught in Maxim’s crosshairs. But he knew he had to. “But I... I talked to Dimitri.”

Ilaria jerked back, a startled look on her face. “What did you tell Dimitri?”

“I made him promise me that he would take care of you for me. To love you and protect you until it was safe for me to finally come home.”

Ilaria blinked up at him and Antony waited as his words slowly started to sink in.

“Dimitri...” Ilaria started, biting her lip. “Dimitri knew you weren’t actually dead?”

Antony heaved a heavy breath. “Yes. But I swear to you that’s all he knew. He didn’t know what I was going through.”

Ilaria nodded, tightening her arms around him. “Thank you.”

“And I promise you, that’s it. There are no more secrets between us.”

“So, you don’t know about the journal?” Ilaria asked against his shoulder.

Antony frowned. “What journal?”

Ilaria carefully extracted herself from his embrace. Reaching into the pocket of her dress, she pulled out the small leather-bound tome. She held it out to him.

Antony hesitated for a moment before taking it. His fingers trailing over his father’s name on the front.

“What is this?” Antony murmured, turning it over in his hands.

“Father’s personal journal.”

“I barely remember this.”

Ilaria nodded. “Me too.”

“Where did you find this? I thought it disappeared when he died.”

Ilaria took his free hand and he followed her numbly over to the sofa. They settled down next to each other.

“My twins found it. Behind a rock in the fireplace of your old rooms. I have not even opened it.”

“My rooms?” Antony repeated. “Why would it be there unless he intended for me to find it. But Father has been dead for nearly thirty years. How did I not after all this time?”

“I don’t know,” Ilaria replied, taking hold of his free hand. “The twins showed me where they found it and at your current height it would have been close to eye level.”

“But he wouldn’t have known that I’d grow to be so freakishly tall.”

“That’s beside the point. You were always mischievous like my boys.”

Antony snorted, which always got him into a whole lot of trouble. His fingers ghosted over the cover again.

“We might as well get this over with and see if Father had anything interesting to leave behind.”

Antony plucked at the leather tie holding the book together. No sooner did the cord fall away did a small folded paper slip out and flutter to the floor. Ilaria scooped it up and opening it began to read:

*To my son and daughter,*



*If you are reading this, then I am no longer with you in this mortal life. But I am with you in spirit and hope you still keep me in your hearts. In these pages, I have outlined a greater portion of my life, and my love for you. This will serve as my last will and testament, as no other copy will be found or will contain what I wish it would. This book is safer for you, my dear children. My only hope is that this comes into your possession at the soonest time, when you are old enough to understand what it is I want to tell you. And if it does not, know that I am incredibly sorry and will hold a deep grief even unto death.*

*I will forever hold you in my heart, my dear  
Antony and darling Ilaria.*

*Your loving father,*

*A.D.*

Ilaria's voice cracked as the last words slipped from her lips. Antony had closed his eyes as he felt the words rush through him, setting his heart pounding. He remembered little of his father, tall and with the same Devarik red hair. If there was anything Antony held dear was that warmth and feeling safe. Something that would be lacking later in his life.

“Are we sure we want to do this?” Antony asked, even as he flipped to the first entry in the book.

Ilaria wiggled closer so she could read over his shoulder. “Fuck yes! Don’t you want to know what father had to say?”

“Of course, I do. It has just been such a long time. How much of this could really change anything?”

“We won’t know unless we look.”

Antony nodded, pressing his lips into a thin line. He couldn’t argue with her logic and in his mind, better now than later. Though, there was this lingering fear of what they would find. What truths their father might expose that they simply weren’t ready to hear?

It didn’t matter when Ilaria snatched the journal out of Antony’s hands and started reading it aloud.

The first couple of sections were the ordinary and the mundane, which was to be expected. Artem’s childhood and relationship with his own father who had been rather strict and died young. It wasn’t until the first mention of Artem’s first wife that things started to get a little interesting.

Both Ilaria and Antony were sure that they had never even heard her name until now.

Talia Benedictian was described as a popular beauty but she had set her eyes on Artem. Not that he minded much, completely taken with her from the moment they met. They were married within a month, the whirlwind of their romance surprising everyone.

Including Artem himself.

Especially when Talia revealed she was pregnant and gave birth only seven months after they were married.

*I should have known. I should have realized that she had never been true to me. The baby was too early but he was stronger and larger than he should have been at that time. But it didn't stop me from loving him, from acknowledging him as my own even when I knew he was not. Talia named him Maxim and I didn't question where she had found that name.*

Ilaria stopped reading with a sharp intake of breath. Antony stopped breathing all together. His stomach twisted and flipped, while his mind raced to comprehend what he had just heard.

“He’s not our father’s son,” Ilaria murmured, staring up at Antony. “He’s not our brother.”

Antony released something akin to a chuckle. “I can’t believe it, but yet, somehow, I can. And it actually makes me feel better.”

“How so?” Ilaria asked with a tilt of her head.

“I’m not sure. Being abused by someone who isn’t blood-related feels different than by someone who is supposed to care for you. Not that helps excuse what he did to me.”

“Not at all.”

Antony took the journal from Ilaria and continued on reading.

Talia ran away with one of her random lovers when Maxim was no more than three years old. Leaving the child behind with the husband she tricked and betrayed. It was four months later when word returned to Artem that Talia had fallen into a rushing river and drowned. Artem had wanted to feel some sort of grief for his dead wife but he simply couldn't. Instead, he put his efforts into raising her son.

Though, it was around six or seven years of age, where Artem began to notice something was off about the boy. It started with the impaled worms on a fork and escalated for almost a year and a half until it was the decayed mouse corpses hiding in the corner of his room, exposed down to the bone. Artem did everything he could think of to try to help and engage the boy. He went as far as hiring a new nanny who could hopefully impart some level of kindness into him.

Evelina Tiberius.

Antony snapped his eyes up to Ilaria.

“Our mother was Maxim's nanny?” The question almost felt too strange to say, but it was there as plain as day.

“Keep going,” was all Ilaria could say.

*I never expected to fall so helplessly in love with her. Evelina brought calm and peace to our otherwise turbulent home. I had hoped she would have a positive effect on Maxim, and it seemed like it had for a time. They had grown particularly close. Maxim taking the comfort of a mother he never had.*

*Until I decided to marry her.*

Despite only being eight years old at the time, Maxim expressed displeasure to his father about marrying. And feeling like if he would have more children he would be displaced. Artem, at the time, reassured his reluctant son that it would change nothing.

It changed everything.

Within a period of less than three years, Artem and Evelina married, she gave birth to twins and died a short while later.

*My heart ached for all three of them. Maxim blamed the twins for her death. For taking away the mother he had come to love. For my darling twins who would never know the love of their mother.*

It didn't take long after this that Maxim's violent tendencies started to resurface. He'd sneak into Antony's room and

pinched him until the baby cried.

“I- I don’t remember that,” Antony muttered. “Though, I suppose I was too young. But it just means he literally hated me my entire life.”

“It has been and will always be unjustified.” Ilaria draped her arm over his shoulder, giving him a tight hug.

Antony handed the book over to Ilaria, knowing he couldn’t read anymore right now. But he wanted to know more, he needed to know more.

Ilaria picked up where Antony had left off.

The five years after their mother’s death had been turbulent. Artem knew he’d never love anyone like he had loved Evelina and this had resolved to not marry again. Instead, he dedicated his time and energy to his children.

He tried to continue to help Maxim as best he could, to try and help temper the rage that lived within him. However, no matter what Artem did, nothing seemed to help. To the point where Artem started fearing what the future might bring for someone like Maxim. It made him start questioning every decision he had made since he accepted Maxim as his son, despite there being no shared blood between them. He put in all the effort any father would, wanting only the best for his children. Despite all the years, all the lessons and the staunch example he had set, Artem knew Maxim could never lead.

It was a decision he didn’t want to have to make but when he made up his mind, he wouldn’t back down.

*My sweet Ilaria. You always looked so much like your mother, it made my heart hurt. You had her gentle spirit and the same dazzling smile.*

*My boisterous Antony. There were times you were too much like me. Adventurous, wild and unrelenting. You had to do everything bigger and better. I can't wait to see the man you became.*

*That's why I wish to leave everything to you. You may only be six years old, but I know even now that you will live up to the Devarik name. To lead Clan Drakos to a bright and prosperous future. With the guidance of your sister, I know you both will do amazing things.*

*I must tell Maxim of my decision and I know this news will not be well received. I do not fear for myself. I fear for you.*

*This is why I write this decision here now and will hide this journal in Antony's rooms. So, maybe one day, you will find it and understand why I chose what I did. Why I want a better future for you both.*

Antony choked on the limp forming in his throat. Even though it wasn't stated explicitly because there wouldn't have been an opportunity.

Artem told Maxim of his intent to disinherit him based on his behavior and illegitimate paternity. That he would be passed over in favor of Antony.

Their father was killed for this decision.



## Chapter Seventeen

Tobias took to walking her home every night from the forge. Isobel had yet to move in with Sylvia, waiting until her family was gone before making the transition. As a result, no one seemed to like her traveling by herself. And for reasons unknown to her, Tobias took the job personally.

“You really don’t have to do this,” Isobel commented for what felt like the hundredth time.

Tobias shrugged. “You’ve been saying that almost every day for the last three weeks. You’re not going to change my mind.”

“I can’t help it,” Isobel replied with a sigh, her arms tightening around his as they walked. “I feel like I’m pulling you away from more important things.”

“If I didn’t think this was important, do you think I’d still be doing it? Besides, you enjoy this time as much as I do,” Tobias commented, though his eyes stayed on the road.

“Oh, I do.”

And it was the honest truth. In the last several weeks, Isobel had grown quite fond of Tobias. Especially during their walks where they'd talk about anything and everything. He had a razor-sharp wit, which either left her reeling with his innate intelligence or her sides aching from laughter. She learned of his deep devotion to his occupation and more importantly to his family. He regaled her with stories of his childhood growing up with five sisters. Each one was progressively funnier than the last.

For the first time she felt like she had made a genuine friend. Something she never felt like she had before outside of family. But to have Tobias's friendship meant more than even he would realize. Despite her protests, she loved being able to spend this time with him.

"Isobel," he said and waited until she acknowledged him. "There is something I wanted to talk to you about before returning to the palace."

Isobel frowned. "Is everything all right?"

"Of course!" Tobias cracked a smile. "I'm sorry to have worried you but I just want you to think about this carefully. I have a new group of recruits coming through the barracks in the next couple of weeks. And since you are learning to make weapons, it only makes sense in my mind that you should know how to wield them as well."

Isobel stopped dead in her tracks to gape up at him. Was he really offering what she thought he was? It wasn't entirely uncommon for women to seek a military vocation, but as

medics, armorers, cooks, laundresses and seamstresses. Very few passed it through basic training. Isobel had seen what General Josef Bauer, Commander General of Clan Ulrich, had put his recruits through and there wasn't a doubt in Isobel's mind that Tobias's methods wouldn't be any gentler.

But she wanted to see that raw power from him. She wanted to experience that for herself and this might be her only opportunity.

“Are you offering me weapons training?” she finally managed to squeak out.

Tobias nodded. “I am. And don't think I'll take it easy on you since I like you.”

Isobel chuckled, pulling him into a tight embrace. “I would expect nothing else from you. But how will this fit into my apprenticeship?”

“Are you saying yes?”

“Of course, I'm saying yes! I'd be stupid to turn down an opportunity like this.”

Tobias grinned, taking her arm again and continued to lead them back to the palace. “I'll talk with Sylvia and work out a suitable schedule for you.”

They walked in silence for a few more minutes before Isobel piped up again.

“Thank you,” she said. “I don't think any of this would have been possible without you. You kept an open mind when my family contacted you about the apprenticeship and then you

recommended me, sight unseen, to your own sister. So, thank you for helping make my dreams real.”

Tobias reached up and ran the backs of his fingers over her cheek and Isobel leaned into the touch.

“You’ve earned it. You proved to my sister that you were worth taking a chance on and you’ve proven the same for me with your dedication to your craft.”

Isobel felt the flush creep into her cheeks. There was something about receiving Tobias’s praise that sent her pulse fluttering.

“Well, if there is anything I can do to thank you,” Isobel murmured, leaning her head to kiss his palm. She wanted him to touch so much more than her face but outwardly vocalizing that want fell flat on her tongue. There was nothing she was willing to risk for Tobias’s friendship. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t try, if only subtly by running her hand up his arm. “Anything at all.”

“Are you propositioning me, Miss Hartmann?” The amusement was clear in his voice.

“That depends.” Isobel bit the inside of her cheek. “If it works then, yes, yes I am. If not, then we can pretend this never happened.”

Tobias chuckled, taking her hand and raising it to his lips. “Oh, it’s working.” He turned it over to kiss the inside of her wrist. “But you know, I still come as one half of a pair.”

“I know,” Isobel sighed. “Do you think Antony will ever come around?”

Tobias nodded. The confidence of the gesture gave Isobel hope.

“Absolutely. He talks about you, you know.”

“He does?” The question squeaked as it came out.

“I don’t think any of us forgot that night. Once he is able to separate you from your mutual affiliations, he will come to see you as I have come to see you.”

“And how do you see me?”

Tobias didn’t immediately answer, grabbing hold of the hand in his grip and pulling her around the nearest corner. Isobel gasped when Tobias pushed her back against a stone wall and sealed their mouths together. Her hands fisted into his jacket, not knowing if she wanted to push him away or to pull him closer. The sweet glide of his lips, the light flick of his tongue against her lower lip, the way his hand possessively grabbed at the back of her neck. He pulled away after a long moment, leaving her panting for air and her mind reeling.

“I see you,” he whispered, turning his head to whisper in her ear. “Strong, beautiful, and fearless. You are not afraid to go after what you want regardless of how dangerous or reckless it might be. You refuse to conform yourself into what others might want you to be. As the daughter of a Chieftain and niece of a current ruling one, you could live your life free from it all. To not want for anything. Your uncle would provide that to

you if only you were to ask. Instead, you ask him for a vocation, for an independent life. And I couldn't admire you more for that."

"Tobias, I—" Isobel stopped. She didn't even know what to say.

He lightly kissed her cheek. "I know. You don't have to say anything but that is how I see you. Since you asked. Let's get back before they send someone to look for us."

Isobel nodded, taking his offered arm again and off they went. As they neared the gate, Tobias slowed his pace again.

"I trust I will see you at dinner this evening?" he asked, kissing her hand again.

"You will. Uncle Bash insisted I come since it is the last night they are here. I also think he wants me to feel like an adult instead of still eating with the children," Isobel commented.

"Ophelia told me this morning that she intends to go back with your family. She's grown rather fond of your young cousins."

"I'm happy for her, they love her as well. Since I'm staying here, I had hoped she would take Ilaria on her offer to accompany them. They will need help without me. Will you miss her?"

"Of course," Tobias replied. "She and I are closer in age than any of the rest of our siblings. So, she has a special place in my heart."

They arrived back a few moments later and parted ways before dinner. If Isobel had any intention of showing up on time, she needed to get the smell of fire and sweat from the forge off of her.



Nothing could have been more uncomfortable than dinner that evening. Isobel should have come up with some excuse to miss it. Even if it meant missing the last night with her uncle and aunt.

Instead, she found herself clothed in one of her nicest dresses with her grandmother's choker around her throat. Sitting at a table, attempting not to choke on her dinner.

Sebastian sat on her one side and Antony on her other. Tobias was on Antony's side and Ilaria beside her husband. Isobel was excited about dinner, until it really started to sink in where and who she was with. If she hadn't made advances towards Tobias just that afternoon, hadn't felt his lips against hers, maybe it would have been more bearable,

She peeked out of the side of her eye at Antony beside her. Thankfully, his good side was facing her and she could see more of his face. He seemed more relaxed tonight than she had ever remembered seeing him be. Not that she saw much of him over the last couple of weeks. She was busy with the beginnings of her apprenticeship and he was spending whatever free time he had with his sister.

It was strange to think that Sebastian, Ilaria and their children were leaving in the morning and Isobel wasn't returning home with them. But she was more than ready for this next chapter in her life. For this next big adventure even if she didn't exactly know where it would lead.

Isobel followed little of the dinner conversation, piercing bits of potato with her fork. She contributed where she could but didn't feel the need to overly interject herself. Her quietness did draw the attention of Tobias across the table, considering he knew how much she could talk once someone got her started. But she was content with this, at least for the time being.

As dinner wound down, Isobel expressed a need for fresh air and a chance to stretch her legs before bed. She bid her uncle and aunt a fond good night. Catching Tobias's eye for a moment, she gave him a small smile. She could feel Antony staring into the side of her head and she wished him a good night as well.

As she slid out of the dining room and down the long corridor, there was a part of her that wondered if Tobias had said anything to Antony about her staying, about her wanting to see him again. Given his standard cool demeanor, it was hard to say one way or another. She had caught him looking at her a couple of times throughout their meal, but she was directly beside him. That had to mean something, right? If anything, Isobel knew she was overthinking the entire situation. Maybe once her family was gone, he could see her and not them.



Isobel eased the door open, stepping out into the chilly night air. The heels of her shoes clicked on the stone of the covered pathway until she stepped out into the garden. A few of the bushes were still green but most everything else was ready for the impending winter. A couple of flakes of snow drifted down and turning her face up felt them fall on her cheeks. A grin spread across her face even as her nose started turning pink and cold.

Her solitude was short lived when a second pair of feet hit the gravel beside her.

“We don’t get snow like this at home,” Isobel said, deciding to speak first.

Antony snorted beside her. He brushed some of the stray flakes from his shoulders before shrugging out of the jacket.

“That doesn’t mean you should freeze,” he commented, draping the coat around her shoulders.

Isobel hummed at the sudden warmth. Pine, peppermint and charcoal filled her senses. There was something comforting about the smell that Isobel couldn’t quite place.

“I wasn’t going to let myself freeze, but thank you.” She pulled the jacket a little closer.

They stood in silence for a few moments, the snow increasing in frequency and size.

“I wanted to apologize,” Antony said after a while. “You’ve been here for a month and I’ve been a terrible host.”

“No. Antony,” Isobel paused to reach out and touch his arm. “I’m hardly a priority when you wanted time with your sister.”

Antony’s shoulders sagged. “I know. I also know that I did not handle the situation with you well. I’m not even going to try and justify it. But I do want to make it up to you.”

“Oh?” Isobel cocked her head to the side, wondering what in the world he was up to.

“Ilaria tells me you are staying behind to work with Tobias’s sister. When were you going to go down to her?”

“The day after tomorrow. After everyone leaves tomorrow, I was going to get my things together and Tobias was going to help me bring them down to her.”

Antony rubbed the back of his neck. “I have some meetings throughout the day tomorrow but how about I send a messenger for you in the late afternoon. There is something I’d like to show you.”

“What would that be?” Isobel asked with genuine interest. Antony wanting to spend any time with her and let her in, if only a little bit, felt like a big step.

A slow smile spread across his face. “Oh, you’ll see tomorrow. But we should get inside before we get too covered in snow.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Isobel was significantly more emotional at having to say good bye than she thought she would. It didn't help that Emrys wrapped her little arms around her waist and refused to let go. Even the twins seemed sad to have to leave her behind. Ilaria had given her a big hug and told her to stay out of trouble, even if trouble had already found her in the form of Antony and Tobias.

She had managed to hold herself together until Sebastian pulled her into his arms.

"I will miss you, sweetpea," he whispered against her hair, kissing the top of her head.

"I will miss you too, Uncle Bash."

"If you need anything, send word and I will be here as fast as I can."

All Isobel could do was nod, hiding her tears in his chest. It felt like all those years when she was a child and he would go

to sea. She wouldn't see him for months at a time, but was always expecting him to come back.

Once they left, she retreated back to her room, to get ready to meet with Antony.

The brush hit the bed with a soft thud, bouncing off and landing on the floor. Isobel gave an exasperated sigh before going to pick it up and drop it into her trunk. She gave up on doing anything other than a simple braid.

Isobel knew she was being ridiculous. Not really knowing why she was so anxious. Maybe because she hadn't spent that much time with Antony, not like she had with Tobias. The concern of what he thought of her was higher than it ever should be. She shouldn't be this worried. This was Antony. It wasn't like they hadn't already had sex already.

There was just something innately fascinating about him. Something Isobel couldn't quite put her finger on. She had heard so many stores of him from Ilaria but none of them seemed to fit the man when she actually met him. He had this quiet, brooding demeanor. And though he tried to hide it behind soft lazy smiles, Isobel could still feel the immense sadness radiating off of him. And despite all of this, she felt like she didn't know him at all. She hoped that whatever he had planned for them would help her glean a clearer image of him.

The knock at the door shook her out of her thoughts. Slipping on her shoes, she answered the door. The messenger didn't say much, but Isobel readily followed along behind him,

unsure which corner of the palace they would end up in. After what felt longer than necessary, they stopped in front of a large set of doors. The messenger rapped on the surface before pulling on the door and ushering Isobel inside.

The thick air hit her first. Warm and fragrant. The late afternoon sun streaming through the glass ceiling and walls. Isobel was sure she'd never seen so many flowers in her life, and tall trees laden with all varieties of fruits. It was a marvel, especially in the dead of winter. When she could still see all the snow through the windows.

“Beautiful, isn't it?”

Isobel whipped around at the sound of Antony's voice. He leaned against a nearby tree, his legs crossed at the ankles. His white shirt was open at the throat and most of the way down his chest, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Wild red hair curled around his ears and some of it fell forward, no doubt to hide his bad eye. Yet, he somehow looked taller if that was even possible.

“What is this place?” she whispered.

Antony pushed away from the tree, and approaching her, held out his hand. “The conservatory.”

“It's beautiful.” Isobel laid her hand in his.

Tucking it into the crook of his elbow, Antony led them down one of the small paths. “My father had this build as a wedding gift for my mother, since she couldn't abide being indoors for too long and this was the next best thing. After her

death, he couldn't stand the sight of it and it fell into disrepair. I restored it about seven years ago, for my own personal use. I never knew her, my mother, since she died before Ilaria and I even completed our first year. Somehow this place makes me feel closer to her.”

“I can see why. It's very peaceful here,” Isobel said, even as she gazed around the room some more.

“Indeed. That's why I also use it for my art space.”

Before Isobel could comment, he pulled them through a small grove of orange trees. There was a large table covered in all sorts of papers and canvases, pencils and sticks of charcoal. A couple of random mismatched chairs filled out the space as well as a small lounge pushed up against the window.

Antony released her arm as she stepped closer to the table. Isobel could still feel him behind her as she took in the drawings, he left scattered across the surface. There were lots of various flowers and still lifes of all sort of objects, each one looking increasingly more realistic than the last. She caught sight of a small portrait of Ilaria under a few sheets and one of Tobias as well.

Until she spotted the picture of herself.



Seeing her in his space should have felt weirder, wrong even, but it wasn't. Far from it actually, which confused Antony even more. The feeling of rightness, of comfort was beyond anything he could have imagined it to be.

To show Isobel his art, to let her into this small intimate part of his life was something he never thought he would do. Very few people knew he was artistically inclined and even fewer had actually seen it. It was his way of dealing with the stress, the demons and the darkness. To create something beautiful out of nothingness, to bring that light into a dark place.

Over the last couple of weeks, Tobias had encouraged him to share this with her. Antony's dreams hadn't and didn't change. The future he saw for them was only getting clearer instead of more muddled. He didn't expect Isobel to understand, but if he started here. Started with the drawings he made, with a piece of himself, then maybe something would finally shift.

He watched the emotions play across her face when she saw the picture of herself. It was a simple three-quarters portrait. Her hair falling in soft curls about her shoulders, exposing the long elegant curve of her neck.

"Is this how you see me?" Isobel finally asked, her voice quiet and small.

"Yes," Antony answered.

"It's almost like looking into a mirror." She set the paper down and turned to face him, the wonder clear in her eyes. "It is truly remarkable, Antony. Really."

He felt the tips of his ears burn as the tension left his body. Why he was so worried about what she would think was beyond him.

“I only draw what I see.” He reached up and ran the backs of his fingers over her cheek. “I want to draw you.”

“You already have.”

“No,” he murmured, taking her chin in his hand so their gazes could meet. “That was out of my head. I want to draw you as you are now.”

“Okay. Tell me how.”

Antony grinned, trailing a finger along the sleeve of her dress. “I trust you have something underneath this. It gets rather warm here and you might be more comfortable.”

“Yes.” The word came out like a sigh. “If you can help me with the laces.”

Antony carefully spun her around and started picking at the ribbons holding her dress together. He could hear her breath catch, as the fabric loosening. Her braid fell over one shoulder and Antony couldn't resist touching the back of her neck and across her back. The dress fluttered to the floor leaving Isobel in nothing more than her thin light pink slip. The thin straps hung on her shoulder and barely skimmed the top of her knees.

Isobel turned back around and Antony felt his mouth go dry. The light from the window reflected off her shimmering hair, her full lips were parted as she sucked in air, making her chest heave and her breasts strained against her slip.

“You are so fucking beautiful, Angel,” Antony whispered before he could stop himself.



He lightly touched her chin again and she tipped her head back to stare up at him with those wide blue eyes. Ducking his head, he lightly brushed his lips against hers, featherlight and soft. Whatever self-control Antony thought he had was immediately dismissed the moment his lips touched hers. His hand slid from her chin to her jaw and then around the back of her neck. He pulled her closer, and when she gasped, he slipped his tongue between her teeth.

When her hands gripped the front of his shirt, Antony was just waiting for her to push him away. Waiting for her to realize that he wasn't what she needed or what she wanted. But she didn't. Instead, she pressed the full length of her body against his, feeling every soft curve of her. He pressed against her lower back, holding her to him.

His lips left her mouth, trailing over her cheek and to her ear.

"I never stopped thinking about you, Angel," he whispered to her.

Isobel released a soft moan when he nibbled on her earlobe. "Neither have I. You want to know a secret?"

"What would that be?"

She draped her arms around his neck and raised up on her toes. Not that it helped overly much, since he was still over a head taller. Wrapping both arms around her waist, he hoisted her up until they were at the same level. Her fingers found his hair, brushing it away from his face.

He should be worried about her catching the strap for his eyepatch and jarring it loose. But he wasn't because he could tell that she was deliberately avoiding it, even as her nails scratched his scalp.

Leaning in again, she pressed another light kiss to his lips before whispering:

“I've touched myself thinking about you.”

His arms tightened around her, a deep rumbling groan echoing from the back of his throat. *Fuck*. If that wasn't the sexiest thing he had ever heard in his life.

Antony took a few long strides from his desk to the couch by the window, dropping her down on it. She gazed back up at him with lust filled eyes, her teeth catching her kiss swollen lips. The edge of her slip rested higher on her thighs. He could draw her like this, he realized. Wanting and waiting. But he had another thought he wanted more.

He dropped down to his knees in front of her, his hands finding her knees. He could hear her breath catch in her throat. The things he wanted to do to her. All the dirty, filthy things. Everything he had witnessed in his dreams, to see those same looks of surrender right before him.

“Will you let me please you?” he asked, his thumbs working circles on the insides of her knees.

“Yes.” Her head dropped back onto the armrest, her thighs parting for him.

He growled in satisfaction, as he pushed them further apart, the slip now around her waist. He kissed one thigh and then another, skipping over where he knew she wanted him. Nipping at the soft skin. His cock already aching in his pants, but this wasn't about him right now. It was about her.

Reaching up, he took hold of her hand and brought it down.

“Show me,” he said. “Show me how you touch this sweet pussy.”

A light pink flush graced Isobel's cheeks as her hand moved down. Antony didn't know if it was the heat of the room, or from the fact that he was going to watch her. But it didn't matter, not with the little noises she started to make as her fingers slid along her lips. A single finger dipping in between just long enough to coat it in her wetness, trailing back up to work slow circles around her clit.

When her finger slipped down a second time, he grabbed a hold of her wrist. He brought it up to his mouth and sucked the fingers clean.

“Delicious.” He then encouraged her to grab a hold of the backrest with one hand and the armrest with the other. “I'd hold on if I were you.”

Before she could ask him what he meant by that, he dove down between her thighs. The flat of his tongue ran long, wide swipes and the flicks against her clit. The moans he pulled from her were some of the most beautiful sounds he ever heard. He focused on doing more of the things that produced those noises. He listened to her cues that he was doing the

right thing. Sure, he's sucked a lot of dicks in his life, but this was still new to him. But he could sure become addicted to the sweet taste of her.

Feeling her legs start to clench and the muscles in her stomach start to quiver. He placed a hand there to hold her down, her hips making to rock up into his face.

He gave a long hard suck as he worked a finger deep inside her. It wasn't long before he was adding a second, turning his wrist to hit that spot that would make her see stars.

She called out his name as her back bowed and she exploded. Antony grinned against the inside of her thigh, knowing he had done that for her. Slowly, he pulled away, lightly tugging her slip down over her still shaking thighs.

Looking up at her with her chest heaving that that post orgasm bliss spread across her flushed cheeks. A few golden strands of hair fell loose from her braid and were plastered to her neck.

This he wanted to remember.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he stood. He grabbed his pad of paper, a set of charcoal and pencils. He settled on her floor to watch her as he drew.

"Don't move," he murmured.

"I don't think I could if I wanted to."

"Good because this is perfect."

## Chapter Nineteen

The exhaustion settled deep in his bones and the headache was building behind his eyes. Tobias loved his duties and responsibilities. It gave him a sense of purpose, of being able to contribute to the greater good. To take the skills he had spent so many years honing and share them with others.

The paperwork, on the other hand, might be his undoing. If it wasn't that time of the year for new recruits, it wouldn't be half so bad. Instead, it was twice the usual workload. Yes, Tobias had captains whose insight he valued, but he liked doing recruitment himself. Maybe because this is what he'd spent his entire life working for. He wanted to prove to everyone who ever second guessed him (even to himself) that Antony had been right in giving him this position. That he earned from his own accomplishments and not because of his long-standing relationship with Antony.

It actually still bothered him that this was something he would think about still. It had been enough years, and no one in the lower ranks questioned his authority anymore. But it

was a dangerous thought that liked to rear its ugly head every once in a while. Especially when he'd had a long day and he was too tired to try and fend them off.

Tobias's feet took him where he needed to go without too much thought. He had known about Antony's intention to try and spend some time with Isobel. Antony had been fighting it for over a month and all Tobias had to do was nudge him in the right direction. It would be different now that her family was gone, since that was one of Antony's major hang ups and there was less of a worry of getting caught by either Sebastian or Ilaria.

He would have preferred to bathe and simply go to bed, but he knew he had to find Antony first. For his own peace of mind.

He arrived at the conservatory a few minutes later. Slipping inside, it was relatively quiet, which was either a good thing or a bad one. There was no deciding which way it was going to go. However, Tobias kept an optimistic attitude about the whole thing. If there was anyone who knew Antony better than himself, it would be Tobias.

He followed the familiar path to Antony's typical hiding place and despite his optimism, he was still surprised at the picture before him.

Antony leaned back against the leg of his desk, the sketch pad in his lap, and the tips of his fingers already black from charcoal. He looked up when Tobias's boots crunched on the gravel. He raised a finger to his lips and nodded towards the

sofa. Isobel was still laid there, her eyes closed and her breathing even. Her head resting on a small pillow over her arm, her long smooth legs stretch out from beneath her short slip. She really was breathtaking.

Tobias dropped down on the ground beside Antony, making quick work of his jacket before tossing it aside. It was always too damn hot in there.

“What are you working on?” Tobias asked quietly.

Antony set his charcoal aside before turning the pad towards Tobias. He sucked in a hard breath through his nose. Damn, he needed to stop asking that question if everything Antony was going to show him was some level of erotic. Even if she was clothed and positioned much like she still currently was, it was the look on Isobel’s face that told Tobias everything he needed to know. He’d seen that look once before. The look of satisfaction and contentment. Like the first time the three had been together.

Tobias cleared his throat. “You remembered this look?”

Antony shook his head, taking the pad back. “No. I had to recreate it.”

“Really?”

There was no mistaking the light pink flush that graced his cheeks. Antony ran the pad of his thumb over his lower lip, which gave Tobias all the answers he needed.

“Twice.”

Tobias felt something flutter in his chest and he wasn't quite sure what it was, but he knew it was a happy feeling. He couldn't help the grin that overtook his face. Reaching up, he curved his hand around the back of Antony's neck, pulling him closer until their foreheads touched.

"How do you feel?"

"It's still a little strange, but if I don't think about it too much, I can move past it. At least for now," Antony admitted. "Thank you for pushing me. I don't think I could have without your encouragement."

"You know, I've always been a bad influence," Tobias chuckled, leaning in to nip at Antony's lower lip.

"But I don't know where I would be without it."

Tobias drew Antony into a soft kiss, their lips barely brushing against each other. To feel him melt underneath his mouth, sending Tobias's pulse racing. This would be enough for now, but it never stopped him from wanting more.

A light gasp reminded him that they weren't alone. Easing back from Antony's mouth, Tobias peeked over to Isobel on the couch. There was no mistaking the intense blush that covered her cheeks and spread down her neck. Or the way she held her hands over her eyes, peering through her fingers.

"See something you like?" Tobias teased, though he didn't release his hold on Antony.

"I- I'm sorry!" Isobel stammered out. "I'm a light sleeper and I heard you come in and I didn't mean to stare and--"



“It’s okay.” Tobias interrupted her rambling apology. He gave Antony a last light peck on his lips before letting go and facing Isobel fully. “Though, if you are wanting to be a part of this, you will have to get used to seeing a lot more than just us kissing.”

“Oh!” The sound came out like a squeak. Then she cleared her throat looking down at her hands where her fingers twisted together. “I mean, of course.”

“You’re just surprised by how much you liked seeing it,” Antony commented.

Isobel’s blush intensified and Tobias was sure she couldn’t get any redder. It only solidified how true Antony’s statement resonated with her. He found it endearing, however, but knew they were going to have to have a legitimate conversation about this.

But this wasn’t the place for that conversation. Clear heads had to prevail if this was going to work out at. And for all their sakes, Tobias secretly prayed it would.

They didn’t stay much longer in the conservatory, each deciding that bed was the best choice. However, Tobias invited Isobel to join him and Antony for breakfast the next morning, before Tobias was to help her move her things down to his sister’s house. It would give them a chance to talk after a night’s sleep and before they would ultimately be parted for at least the next week.

After helping her back into her dress, Tobias offered to walk Isobel back to her room, while Antony finished putting his art

supplies away. He left her at her door with a light kiss to her cheek, even if he preferred to give her one on the mouth. Poor girl seemed confused enough without having him lusting after her too.

Walking back to the rooms he shared with Antony, Tobias let his mind wander again. Even if he was bone tired, there was a lightness he didn't expect. There was hope for them yet. Tobias might have been the one to bring them all together initially, but he was sure as hell going to make sure something stuck. If not for his own sake but for Antony.

Slipping into their room, Tobias found Antony leaning over the small washing bowl. The mirror that normally hung above it had yet to be replaced after it shattered and Tobias was content to leave it that way. Antony worked to scrub the black staining his fingertips.

Tobias tossed his jacket aside before removing his shirt and yanking his boots off.

“Do you think she will accept us?”

Tobias wrapped his arms around Antony's waist, pulling him back against his chest and leaning his chin on the other man's shoulder.

“I think she already has. She let you in tonight and I think that's a huge step.”

Antony leaned back against Tobias. “I know. I just wish the gnawing guilt every time I look at her would go away but I know it's not that simple.”

Tobias hummed, knowing full well the extent of Antony's guilt. For a crime he was forced and coerced into committing, for a fire that changed the lives of so many, for the death of Isobel's beloved father.

"You're not the same person you were back then. You've grown so much, Antony. You've proven yourself time and time again. Show her with your words, your actions, your dedication and when the time comes that she finds out the truth, she'll be able to forgive you."

"Even if I can't forgive myself?"

"All in good time."

"So, we convince her in the morning to stay with us?" The waver in Antony's voice made Tobias tighten his arms.

"We will, because I want her here as much as you do."

Antony gave out a snort, turning in Tobias's embrace, wrapping his own arms around him too.

"And to think a month ago, you were threatening to leave me over a woman we hadn't even met yet."

Tobias pinched Antony's side. "Shut up. Come on, let's go to bed."



Isobel arrived promptly at the appointed time, a testament to her punctuality that Tobias admired. If she could be on time for breakfast, she would be on time for their training sessions which would also start the following week. He wanted to give

her at least a little time to settle in with Sylvia before he upended her entire schedule again.

He hadn't told Antony yet about her training but opted to not tell him for the time being. It would be that much more satisfying when she could show him her progress.

The food arrived about the same time Isobel did and Tobias encouraged her to start while they waited for Antony who had woken up that morning with an incredible amount of pain behind his bad eye. Even after all this time, it didn't really bother him that much anymore (or rather he didn't complain to Tobias about it), but even Tobias knew that some mornings were more of a struggle than others. It usually didn't take more than several minutes with a cold cloth on it to help numb the stinging.

So, in the meantime, Tobias enjoyed a cup of tea while Isobel ate. He wasn't quite sure why he took such immense satisfaction from watching her eat. Maybe because she simply ate and didn't care about who saw her do it. Or that it brought a simple amount of joy to her face. Not that it mattered either way.

"Are you going to eat?" Isobel asked when she leaned back with her teacup.

"I will eventually. I don't find myself that particularly hungry first thing in the morning," Tobias admitted.

"At least not for food." Antony made his presence known as he entered the room, the heel of his hand still pressed to his forehead.

Tobias smiled into his drink. “But you like waking up with my mouth on your cock.”

“That is hardly the point,” Antony grumbled, dropping down into the seat beside Isobel.

“Then enlighten me.” Tobias fixed another cup of tea and slid it across the table to Antony. “Because you weren’t complaining about it an hour ago.”

Antony grunted into his cup, taking a large mouthful before answering. “That was before this blistering headache.”

Isobel wiped her mouth with her napkin before pushing away from the table. The sound of her chair scraping against the floor made Antony wince. Tobias did feel bad about the state Antony was in. The damaged nerve endings in his bad eye flared up still and there wasn’t much that could be done about it anymore, he still suffered.

“May I try something?” she asked quietly, even as she rose from her chair.

Antony quirked up a brow and gave a small nod. Isobel skirted around the table until she was standing behind Antony’s chair. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she dug the heels of her hands into the hard muscles. Antony released a deep groan as she repeated the movement a couple of times before moving up, pressing her fingers into the nape of his neck. Then sinking into his hair, and pushing down to run small circles around his temples.

Tobias watched with a captivated interest, as he could see the tension melting away from Antony's body. This girl was always full of surprises and he shouldn't be surprised by them too. Just when he thought he had her figured out, she did something else that totally skewed his perceptions of her.

Antony reached back and took hold of her hand, tugging her around.

"Thank you," he said, lightly kissing the top of her hand. "That helped immensely. I'm curious to know where you learned such a thing."

Her smile was almost sad as she retook her chair. Isobel twisted her fingers together in her lap.

"I learned it for my grandmother. During the last year of her life, she'd suffer from these debilitating headaches and stiffness in her neck. One of her physicians showed me so that I could help her."

Tobias couldn't quite remember if he had met her when he was in Ulrich all those years ago. However, he had a vague recollection of Antony telling him about a letter he received from Ilaria about the death of Sebastian's mother. It hadn't been that long ago.

"I'm sorry to have heard of her passing," Antony said softly.

Isobel nodded. "We were very close my entire life. She meant the world to me." She reached up and touched the red pendant on the black choker she had around her neck. "She left this to me. Two months, three weeks, five days. That's

how long she has been gone and it feels like she is with me.” Isobel wiped away a stray tear with a wry chuckle. “She would have freaked out knowing the situation I’ve gotten myself into.”

“She wouldn’t have approved of this?” Antony asked, waving his hand between the three of them.

The unexpected laugh Isobel gave, somehow made Tobias feel better.

“Quite the contrary. I’m sure she would have some very colorful things to say about this situation.”

“And what exactly would you call this situation?” Tobias asked. He’d never find a better moment to finally bring this up. It was why they were all there. Because the sooner they figured this out, the sooner he could drag her into his lap.

Isobel might have started as Antony’s obsession, but she was slowly being his as well. Tobias wasn’t quite sure when it had happened. He enjoyed her company and the conversation they would have on their walks to and from the forge. There was a part of him that was going to miss that when she moved down there permanently. But there would be upcoming opportunities as well.

“I– don’t know.” Isobel sighed, running her fingers through the ends of her hair. “I enjoy spending time with you both.”

“And you understand it’s all or nothing?” Tobias asked.

“I do. I was thinking about it before bed last night. Seeing you kiss made me realize how selfish I have been. You already

have each other. I'm just a distraction. So, when you ask me what this is, that's all it can be."

"Oh, Angel," Antony sighed with a shake of his head. He pushed out of his chair and came to stand beside hers, dropping down onto a knee. Taking one of her hands in his, he gave it a squeeze. "Listen, I know this is hard to understand, since you are used to seeing one on one relationships. Yes, Tobias and I have an established relationship that we have worked on for a very long time. But that doesn't mean it can't shift and change as needed."

Isobel's lips fell open like she wanted to say something even if nothing came out. Tobias reached across the table to take her other hand.

"What we could have would be so much more. Anyone in any sort of relationship or dynamic has their part to play. I have enjoyed my time with you as I'm sure Antony has as well. That's why we want you to be a part of this, of us." Tobias gave her an encouraging smile. Antony took Tobias's other hand, closing their little circle. "We each want time with you like we want time with each other. Whether together as a three or separately in twos. Do you understand?"

Tobias could almost see her mind spinning as she took in his words. He had tried to be as straightforward as he could, without trying to confuse her more than she already was. Because he wanted this. Because Antony wanted this. Because they knew their lives would be better with her in it.



“I understand,” she finally admitted. “Or I at least I think I do. This won’t all get figured out in a single moment, but I’m willing to try this ‘us’ thing, if you two are. However, I do have a condition of my own.”

“And what would that be?” Antony inquired, his head tilting to one side.

“This only lasts while I’m here. In a year, once my apprenticeship is over, I’m going home.”

Tobias bit down hard on his tongue, to keep from saying something he shouldn’t have or from outright chuckling. He had faith in Antony’s visions, and if he saw them together, they would end up that way, regardless of whatever limitations she thought she could impose. Instead, he locked eyes with Antony, the understanding reflected back at him.

“Of course,” Tobias replied with a nod. However, she wouldn’t leave them quite that easily.

“What happens now?”

“So, you’re agreeing to give this a try?” Antony smiled, even if the nervousness was clear on his face.

“As crazy as it sounds or it feels, yes. Yes, I am.”

## Chapter Twenty

Isobel woke up before the sun. Not something she was known to do but there was so much running through her mind, she couldn't sleep even if she wanted to. She was too damn excited for what the day was going to bring.

There was a project she was currently working on, which she wanted to make more progress. A dagger. Her first real test to see if her designs and her skills were beginning to hold up. She might have only had two weeks of formal training but Sylvia was confident that she could do it. Sylvia also let it slip that Tobias's birthday was coming up in the next couple of weeks and Isobel hoped to be able to give it to him.

She was looking forward to seeing him that afternoon as well. He was coming after the midday meal to take her for her first training session. She was equal parts excited and nervous at the prospect.

Would she even be any good at it?

It was a question she had been asking herself for the last several days. Even in the short time of her blacksmith training, she could feel the strength increase in her arms. The heavy hammers were like a constant test of her endurance. But swinging a hammer was much different than swinging a sword. And that was only if Tobias gave her one of those to begin with. She contemplated asking to start with something easier like archery.

Isobel snorted as she tied up the laces on the front of her dress. The whole point of receiving weapons training was to learn the skills needed to wield the things she would make. She was after all a blacksmith, not a fletcher.

The house was quiet when she went downstairs into the main living space. Sylvia told her the night before that she wanted to get to the market early that morning, so Isobel wasn't surprised to find herself alone. She rummaged through a basket until she found a piece of bread and soft cheese. What she wouldn't have done for a piece of fresh fruit. However, in the winter it was hard to come by. She was spoiled with the milder winters of Clan Ulrich, where there was always something to be found. Maybe, she could convince Antony to share something from his greenhouse.

Correction, she was going to get Antony to share.

She couldn't keep the grin from her face as she took her breakfast into the forge.

A few small embers from yesterday's fire still smoldered and glowed in the fireplace. Isobel stuffed the bread into her mouth

to hold onto it, not wanting to get soot all over it, as she knelt before the fire. With some extra kindling and a little coxing, she got it up to a small blaze. Sitting back on her heels, she enjoyed the warmth on her face as she finished eating her breakfast.

Her work in progress was wrapped in a small cloth up on a shelf, where she had left it the day before. Taking it down, she looked it over trying to see if there were any cracks in the steel. She grabbed the blade end in one hand and the tang in the other, since it didn't have a full handle yet. Her thumbs lightly pushed at the intersection of the two parts.

It snapped clean in half.

Isobel sighed, dropping the pieces back into a bucket of broken bits to be melted down again. It seemed like she was going to have to start over. Again. For the third time.

“Tempering the steel is the hardest part.”

Isobel snapped her head up to find Sylvia leaning on the door frame.

“I know,” Isobel admitted dejectedly. “It’s just, I really thought I had it right that time.”

Sylvia came to stand beside her, staring into the bucket of broken pieces. She nudged Isobel’s shoulder. “You want to know how many things I broke before I got it right?”

“Probably more than the four I’ve broken so far.”

Sylvia smiled. “Somewhere between twelve and fifteen.”

“Oh dear,” Isobel sighed. “I’m never going to get anything done, am I?”

Sylvia wrapped her arm around Isobel and steered her away from the pile of shards. “You just want something done to prove that you can do it. And to have something to give to my brother.”

Isobel bit the inside of her cheek. Was she really that transparent? Was her growing infatuation with Tobias starting to become too obvious? Isobel knew what that would look like to anyone - that she was lusting after a man who was clearly already in a committed relationship. Not that she wasn’t lusting after Antony too. But really, they had started it.

“After everything he has done for me including allowing us to meet, I feel like I owe him some sort of gratitude,” Isobel finally admitted.

“I understand that want,” Sylvia responded. She picked up one of her tools and started to inspect it. “But there are other things you could give him if this doesn’t work out in time.”

“Like what?” Isobel asked without thinking.

“Toby has... particular tastes. He likes soft, willing, obedient. Something he can bend and mold to his liking.”

“Why does this sound like something I can’t go to the market to buy?” Isobel picked up a bucket of water to carry over by the fire.

“Because it can’t be bought.” Sylvia paused, laying down her tool. “I see the way he looks at you, Isobel. A blind man

can see the way he looks at you. He likes you, even if he won't admit it."

"What about Antony?"

Sylvia rolled her eyes. "Whatever he has with Antony Devarik is his own business. I don't begin to pretend to understand. However, if he is letting you in, if they are both letting you in, don't run away from it."

"I don't think I understand." Isobel felt a growing flush in her cheeks. She wanted to blame it on the increasing heat in the forge, but she knew better.

"I know about the tavern."

"What?" Isobel yelled louder than she meant to. Her heart pounded against her ribcage.

"Rafaela is my sister too." Sylvia chuckled. "She told me the day afterward, since she hadn't seen Toby or Antony with someone else for a long time. Naturally, she was curious. I was too, at the time. Then I got to meet you and get to know you. I see why Toby is drawn to you."

Isobel dropped down on the small bench along the wall, burying her face in her hands. It was all too much.

"Do you think I'm crazy?" Isobel muttered against her hands.

"Of course not! He might be my brother, but he's still a handsome man." Sylvia came over and gently peeled Isobel's hands away from her face. "More importantly, he's a good man. Take care of him and he will take care of you."

“Thank you.” Isobel gave her hands a squeeze.

“Of course.” Sylvia smiled. “Don’t ever hesitate to talk to me. Now, let’s get to work.”



Sweat poured down her face and the back of her neck as Isobel lurched backward to avoid another direct hit. She took enough blows already.

Tobias was unrelenting and they had been going at it for over two hours. When he told her that they were going to start with one-on-one hand combat, she thought he was crazy. She couldn’t fight off someone of his size. But she’d be damned if she didn’t try.

Her fists balled up tightly at her sides, her nails biting painfully into her palms, as she glared at him from across the small mat. She swung headlong at the stupid smirk on his face but he leaned back and she caught herself swinging at air again.

His fist, however, connected with her side for the third straight time. Air left her lungs in a harsh gasp.

Isobel lunged at him again, catching him around the waist. He stumbled back a few steps, but did not fall over. There was no part of her that was surprised by this, even if she had tried it. No, she was going to have to take him out by the knees. She gritted her teeth as she stepped back to try just that, when he caught her instead and lifted her up as if she weighed nothing at all, tossed her over one shoulder.

Isobel landed hard on her back.

“Had enough?” he asked, standing above her with his hands on his hips as she struggled to breath.

Determined not to look like a quitter, Isobel sprung to her feet and swung her arm out at the same time. Her fist finally met its mark. Tobias’s head snapped to one side and he gingerly touched his now bruised lip with his tongue.

He turned his gaze to meet hers as Isobel refused to look anywhere else. She had to prove she could do this. If she couldn’t defend herself with her fists, how was giving her a weapon going to be any better?

“Finally, we are getting somewhere,” he muttered so low she almost didn’t hear him.

He charged at her again, but this time she was ready. Well, Isobel was enraged. There was only so much she could take before the anger and frustration started to settle in. She had to be getting better, at least fractionally.

Tobias dropped his shoulder and Isobel threw her entire weight at it hard enough to knock him off his feet. Tobias landed hard on his back. Not missing her opportunity, Isobel fell down hard on his chest and made a grab for his arms to pin him down.

That did not end well.

The next thing she knew she was laid out again. But this time, one of Tobias’s hands held her wrists securely above her head and his powerful thighs held her knees together so she



couldn't kick out. Isobel growled as she tried to struggle. However, he was too strong. And all the writhing did was press part of her body against his. She could feel every muscle as she arched her back off the mat.

His free hand trailed down her side, gripping her hip to try and hold her still. Lowering his head, he brought his lips to her ear.

“Keep moving like that and you'll find yourself face down with your skirts around your waist.”

Isobel stopped moving and grinned up at him. “What if that was the point?”

Tobias shook his head with a minor chuckle. “You want to be spanked? You want me to turn your ass a lovely shade of pink so it's hot and sore when we have dinner with Antony?”

A shiver ran down her spine at his words and the heat of it pooled between her legs. The things she would let that man do to her. Even if his words were meant to scare her, they didn't.

“If you don't spank me now, would you spank me later?” Isobel asked, biting her lower lip.

“Oh, believe me, I will.” The grin that overtook his handsome face was dazzling. “Now, do you yield?”

“Never.” She challenged.

“Let's try again then?”

After pushing herself up, Isobel offered Tobias a hand up.

Tobias smirked as he gripped her hand and yanked on her arm.

Back to staring at the ceiling.

“Kindness can often be viewed as weakness.” Tobias regarded her on the ground for the second time in as many minutes.

With gritted teeth, she swung her leg out and caught him behind the knees, sending him tumbling down to the mat. Isobel sprung up only to drop down on his chest. His breath left his body in a whoosh.

“What were you saying, General?”

He seized her by the elbows and somehow managed to flip her over his head.

That hurt.

“What did I tell you this morning?” His voice was a harsh growl as he dragged her to her knees and twisted one arm painfully behind her back.

It was futile to attempt to shake off his unrelenting grasp. She could fight him before, but this position made it next to impossible.

“No biting?” Isobel opted for humor.

“Try again.”

He now had both of her arms twisted back and her knees shook violently as Isobel forced herself to breathe through the

pain that was beginning to cloud her senses. But the pain felt good, more than she thought it would.

The only thing that Isobel could recall was something about perseverance.

Tobias now had a knee in her lower back.

“Answer me!”

Spots started to cloud her vision.

Tobias released her arms which fell like two dead cold fish at her side, unable to move them as the blood rushed back through. Instead, he wrapped her braid around his hand and yanked back hard, forcing her up to her knees. His free hand wrapped around her throat. The weight of his hard body pressed up against her back, as well as the more than prominent erection.

This power excited him. It was evident in the way he held her, the way he filled her senses and made sure she was only thinking of him.

Isobel remained perfectly still, breathing deeply through her nose. Their eyes connected in the mirror hanging from a far wall. His gaze was deep and dark. His nose pressed up against the back of her ear.

“You look so good like this, kitten,” he murmured, his breath hot in her ear. “My hand around your neck. If I were to press a little harder, would you let me?”

Her lips parted as she tried to suck in as much air as she could, his fingers tightening just that much more.

“Yes,” she hissed.

“Would you let me hold you down this way, cutting off your air as I fucked you long and hard?” His tone grew darker. “Maybe I’ll hold you like this while Antony ravages you. To kiss your swollen lips, pinch your aching nipples, touch your throbbing clit, bury his cock in that sweet wet pussy.”

A soft moan escaped her lips. The image he was painting in her mind made her entire body tingle with excitement.

His fingers twitched as if they might move but his grip did not falter. He did, however, release his hold on her hair. The tips of his fingers trailing down the back of her neck and across her shoulders, smoothing along her collarbone, then up to her lips.

“Open,” he growled against her ear. The pad of his thumb pressed on her lower lip. Her lips parted as he slid two fingers along her tongue. “Such a good girl. I knew this smart mouth of yours would be so talented.”

Isobel moaned, giving his fingers a hard suck. This was definitely not how she expected the afternoon to go but she didn’t care. There was just something about Tobias that drew her in like a moth to a flame. Something in his demeanor, in his charisma.

Before she could even realize what was happening, Tobias completely pulled away. The gasp at the sudden invasion of air made Isobel’s head spin and she tipped forward, bracing her hands on the floor. She panted for breath; her whole body

started to tremble. No matter how hard she tried, the torrent of thoughts and feelings hit her like a wave on the shore.

Isobel shouldn't have liked being handled like that. She shouldn't have liked him cutting off her air. But she did. More than she ever believed she would. And the thought scared her, that he could hold that power over her. Yet, she trusted him. She trusted Tobias not to hurt her.

With her head still spinning, she felt herself being moved even if she couldn't move herself. Tobias seated her across his lap, his arms wrapped tightly around her. She buried her nose in his shoulder, breathing him in. Lemon, anise and leather. Somehow it helped calm her nerves.

“How are you feeling?” Tobias murmured, running his hand up and down her back. “I didn't push you too hard?”

“No,” Isobel replied. She held onto the front of his sweaty shirt. “I wouldn't learn if you weren't hard on me.”

“That's not what I meant, kitten.” His voice was light and soft.

“I know.” Isobel paused with a sigh. “I never thought I would like something like that. But I did. A lot.”

Tobias tipped her chin up until she met his eyes. Isobel could tell he was looking for something, but she wasn't sure what. Eventually, he smiled and leaned down to lightly kiss her lips.

“Good,” he said before kissing her again. “There is still much for you to learn and I think I know where we need to

start. For the rest of it, we will need Antony. In the meantime, why don't you go bathe before we meet him for dinner.”

While his words both scared and thrilled her, Isobel couldn't wait to see what other dark secrets Tobias had hiding beneath those easy smiles and soft eyes.

## Chapter Twenty-One

There was correspondence everywhere, piles of reports, and never-ending petitions. Antony had long considered hiring someone to handle these sorts of piles and logistics for him. However, he didn't want to run the risk of missing anything. This was all too important to him to allow someone else to handle it. For eight and a half years, he had dealt with it all and nothing was going to change anytime soon.

Though, he reflected staring down at the endless piles, he should have a better organization system so things didn't get misplaced. Not that he had a particular habit of doing so. It was one of the main reasons he kept a public office away from his living space. To keep that distance between his professional life and his private life.

Not that he and Tobias didn't blur the lines more times than not. But Antony began to appreciate that distance, especially when there were matters that became rather draining.

Including and not limited to this particular report about the winter grain harvest. Antony dropped his head back against his

chair with a groan. There had to be an easier way. Drakos wasn't as self-sufficient as it should have been and Antony's own ego wasn't so large to realize when he needed help. A supply and trade chain between Drakos and Ulrich had been set up years ago before Sebastian ever returned home. However, Ulrich's resources weren't in grain. Much to his increasing chagrin, Antony was going to have to reach out to Clan Ivanov.

Drakos and Ivanov didn't always have the best relationship. Even if Ilaria had been married to Dimitri Petrovich, the younger brother of their Chieftain, Natasha Petrovich Velenskyy. But Dimitri's murder by Maxim's hands had not endeared Natasha to them in the slightest. It was, however, the justice she did eventually receive with Maxim's banishment that at least made communicating with her a little bit easier.

Antony made a note to himself to have a letter drafted to Natasha and have his council approve it before it was sent. Not because he felt like he needed their approval in a move that would help his people. More so that he didn't write anything that could be perceived as unfavorable or at worst insulting.

The small clock on the mantelpiece tolled the hour. Antony sighed, running a hand through his hair. Thankfully he was almost done for the day. He spent a couple of minutes trying to tidy up his space as his mind wandered to later that evening.

He hadn't seen Isobel in a week. Not since they agreed to try something and at the same time, she moved out. Antony understood the necessity of the space but it didn't mean he



couldn't be excited about it now. He missed her, probably more than he was willing to admit. She had become such a fixture in his home for over a month, even if he had avoided her for more than half of it. However, that was all in the past now.

Antony's dreams had been quiet of late and he wasn't going to complain about that. Taking it as a sign that he was on the right path and things would turn out the way he hoped they would. His mind slipped further, thinking about all the things he wanted to do to her. What he and Tobias wanted to do. They had talked about it at length the night before, so they were of the same mind.

A knock jerked him out of his musings. As soon as he called out a messenger slipped through the door. "This just arrived urgently for you, sir," the messenger stated, holding the letter out.

Antony muttered his thanks before shooing the messenger away. His heart stopped when he noticed the wax seal on the back - green, embedded with a leaf.

Bakken.

Antony did not regularly correspond with Clan Bakken, far to their north and most of it hidden within the mountains. He received a letter twice a year from their Chieftain, Lars Eklund. Something he never looked forward to. After Maxim was finally held accountable for the damage he caused to Antony, to Ilaria, for the deaths of Dimitri Petrovich and

Rudolf Hartmann, he was banished to be held by Clan Bakken. With the expectation, he would rot and die there.

There was a very small part of Antony that regretted not killing him when he had the chance. But Antony wasn't the killer and he refused to stoop down to Maxim's level. Though it was still hard to come to terms with him not actually being his brother, while bringing a comfort that they weren't related.

Antony sucked in a deep breath with a shake of his head. He snapped the wax. The letters from Bakken came once a year, usually in the spring so this particular letter was several months too early.

Starting to read the letter, it was the usual pleasantries until he got about halfway through:

*It is with great joy and pride to inform you of your brother's rehabilitation. He wishes for me to express to you his deep sadness and remorse at his past behavior. And wishes for permission to return home.*

Nope.

Antony balled up the paper before he could read another word. Surging to his feet, he walked to the small fire in the corner and burned it. He didn't even want to know what else the letter was going to say.

Maxim wasn't his brother.

This wasn't his home and he sure as fuck wasn't going to come back. If he ever saw Maxim again other than dead, it would be too soon.

Antony leaned an arm against the mantelpiece staring into the flames. His breathing was heavy as he fought to calm his raging heartbeat. He could feel his pulse in his ears. So much so that he didn't hear the door to his office open and close again. He shivered when a pair of arms wrapped around his waist.

Tobias rested his chin on Antony's shoulder. "What has you so lost in thought?"

"Nothing," Antony replied quietly. He really didn't want to think about it, let alone talk about it. He wasn't going to respond to that letter and in fact, he was going to pretend like he had never received it.

"Are you sure?" Tobias kissed the side of his neck.

"Yes. It's been a long day." Antony turned in his embrace, draping his arms around Tobias's neck. "I just want to focus on tonight."

There was a gleam in Tobias's eye that told Antony he was up to something. "If we hurry, we can most likely still catch her in a bath."

"Do I even want to ask how you know that?" Antony asked with a smirk.

"I picked her up from the forge early and suggested she bathe here. I love my sister but her bathtub hardly covers to

the waist. One of these days I'm going to replace it and not tell her beforehand. Anyway," Tobias paused with a snicker. "That is neither here nor there. Shall we?"

Antony nodded, dropping a kiss on Tobias's lips before they parted.

Isobel was in the same room as she was when she stayed there. Tobias and Antony both decided that would be most familiar and comfortable for her. That it would become her room permanently when she visited. Not like either man had any plans to always make sure she was in their bed and not alone in her own.

They found her precisely where Tobias would say she would be.

The thick air of the bath almost reminded Antony of his greenhouse. Warm and fragrant, carrying the scent of oranges and jasmine he had grown accustomed to on her. Her back was to the door and if she noticed she was no longer alone, she didn't indicate it. Her pale blonde hair was piled in a knot on the top of her head as she leaned back against the rim. Her toes peeked out of the bubbles from the other end.

"I do know you are there," Isobel commented with a chuckle. She turned around and leaned her arms up on the rim. "I was hoping you would find me."

Antony snorted as he approached her first, trailing the tips of his fingers along the curve of her jaw. "And what did you hope for, Angel?"

“That I wouldn’t have to wait too long to see you again.” She leaned into his touch and his thumb ghosted over her lower lip.

There was something about her simple words that sent Antony’s mind racing. Maybe because he’d never done something like this before. It was different with Tobias. They had been longtime friends before anything happened between them and when it did, it fell so naturally into place. With Isobel, his mind was already so filled with certain wants and expectations that he didn’t know how to start.

“I wouldn’t have kept you waiting then.” Antony’s smile only felt half genuine.

Isobel stared up at him with those wide blue eyes, so willing and so full of a trust Antony didn’t even begin to believe he had earned. If she knew what he had done, she wouldn’t look at him like that. He didn’t want to think like that, however much the thoughts pressed themselves to the front of his mind.

Antony felt Tobias move to stand beside him, a hand coming to rest on his lower back. Such a small discreet gesture to pull him out of his dark thoughts, to refocus on the present. To focus on what he wanted. And what he wanted right now was in front of him covered in nothing but bubbles.

“I hope we aren’t interrupting,” Tobias commented with a tilt of his head.

Isobel shook her head, smoothing her hands over the surface of the water. “No, I was almost done anyway since the water isn’t quite as warm.”

Antony found his feet moving before he even realized it. He reached for the drying cloth on a nearby table. Returning to the tub, he held it open for her. Isobel rose out of the water, giving him the perfect view of her generous curves. Rivulets of water trailed down her lightly tanned skin and he wanted to follow each one with his tongue. She accepted Tobias's hand to step out of the tub. Antony wrapped the towel and his arms around her, pulling her back against his chest.

He leaned in closer, the tip of his nose trailing up the side of her neck. "I'm like a starving man teased by a mouthful of food, yet craving so much more. I would devour you, Angel, one bite at a time."

A soft moan escaped her lips as she melted back against him and he easily supported her weight. Antony's eye met Tobias's gaze, a smile spreading on the other man's face. Approaching the pair, Tobias caught Isobel between them, taking her face between his hands. He leaned down to kiss her lips.



The tingling started in her toes and quickly trailed up her legs and down her arms. Isobel reveled in the feeling of Antony's arms, being so surrounded by him. The dirty things he whispered in her ear while Tobias devoured her mouth. His hands on her face and in her hair.

Tobias pulled the pins holding up her hair until it fell in loose curls around her shoulders. He took a single curl and wrapped it around his finger, giving it a soft tug.

“Are you sure you are ready for this, kitten?” Tobias asked against her mouth.

Isobel eagerly nodded. “I’ve never wanted anything more. Though, I thought we were going to eat first.”

“I’m sure he’ll love to eat you too,” Antony murmured. “Maybe I will feed you my cock while he does so.”

Isobel moaned at the prospect, her thighs clenching together in the hopes of getting some sort of relief. Even if it wasn’t meant to be. Tobias pulled away slowly and Antony snaked an arm underneath her knees, sweeping her off her feet. Crossing from the bath into the bedroom, he dropped her down in the middle of the bed. Isobel leaned up on her elbows to find both men standing at the edge of the bed.

They turned to each other and Isobel watched with voracious interest as Tobias grabbed Antony by the back of the neck. He dragged him into a long deep kiss. Their hands began to wander over each other’s body, pulling at ties and buttons along the way. They pulled away just long enough to yank off the other’s respective shirt.

Isobel had never been more aroused in her life then she was in that moment. Watching the two of them together, equal expanses of pale skin, dark and red hair mixed together. Breaking from their kiss, their eyes met for a moment as Tobias rested his hands on Antony’s shoulders.

“Now, show our girl how you suck my cock like a good boy.” Tobias’s raspy words were meant for Antony but he was

looking at Isobel. She could see the slight tremble that ran through Antony, much like it ran through her.

Antony sank down readily to his knees, his hands finding the waistband of Tobias's pants. Undoing them and shoving the material down his long muscular legs. His long hard cock popping out in the process. Antony wasted no time sucking the entire thing into his mouth until his nose touched. Tobias let out a deep groan, burying his fingers into the red curls, taking a firm grip.

How Antony wasn't actively choking, Isobel would never know. But watching him move his head back and forth, his cheeks hollowing with each backward pull, and the growing wetness on Tobias's cock. Isobel was definitely learning some things she never thought possible.

She squirmed on the mattress, though tried to keep it from being too obvious, but Tobias caught sight of her subtle movements anyway. He grinned, pulling Antony off of him. Leaning down he lightly kissed the other man's lips before whispering something to him that Isobel couldn't hear. With equal parts anxiety and excitement, Isobel's eyes grew wide as Antony stood.

A loud gasp escaped her when Antony seized a hold of her ankle and yanked her down to the edge of the bed. He started at that ankle, kissing it softly before moving up to her knee and her thigh. The drying cloth was slowly peeled away leaving her naked beneath him. He trailed his lips over her hip



bone and across her stomach, along the underside of her breasts, just barely skimming over a pert nipple.

Isobel was panting by the time he sealed their mouths together. He took a hold of her hands intertwining their fingers together and pulling them above her head. Easing away just enough, he left hot open-mouthed kisses along her jaw and down her neck, nipping at the skin he found there.

“I’ve dreamed of this, Angel.” Antony bit down a little harder on her neck, making her moan louder. “Of having you beneath me again. To feel every inch of you.”

She jumped and shivered when a hand trailed down her side to her hip. Tilting her head back, she saw Tobias kneeling there. Somehow, he was now the one holding her down again.

Antony followed his hand down, turning his attention to her breasts, leaving them with the attention of his fingers and his tongue. Isobel tried to arch off the bed with a strangled noise when he bit down on one nipple, hard. It sent a shockwave through her system.

“You liked that, didn’t you?” Tobias teased from above her head. He moved her wrists to one hand so he could use the other to touch the breast Antony wasn’t paying attention to. Rolling the tight bud with his thumb before taking it between his fingers. Tobias pinched as hard as Antony’s teeth.

“Fucking shit!” Isobel screamed, her eyes squeezing shut. She had never felt anything like that in her entire life and she could practically feel the moisture dripping from her thighs.

Antony kneed her legs further apart, the tips of his fingers ghosting over where she wanted him to touch her most.

“You’re so wet for us, Angel. I think you enjoyed that pain.”

Antony’s thumb brushed up against her clit, and her whole body twitched. Fuck, she was going to come and they had barely touched her. What was it about them that simply set her on fire?

“Please,” she whimpered, though she could hardly tell what she was asking for.

“What do you want, kitten?” Tobias asked gently. He leaned over and she met his dark, almost smothering eyes. He lightly traced over her features with a featherlight touch, before pressing his lips to her forehead.

“More.”

The word just passed her lips when her entire perspective changed. Antony wrapped her legs around his waist and quickly flipped them over. In an instant, Isobel found herself straddled over Antony’s lower stomach, her hands braced on his chest, sinking into the coarse hair. He wore a lazy smile and she could feel his hands on her hips.

Isobel went to say something but the words died on her tongue when Tobias pressed against her back. One arm snaking around her ribcage and the other resting on the base of her throat. She could feel his hot breath on her ear.

“There we’re so many things we had planned for you, kitten. But you drive us crazy with want. Next time.” He licked the

curve of her ear. “We’ll make sure you can take both of us. But for now, we’re going to make you feel so good.”

Isobel knew she was smaller in stature than the both of them, but the way they so easily picked her up and loved her around like she weighed nothing was exhilarating. Knowing they could manhandle her anyway they wanted.

The next thing she knew, they had traded places, with Tobias now underneath her and Antony against her back. A deep shiver ran through her when she felt the warm press of Tobias’s cock against her clit. But the feeling of Antony’s hands caressing her thighs, over her ass, and along the curve of her spine left her breathless. Isobel felt Antony’s lips on the back of her neck before his teeth scraped over her shoulder.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you,” he whispered hotly in her ear. His fingers pressed between her wet lips, spreading the wetness. “About how amazing this pussy feels wrapped around me. Tell me, Angel. Tell me how badly you want me to fuck you. How much you want me to pound your tight little pussy.”

“Antony.” His name came out like a pathetic whimper. She could come from their dirty mouths alone.

His hand came down hard across her ass and squeezed while it still tingled. She gave a rather undignified squeak.

“Tell me,” he growled into her ear, the tip of his cock bumping at her entrance. “Or we will leave you here, needy, dripping and unfulfilled.”

The threat made her throat run dry and she managed to force out the words.

“Please,” she begged. “Please, I need it so bad.”

“What do you need, Angel?”

“Your cock.” It came out in a long sigh as he slid all the way in until his hips were flush with hers.

Isobel was sure she’d never get over how good he felt, stretching her open and filling every bit of space. It was almost too overwhelming, the slow rocking of Antony’s hips that forced her clit to rub against the ridge of Tobias’s cock.

Tobias smoothed the loose hair from around her face, the tips of his fingers whispering over her cheeks and neck.

“You take it so good, kitten,” he murmured to her. “But do you think you can take a little bit more?”

Somewhere in her addled mind, his words slowly started to sink in. And she looked up at him. Her eyes wide and she could feel the dampness forming there. Her nails dug into his chest.

Antony nipped her ear, his movements dragging to an almost painfully slow cadence. “If you aren’t wrung dry, crying and begging us to stop, then we haven’t done our job, Angel.”

Tobias grabbed a hold of her wrists. Her arms twisted back and the next thing she knew, Antony had both her wrists in his grasp, pressing against her lower back. She couldn’t move, not even a little bit and there was something about that which caused a fresh wave of heat to lick at her skin.

Isobel squeezed her eyes shut, focusing on the pleasure coursing through her. She always imagined that sex with someone who knew what they were doing would feel so much better than her first sad little encounter. But this... this was beyond even her wildest imagination. The indecent noises they were pulling from her could attest to that. They fell into rhythm with the slapping of Antony's hips against her back side.

Her teeth sank into her lower lip and she felt herself starting to climb and spiral.

The clicking of a tongue and the press of a hand against her throat, made her eyes snap open. She stared down into Tobias's face, the corners of his lips twitching and somehow his already dark eyes felt darker.

“You don't come until we tell you you can. Now, grind that pussy against my dick.”

Isobel tried to wiggle as best she could, even with the limited movement she had. Tobias pressed a little harder on her neck, it made breathing slightly more difficult, much like he had that afternoon. Her arms ached from where Antony held them.

It was all too much and becoming increasingly overwhelming. She felt the tears gathering in her corners of her eyes and one slipped free to trail down her cheek. She couldn't hold on anymore, even if he told her to. A muffled scream pressed past her lips, her body tightening and cooling before exploding into a million little pieces. She was sure she stopped breathing, her heart pounding so fast it almost hurt.

She clamped down painfully on Antony's cock and he released a groan of his own.

Her arms fell numbly to her sides when Antony released his hold and she sucked in as much air as she could when Tobias did the same. A heartbeat later, she heard their moans and the warmth of their release against her stomach and her ass.

Isobel rested her forehead in the hollow of Tobias's throat as she slowly tried to find her way back down to the ground. The tears flowed freely down her cheek, but not in sadness or pain but in genuine relief and joy. She almost wanted to laugh but that would require far too much effort. Instead, she laid there unmoving on top of Tobias's hard body.

She shivered when a cool damp cloth touched between her legs and then over her back. Tobias very carefully wiggled out from beneath her and taking the cloth from Antony, lightly wiped her stomach. Once it was all done, Isobel found herself sandwiched between the two again.

Laying on her back with Antony on one side and Tobias on the other, both leaning up on an elbow. Soft fingers wiped the tears from her face, followed by soft lips.

"How do you feel, Angel?" Antony asked, nuzzling his nose behind her ear.

"I don't know," Isobel confessed. "That was single-handedly one of the most intense experiences of my life. Was the over-the-top orgasm absolutely amazing, yes, it was. It's just hard to process."

“Was there something we did that you didn’t like or made you uncomfortable?” Tobias asked, the tips of his fingers ghosting over her lips. “Having him restrain you while he fucked you, or my hand around your pretty throat.”

Isobel found herself smiling. She placed a hand on their chests, feeling their respective heartbeats pounding beneath her palms. “No, because you make me feel safe. If I had told you to stop, I know you would have.”

Antony took her hand and raised it to his lips. “Without hesitation.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Antony must have dozed off because when he stirred there was a heavy weight on his chest. A face nuzzled between his shoulder and his neck, feeling the hot breath there. He peeked his one eye open, expecting to find a head of dark curls, instead found a shimmering blonde. A small smile touched his lips. Isobel. He tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

Peering over her shoulder, Antony found Tobias leaning up on his arm, his head in a fist, watching them both.

“Thank you,” Antony silently mouthed to him, not wanting to wake her up.

Tobias reached over with his free hand, running his thumb over Antony’s cheek.

“Always.”

Antony dropped his head back down to the pillow, staring up at the canopy above. He was having a hard time believing this was real. That the woman he had seen for so long was real and



now sleeping in his arms. Or that Tobias liked her as much as he did. It was almost too good to be true.

Too easy.

Their time was limited. Antony knew that. Before Isobel found out the truth about him, when her apprenticeship ended and she would return home, when Tobias decided he no longer wanted to share. That was a choice he was never going to be able to make. The future wasn't as certain as Antony wanted to believe it was. To trust in the things he had seen. No amount of trust would hold it true. The visions always changed and maybe they weren't meant to be after all.

Isobel wiggled closer to him. The softness of her skin, the warmth of her naked body further implanting her into his mind. Her hand ran over his chest and he caught it in his own before she could get any further. Turning his head, he saw her peeking up at him. A light flush dusted her cheeks.

“Did we sleep long?” she murmured.

“No,” Tobias responded, pressing his lips to her shoulder. “Any hour, maybe two. You were pretty worn out, kitten.”

Isobel snorted as she peeked at him. “If I was, the both of you had something to do about it.”

Antony caught her chin in his hand, getting her to look at him again. “I'd gladly wear you out like that again, Angel.”

“Is there a threat or a promise?”

“Oh, it's definitely a promise.” Antony smiled.

He found himself doing more of that lately than he ever remembered doing before. Even with all the darkness and damage in his life, Antony tried to maintain a level of perspective. The last eight and a half years would never make up for two decades of pain, but now, more than ever, he wanted that.

“You seem so lost,” Isobel whispered, touching his cheek, right below his eyepatch. “This can’t be comfortable to have on all the time. Do you actually sleep in it?”

Antony turned his head to kiss her hand. “No. Privately I take it off.”

“Tobias sees you without it.” It wasn’t a question.

“I have grown accustomed to it,” Tobias started. “I don’t see anything different, whether he wears it or not.”

“You don’t have to hide from me.”

As quiet and simple as her words were, they hit Antony right in the chest. His eye was always a touchy subject, but he had grown used to the blindness. To the occasional headaches that would persist. It didn’t bother him as much anymore than it did for the first few years.

“It is not a pretty sight,” Antony whispered.

“Your eyeball didn’t fall out of your head.” Tobias snorted.

Antony sighed with a shake of his head. Detangling himself, he sat up in the bed, leaning back against the headboard. Isobel and Tobias followed a moment later. Isobel pulled the blanket

further up to cover herself while Tobias moved to Antony's other side.

“It didn't,” Antony conceded. He ran a hand over his face and threw his hair. The strap across his forehead suddenly felt itchier than it ever was. “With or without the patch, I'm completely blind in that eye. There hasn't been any vision in it for over a decade.”

“What happened?” Isobel asked softly. She and Tobias each took a hand.

Antony wondered how much he could tell her; how much he should tell her. The nightmares of his past were not her burdens and he wouldn't make them so.

“It was an accident,” Antony admitted simply. It wasn't an outward lie, but it was enough. “I keep it covered out of habit and despite it being fully intact, the color of it has changed.”

“If you are more comfortable with it off, you don't have to wear it on my account.” There was no mistaking the sincerity in her words.

Antony felt Tobias give his hand a firm squeeze as if telling him this was the right thing to do. To really start letting Isobel see more than what he projected. The thought made him antsy, but he knew he was going to have to do it eventually.

“I can show you if you want,” he finally whispered.

Isobel didn't say anything, she simply nodded, leaning in to lightly kiss his cheek.

Antony released their hands. His eye fell shut as he reached up to pull the strap loose. His eyepatch had become like a kid's favorite comfort toy. While it changed the look of his face, to him it was better than what he had hidden underneath.

He let the patch fall down into his lap. Very slowly, he blinked open both eyes, his good one fixated on the ceiling. He couldn't see the look on her face when she saw what he was hiding.

Antony knew what his eye looked like even if he preferred to avoid his own reflection as much as he could. What was once a vibrant greenish blue was pale and milky, with only the faintest amount of color around an otherwise cloudy white center. The thought of it made him almost sick to his stomach.

He almost jumped out of his skin, when he felt her lips trail over his cheekbone right below his eye. Turning, he stared at her now, waiting for her to realize that she was as repulsed by it as he was. Instead, she lightly cupped his cheek in her hand.

"This is part of who you are," she whispered. "Don't ever feel like you need to hide from me. I like you just as you are, patch or no patch."

Antony felt the burning in his eyes before he even realized it. Wrapping his arms around her again, he pulled her close. Isobel ran her fingers through his hair and the wetness of his tears hidden in her mass of hair. It wasn't a sadness that affected him, but a relief. A cathartic moment when for a moment, everything was meant to be.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

The fire crackled in the hearth and the hot tea in the earthen mug kept her hands warm. Isobel stared down into it even if all she saw was darkness. It was well past midnight, but she couldn't sleep. She hadn't been able to sleep in almost a week.

Seeing Antony's blind eye completely changed the way she saw him, even if she didn't want to admit it. Her perception of him shifted. No longer was he this larger-than-life figure she had only heard so much about, who had shown an interest in her. This humanized him in ways she couldn't begin to understand. Isobel knew there was something there he wasn't telling her. It wasn't a simple accident that would cause such an injury. And if it was, Antony wouldn't be so adamant about keeping it hidden.

Isobel took a sip of her tea, hoping the peppermint and chamomile would help calm her whirlpool of emotions. She liked Antony, she liked spending time with him and getting to know him. She liked the wicked things he could do to her

body. But thinking about Antony also made her think of Tobias. Tobias had long become a dear friend before they both got sucked back into the physical intoxication the three of them produced together.

For a moment, Isobel wondered if all they had together was surface deep. That it was just sex, a release for all of them and nothing more intimate or profound. Antony and Tobias had each other, they always had each other. Isobel was the proverbial third wheel. She was there when they wanted her to be there. She didn't know if she could handle that. They had talked of a collective "us" but the lines had gotten so blurry, she didn't know what way was which.

"If you think any harder, smoke might come out of your ears." Isobel jumped, trying to keep from sloshing her tea out of the cup. Sylvia chuckled. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

Isobel shook her head, leaving the mug to rest on the table. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"Nonsense," Sylvia said with a wave of her hand. She poured herself a cup of tea and joined Isobel at the table. "I've heard you up the last several days. I just thought I'd offer you the company tonight."

"Thank you," Isobel sighed, staring into her mug. "I just don't know what's wrong with me."

"Who says anything is wrong with you?"

“Nobody, I suppose. Other than myself. I just—” Isobel stopped, chewing on her lower lip for a moment.

“You’re conflicted when it comes to Toby and Antony, aren’t you?” Sylvia said gently, reaching out to grab hold of Isobel’s hand.

Isobel snapped her head up with a frown. “Am I really that transparent?”

“I just know that lovesick look and considering the last time you told me you were going to be gone for a day and didn’t come back for three. It’s not like I didn’t know where you were.”

“Do you think I’m an idiot?” Isobel asked before she could stop herself. She needed to know if she looked as pathetic as she felt.

“For what, dear?”

“For getting myself involved with two men, I know I shouldn’t and can’t have.” There she said it, she finally admitted out loud what she had been trying to hide.

Sylvia didn’t immediately respond, rising from her chair to come around and join Isobel on the bench. She draped her arm around the younger woman’s shoulders.

“Who says you can’t?”

Isobel leaned into Sylvia’s side, not realizing how much she needed that comfort.

“They have each other. They have always had each other. I’m simply extra.”

Sylvia grabbed a hold of Isobel’s chin and forced their eyes to meet. “That is not true and you know it. I will not pretend to understand Antony Devarik’s mind, but I know my brother. Toby would never openly pursue something only to toss it aside. He knows too well what that feels like.”

“But...”

“Listen to me,” Sylvia started. “The way Toby is around you; I’ve only ever seen once before. With Antony. What do you know from when they were young?”

“What do you mean?” Isobel’s frown deepened.

Sylvia released her hold. “We probably need something stronger than tea for this story. But you should know, you deserve to know.”

“Know what? Sylvia, you aren’t making any sense.” Isobel felt her pulse in her ears, wondering what in the world Sylvia was up to.

“Antony and Toby have known each other for more than half their lives. They were soldiers together, best friends before they became lovers. Toby loved him like no one before him and no one after him. It was only ever Antony. Just over thirteen years ago, Antony disappeared without a trace. After almost a month, word passed down through the ranks that he was dead. And Toby—” Sylvia paused to take a shattered breath, wiping at her eyes. “I found him, you know. After he



received the news. I had never seen him so broken, so lost. I brought him here and put him up in what is now your room. He didn't eat for days and even when he finally did, it was barely enough. I worried, hell our entire family worried that we were going to lose him eventually. I don't know what went on in that head of his, but all I could do was be there for him when he finally realized there was nothing left to do. Our mother would come fairly regularly and I think eventually hearing her crying and praying for her son, something finally clicked in Toby's mind. He lived for his family, for his work, to be what he and Antony had always talked of being. He lived for Antony, for his memory."

Isobel felt the sob catch in her throat. The tears flowing freely down her cheeks. Sylvia was much the same, the two of them wiping away the tears.

Isobel's heart ached for him. She too had known profound loss—her father, her mother, her grandmother. But for Tobias he hadn't until Antony never came back. And Isobel could understand the devastation in that.

However, there was still a small piece she felt like she was missing. "But Antony obviously did come back."

Sylvia nodded, draining the last of her tea from her cup. "He did. And Toby learned at least enough of what caused the disappearance to be able to forgive Antony eventually. My point in all of this is that when my brother becomes dedicated to something or someone, he has a hard time letting go. He likes you; he trusts you. Otherwise, he wouldn't put in the

effort he has. Where you fall between him and Antony, that I can't tell you. Like I said, Antony is not someone I try to understand in that way. He makes my brother happy and that's all I care about. And you do too, Isobel. Don't underestimate how important you actually are."

Isobel thought about what Sylvia had said for a long hard moment. While it was hard for her to believe everything the other woman said, she would try to take Sylvia's advice to heart.

"Thank you. I think it's just all so new and different that I have a hard time wrapping my mind around it. That whatever we have, whether in the short term or the long term, could actually be real," Isobel finally admitted.

"Just keep an open mind and as cliché as it sounds, anything can happen. Now," Sylvia said, pausing to give Isobel a one-armed hug. "Let's get some actual sleep and we have a decent amount of work to accomplish tomorrow."

Isobel nodded, taking both their mugs to the wash basin and leaving them to the side. She'd wash them first thing in the morning. Instead, she climbed the stairs up to her small room and flipped down on the bed. She stared up at the ceiling for several moments, before rolling to her side and hugging her pillow.

It was moments like this where Isobel particularly missed her grandmother. Amalie would always know what to say to make her feel better or to get her thinking from a different perspective. She would laugh at this entire crazy situation

Isobel had found herself but would never let her feel bad about it. There was not a judgmental bone in that woman's body.

A tear escaped the corner of her eye and Isobel brushed it away before burrowing deeper into her pillow. Sleep would make her feel better and hopefully by the time she woke the next morning, that she would have some clarity.



Pressing her thumbs to that crucial spot where the tang met the blade, it didn't snap. A triumphant smile passed across Isobel's face. It was in the last couple of days that they stopped breaking. For a while they would bend, but not completely snap on two. Isobel was thrilled that she was finally getting this step right after so many failed attempts. She had seen the look of pride on Sylvia's face when she showed her mentor.

Maybe now, Isobel could finally move on and learn something new. She still had high hopes of having something remotely dagger-shaped to give to Tobias for his birthday. She wanted to prove that she could do this. That Tobias's recommendation to his sister was not in vain.

There was a knock at the door and Isobel frowned. There wasn't a storefront for the forge so any visitors or customers were by appointment only. As far as Isobel knew, Sylvia wasn't expecting anyone that morning, as she had already gone to run a few errands.

Going to the door, she slid open the small panel to see who it was.

“Antony!” Isobel shouted.

She yanked the door open and he caught her easily as she threw her arms around him. Her heart was pounding a mile a minute. He was absolutely the last person she was expecting to show up at the forge.

Plans had been made when she saw Antony and Tobias last for when she would go visit them again. Tobias was supposed to come and get her later than afternoon, as was generally their custom. But to see Antony, instead, and so much earlier was a surprise she didn't see coming.

Antony didn't leave the palace much, Isobel knew that. He showed his face enough so the people didn't think he was dead or whatever other nonsense they came up with. So, for him to take this chance to come and see her, sent her mind into a tizzy.

“Well, hello to you too.” Antony chuckled, pulling her closer. His gloved hand touched her chin and he pressed his lips to the corner of her mouth.

Isobel sighed, grabbing two fistfuls of his jacket before yanking him into the forge. The door slamming shut behind him. He wrapped his arms around her middle, pulling her up until their faces were even and her feet dangled off the floor.

“Surprised?” Antony asked, kissing her cheek.

“Yes!” Isobel squeezed him tight around the shoulders.  
“What are you doing here?”

“Am I not allowed to come and see you, Angel?” There was a hint of amusement in his tone.

“Of course, you are. I’m so very happy I get to see you earlier.” Isobel nuzzled her face into his neck. She still couldn’t believe he was there.

“Me too, Angel.”

He held onto her for a moment longer before setting her back down on her feet. He brushed some of the loose golden strands away from her face.

“You want to see what I have been working on?” Isobel asked suddenly, not even thinking the question through.

“Of course. That’s one of the reasons I came. To see what kind of progress you have made in the time you have been away,” Antony remarked.

Isobel grinned, bouncing away to grab the blade she had been working on. There was something with the way Antony phrased his statement - that this was time spent away and not this is where she was and she’d go visit them. It ignited a fire in her stomach that sent warmth spreading through her body. Having Antony here was surreal and she couldn’t be happier about it.

Isobel took the piece of metal and brought it over to Antony. She watched the fascination swirling in his one eye as he turned it over in his hands. He pressed in the same spot she had only minutes before.

“I’m truly impressed,” Antony said, handing it back to her. “Did you have plans for this?”

Isobel nodded, biting her lip. “Sylvia let it slip that Tobias’s birthday is a month away. I wanted to get this done so I could give it to him.”

“He will love it,” Antony said with a soft smile. He ran the backs of his fingers across her cheek. “How about we do this: let’s make this your first commission. I will purchase it so the first thing you ever made is also the first thing you ever sold. We can still give it to Tobias so that it stays close and will be appreciated.”

Isobel bounced on her toes, she was so excited, clutching the handmade blade to her chest. “You would do that for me?”

“I’d do anything for you, Angel.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Seeing the bright smile on her face and the way her eyes sparkled was well worth taking the trip down to and back from the forge. Worth all the random looks he got when he walked down here. People were naturally surprised to see him out and about. Some avoided his gaze altogether, while others at least gave him a small smile. However, none approached him outright. He was going to have to change that at some point. To be more approachable.

However, that was a problem for another day.

Instead, he simply enjoyed her company. Her bubbling enthusiasm was addictive and Antony was more than happy to do whatever it was to make her smile. So, when Isobel insisted on making it official and Antony happily played along. She showed him leather samples for the grip and different ideas for a cast metal pommel. If he was being honest, he didn't care what she picked out. He knew Tobias would like it regardless because she was the one who made it.

They didn't remain at the forge too much longer. Sylvia returned from her errand a short time later. And Antony, in all his attempts to not be extremely awkward, failed completely. He kept mostly to a back wall and watched as Isobel grabbed her things and Sylvia unloaded her purchases. He had no idea what to say to her, and if he was being honest, he was mildly intimidated by her. Simply for the fact of being Tobias's sister.

Sylvia cleared her throat getting Antony's attention, his head snapping up to meet her gaze.

"I know it is not my place to tell you what to do or not to do," Sylvia started slowly. "And I will not attempt to do so. However, I must tell you to be gentle with her. Her heart is more fragile than she would have you believe."

Antony inclined his head even as he felt a flush creep up the back of his neck. "Of course."

Isobel bounced back down the stairs a moment later and they were on their way. Antony shouldered her bag and offered her his arm. The air was particularly cold that day and Isobel leaned against Antony's side. He paused to turn up the collar of her cloak.

"Thank you," she murmured. Her nose turned a rather adorable shade of pink.

"We're going to have to get you something warmer," Antony commented, the backs of his fingers ghosting over her cheek.

Isobel hugged his arm a little harder as they continued on their way. "Perhaps. But you can always keep me warm."



“Like we did that night in the conservatory?” He whispered into her ear. “Get all hot and sweaty.” Maybe Tobias can join us this time.

She hummed low in her throat, which sent a shockwave through his system. “I like the idea of that.”

“You and he seem to be getting along.” Antony tried to make it sound casual even if he was fishing for information.

“I enjoy my time with him as I enjoy my time with you. Finding you both has been a highlight of my life.”

They passed through the gates to the palace. The silence stretching comfortably between them, Antony lost in the recesses of his own mind. There were so many things he wanted to say; that he needed to tell her, but any time he even thought about trying, the fear of pushing her away was enough to stop him. He’d come to care for her a great deal in the little time they had been together. That protective instinct he always felt for Ilaria forming within his relationship with Isobel. He didn’t know the extent of what she had been through in her life, but he wanted to shelter her from that. For her to never lose that innocence that always laid behind her eyes.

The only thing left to do was to convince her to stay after her yearlong apprenticeship was over. However, he still had a decent amount of time to figure out how to do that.

Antony was so lost in thought, that he hadn’t realized she had pulled away from his arm until something cold and wet hit him in the back of the head. Spinning around, he found Isobel giggling to herself even as she balled up another small pile of

snow. Antony's lips twitched as he easily ducked out the way of the snowball coming at his face.

Leaning down, he grabbed his own handful of snow before throwing it at her. Even though she tried to dodge the ball, it still hit her square in the chest. She staggered back a few steps but she still wore that mischievous smile.

Antony's long legs ate up the space between them. Isobel squeaked and tried to get away but was hindered by the depth of the snow she stood in. He seized her around the waist and spun them around. Her fingers dig into his shoulders and she laughed. Antony stumbled when they got too dizzy and together, they dropped down into the snow.

Antony grinned up into the grey sky. He hadn't felt this carefree in longer than he cared to remember. He rolled over on his side, touching Isobel's cheek to meet his gaze. Leaning in, he lightly kissed her lips.

"Thank you," he murmured.

"For what?" Isobel asked. "I threw snow at you first."

"For reminding me what it is like to actually have fun. I never played much in the snow."

Isobel shot up to stare down at him. "Why? If I lived here as a child, I would have been out here all the time."

Antony leaned up on his elbow in the snow with a shrug. He didn't really want to talk about it but Tobias kept telling him that if he really lets her in, it would be better for all of them. So, he was going to endeavor to try.

“My childhood was less than happy,” Antony admitted. “It’s not something I like to think about often.”

Isobel scooted closer to his side and he draped his arm over her shoulders.

“I’m here to listen if you want to tell me about it. Mine wasn’t either after a time.”

Her soft words were meant to be an encouragement, Antony knew that. Yet, it still felt like a dagger to the chest. He did need to hear this however, this part of her life. Maybe hearing it from her might help expunge some of his guilt.

It just meant having to talk about his years of torment in exchange. Sitting there in the snow, the first flakes of the evening began to fall and catch on her golden hair. The cold seeped in through his pants making him shiver. However, none of it mattered with her pressed up against his side, holding onto his hand.

Antony cleared his throat after a moment. “I never knew my mother. She died before Ilaria and I were one year old. Our father did the best he could but he too died when we were six. We were then left in the care of our older half-brother, who was supposed to be our guardian and to take care of us. He should have been the last person to be entrusted with our care.” Antony paused sucking in a deep breath. This hurt a lot but maybe actually saying it out loud would help. It had helped when he told Tobias of Marivynn. So hopefully this would too. “It started when Ilaria and I were ten. As children

are prone to do, we had gotten into some mischief that got us into a world of trouble. That was the first day he hit me.”

“Oh Antony!” Isobel gasped. Her eyes somehow became wider.

Antony shook his head, his grip on her growing tighter.

“It started with his fists then progressed to his belt, then to whatever he could get his hands on. It often left me battered and bruised. I still carry a lot of the scars from that time. The more pain he inflicted on me, the more satisfaction he received. Ilaria didn’t know what I went through, I couldn’t let her know. As long as the attention was on me and not on her, I knew she would be safe from it.

“Things changed when I turned fifteen and joined the barracks. That’s when I met Tobias. He became a friend, my only friend. Looking back, I think he was suspicious about my suffering but if he did, he didn’t say anything. He was just there when I came back. To comfort me, even if it was only to hold my hand.”

Antony felt her hot tears in the side of his neck before he even saw them. Running his thumb over her cheek to wipe them away. He leaned his forehead against hers and closed his eye.

“Don’t cry for me, Angel. I don’t tell you this to be sad. I have long accepted that this has been my life and there is no point in wishing to change the past. It is what makes us who we are now and the only place to go is forward.” Antony

paused with a slight chuckle. “At least that’s what Tobias has been telling me for the last eight years.”

Isobel wrapped her arms around his shoulders, holding onto him tightly. “My grandmama would tell me the same things when I’d get too sad.”

“You are too young to have seen such sadness,” Antony murmured.

Antony sighed, opening his eye again to watch her. Seeing the dance of emotion swim through her eyes was enough to break his heart.

Isobel met his gaze. “In just eight years, I’ve lost more than half my family. First losing Papa and then finding out he wasn’t actually my father after all and then my mother only two years later. And Grandmama more recently.”

Antony felt his spine go stone stiff. “Wait a second. Rudolf Hartmann wasn’t your father?”

“No,” she said with a small snuffle. “He raised me, he loved me and, in his heart, I know I was his daughter as he was always my father. But two days after he died, I found out that he didn’t actually father me. Uncle Bash did.”

The last line repeated itself over and over again in his head. It didn’t quite understand what it had heard.

“Sebastian is your father?” Antony managed to get out.

Isobel cocked her head to the side with a frown. “Didn’t Aunt Ilaria tell you? I thought you would have known.”

“Why would Ilaria tell me?” Antony asked, trying to keep his voice from getting too high pitched. “It is not my place to know of your family’s personal affairs.”

“But—” Isobel began to protest.

“Do I even want to know what you two are doing?” Tobias approached them from a nearby pathway. “I was beginning to think you had gotten lost.”

“Hardly,” Antony grumbled.

He gave Isobel one last squeeze before they entangled and he helped her to her feet. She dusted the excess snow from her dress and Tobias pulled her into a hug, kissing the top of her head. Antony wrapped his arms around both of them.

“How long have you two been out here?” Tobias asked. “Your both practically frozen.”

“Long enough,” Antony asked.

Isobel nodded in agreement. “I very much look forward to a hot bath.”

Tobias grinned. “I’m sure that can be arranged. Come in, let’s get you both inside.”

Together they crossed the relatively short distance into the warm confines of the palace.

Antony’s mind, however, still hadn’t stopped racing from this new revelation he had received. Not that he wasn’t already incredibly intimidated by Sebastian to start with. This only added to that stress. There was no doubt in Antony’s mind that

Sebastian wouldn't hesitate to skin him alive if he did anything to hurt Isobel.

Not that he planned to by any stretch of the imagination.

They were barely inside the door when a messenger found him.

"This arrived urgently for you, sir," the messenger said, holding out the letter to Antony.

Catching sight of the green wax on the back was enough for him to know who it was from. Again.

"What is it?" Tobias asked, even as Antony tucked the letter into an inside pocket.

"I'm sure it's just a response to the letter I sent to Natasha Petrovich Velenskyy about the grain trade." Antony tried to keep his tone neutral. He knew he needed to read this and now. "Why don't you two go and bathe and I will catch up with you in a little bit. I should see this letter since I've been waiting for the response."

"Are you sure, you will be all right?" Isobel inquired, giving him a confused look.

"Of course." Antony forced a smile to his face. "Sometimes work simply cannot wait."

Isobel and Tobias eventually both consented, giving Antony a little kiss before disappearing down the hallway.

Antony leaned against the stone wall. He was soaked to the skin and shivering from having spent so much time sitting in

the snow. But it didn't matter and he almost couldn't feel it anymore. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled the letter out again, staring at the seal. It wasn't Clan Ivanov like he said it was. It was once again from Clan Bakken.

Antony almost didn't care what Lars Eklund had to say in regards to his prisoner. Antony wasn't paying him for his opinions, simply his protection.

Flipping the letter over, Antony's heart dropped into his stomach as he stared at his name scrolled across the front of the envelope. A jagged script he knew all too well and longed to forget.

*Maxim.*



## Chapter Twenty-Five

One Month Later

Tobias was sure he was dead. Nothing had ever felt like this and nothing would ever compare. He didn't know what he had done in his life to find this level of bliss, of pure unadulterated happiness. Especially when there were times, he wasn't even sure he wanted to see tomorrow. No, this was not what he had expected but he'd be damned to let it go. If this was only a small glimpse of what a future for them might look like, Tobias was going to grab onto it with both hands and not let go.

Considering that he currently had two fistfuls of hair, one red, one gold. Two mouths and two tongues. Tobias sucked in a harsh breath through his nose even as a deep groan reverberated from his chest. He didn't think he'd ever been so painfully hard in his entire life.

Isobel swirled her tongue around the head of his cock before sucking it back into her mouth.

“*Fuck.*” Tobias yanked hard on Antony's hair until their eyes met. “Why did you have to teach her that?”

Antony had the audacity to grin, even as Isobel sucked him deeper.

“Because you like it,” Antony replied. “Like I know you’re going to enjoy this too.”

Before Tobias could even ask what he meant, he felt Antony’s slicked fingers against his ass. Lightly pressing against the tight ring of muscle before pushing in one finger and then two.

Any protest Tobias had died in his tongue. Fuck, that felt good. Normally he was on the giving end of such ministrations, but on the random occasion that the tables were turned, he enjoyed it just as much. But he wanted more, he needed more.

Tugging up Isobel from where she knelt between his legs, she laid out beside him, her soft body pressed up against his. Tobias took his thumb and wiped some of the drool off her chin before leaning in for a kiss. She ran her hand over his chest and curved around the back of his neck.

Antony carefully removed his fingers, sliding up behind Tobias to suck and bite his neck and shoulders.

“Tell us what you want,” Antony murmured in Tobias’s ear. “We are here for you.”

Tobias answered by shoving his hips back against Antony. The other man’s hard cock pressed up against his ass. Antony chuckled, moving away just long enough to grab something off the side table.

“I want you too,” Tobias whispered to Isobel, trailing his nose over the curve of her neck. “Roll over.”

Isobel hastily complied, rolling over into her stomach. Tobias grabbed one of the extra pillows and shoved it under her hips to lift her up a little bit. He ran his hands over her shoulders and along the curve of her spine, reveling in the feel of her soft skin, enjoying the way she shivered. Leaning over, he kissed the back of her neck. His fingers skimmed up her thighs, feeling how slick she already was for him.

Tobias braced a forearm on the bed beside her, his cock in his other hand. He trailed it along her wetness, rubbing the head against her clit until she moaned. And when she did, sank himself all the way inside her.

“You always feel so fucking good, kitten,” Tobias said through gritted teeth, punctuating his statement with a rough snap of his hips.

Tobias shuddered when Antony came up against him, hugging him close. Antony slowly entered him from behind until all three were so intimately connected.

He never thought they would get here, being together like this. Isobel wiggled her hips to get him moving again. Tobias was more than happy to comply as they found a rhythm. It didn't take long before they were panting and sweating.

Isobel's hands fisted into the sheet beneath her with a deep moan, her back arching off the mattress. The vice like grip of her orgasm was enough to send Tobias over the edge. Thankfully, he was quick enough to pull out before releasing

onto her lower back. Antony followed a moment later still buried as deep as he could get. Tobias knew he'd be feeling that for the rest of the day.

They collapsed back down, all three panting for breath. Antony was the first to recover, touching Tobias's cheek to turn his head in his direction.

"Happy birthday," Antony whispered, leaning in to lightly kiss his lips.

Isobel repeated the sentiment, nuzzling into his shoulder.

Tobias couldn't help but smile.

"That's one hell of a happy birthday, good morning," he chuckled. "I have no doubt, you two planned that."

"Naturally." Antony brushed some of the loose curls away from Tobias's face. "We both have so much to thank you for. This is only the beginning of that appreciation."

Tobias felt his heart flutter. "But you don't have—"

Isobel pressed her fingers to his lips. "We don't have to but that doesn't mean we don't want to. Just say thank you."

"Thank you." The words were out of Tobias's mouth as soon as Isobel's fingers dropped away.

"We have one more thing for you." Isobel grinned, moving away to stand up.

Tobias and Antony pushed themselves up to a sitting position on the bed. Tobias definitely appreciated the view of her naked body as she went to the wardrobe in the corner and

pulled something out. She scurried back to the bed, sliding back in beside Tobias. In her hands was a small bundle wrapped in a white cloth and tied with a red ribbon. A ribbon Tobias recognized as something Isobel usually used for her hair.

Tobias took it when she handed it to him, settling it in his lap.

“Technically, it’s from both of us,” Antony remarked as Tobias plucked the knot out of the ribbon. “Though, I had hardly anything to do with it.”

“That’s not true,” Isobel protested.

Tobias peeled back the fabric to find a rather remarkable looking dagger. The shining blade was fairly thin and tapered to a fine point. The hilt was wrapped in a soft dark brown leather. He gripped it, lifting it to turn this way and that. Catching sight of his sister’s insignia pressed into the metal where the blade met the hilt, he then saw the initials underneath and they were not Sylvia’s.

“You made this?” The surprise was not far from Tobias’s tone.

Isobel nodded, biting her lip. “I’d been trying so hard to get it right. It’s the first one I completely finished. Hopefully, it’s satisfactory.”

“Oh, kitten,” Tobias chuckled, draping an arm over her shoulders and pulling her closer to his side. “It is more than

satisfactory. I'm very impressed with what you've learned in such a short period of time."

Isobel beamed at his praise. "Sylvia says I should be able to move onto bigger things in a few weeks."

"We should be watching out for her," Antony remarked. "If she's making bigger pointy things."

"Why? You worried I'm going to stab you?" Isobel stuck her tongue out at him.

"I'll just make sure to stay on your good side." Antony slid down the bed and stared up at the ceiling. "Do we have to get up today?"

Tobias shrugged. "It is my birthday and I would say no but you and I still have duties to see to."

Isobel flopped down with a giggle. "I'll stay right here."

"And a distraction, you would be, Angel. Knowing you are here, naked and alone." Antony reached over to trail his hand over her bare thigh.

"That's not my fault."

Tobias smiled to himself. He couldn't believe how comfortable they all had become. That here in this space where they were alone, they could be themselves. There was a part of Tobias that worried what would happen when the status of their relationship became more commonly known.



“Are you sure I can’t convince you to come to dinner tonight?” Tobias asked hopefully, even as he tried to maintain a casual posture with his hands folded behind his head.

Antony sat across from him at his desk, shuffling through the various piles of paper. He didn’t even look up when he replied.

“You know it’s not a good idea. I draw too much attention.”

“But you went into town before to pick up Isobel,” Tobias argued. He knew he was fighting a losing battle but he was going to try.

“This isn’t about going into town. You should be able to spend time with your family without worrying about me.”

“I worry about you, regardless.”

Antony sighed, looking up. “Trust me, Tobias. You don’t want me there.”

Tobias ground his teeth together. It was the furthest thing from the truth. He wanted to spend time with Antony and his family. For Antony to meet his mother and not just in passing. Isobel was going to be there. He had invited her even if she was still going to come by virtue of being Sylvia’s apprentice. Having Antony there would make it perfect.

“Fine,” Tobias finally said, pushing himself out of his chair. “I have a meeting with my captains and then I will be leaving. I’ll see you later tonight.”

Tobias was just about to walk out the door when Antony called after him. “Make sure you bring Isobel back with you.”

“Of course.”

Heading back to his own office, Tobias felt like he was dragging his feet. If all the progress he thought he had made in terms to Antony seemed to have slid back to the way things were. He had hoped after that bonding, Antony would want to come to his birthday dinner. In all the years they had been together, Antony had never come to his parents for dinner. He wanted to believe he understood why, but it didn't make it any easier to accept.

His captains were waiting for him by the time he reached his office. Thankfully, it was going to be a quick meeting since all he was wanting were status updates from the various teams. It took no more than an hour before he was grabbing his jacket and heading for the door.

Tobias took the familiar road from the palace down to his parent's house. It thankfully wasn't snowing but it was still fairly cold. It was one of the things he disliked the most about having a winter birthday. As a kid it was the worst because then he couldn't go out to play with his friends. He was always trapped indoors. However, the older he got, the less he cared about birthdays. He simply still humored his mother with these dinners.

Daphne answered the door when he knocked.

“Toby!” She wheeled, throwing her arms around him.

“Hello to you too,” he chuckled.



She pulled him through into the living room where most of the rest of his family was waiting for him. Rafaela approached him first, giving him a tight hug.

“I’m sorry Xavier couldn’t be here too but someone had to stay at the tavern,” she explained.

“Of course. I will have to come and visit again soon.”

“Yes, you do!”

Sylvia was sitting next to Rafaela and she too embraced him.

“It’s not like I don’t see you on a semi-regular basis at this point,” Sylvia chuckled. “Happy birthday, Toby.”

It was nice to have his sisters here even if it was only three out of the five. Ophelia was currently in Ulrich with Isobel’s family. The elder sister who fell between Rafaela and Sylvia, Imogen, had married a number of years ago and moved out to one of the small villages in the countryside with her husband. Tobias was remiss to think how long it was since he had last seen her. He really ought to take the time to go visit, maybe in the spring.

“Where’s Isobel?” Tobias asked when Sylvia pulled away.

“In the kitchen with Mama,” Rafaela responded.

Tobias was next going to ask where their father was right as he walked through the front door.

Nathaniel Victarian was not an overly large man, even if he was in Tobias’s mind. They stood around the same height with the same dark hair, except Nathaniel’s was graying at the

temples. Tobias always considered himself very close to his father as they had been the only two men in their household. Eventually, Tobias followed in his father's footsteps in seeking a military vocation, even if Nathaniel had only served a fraction of the time Tobias had already put in.

"Father," Tobias greeted him as they embraced, hands thumping each other on the back.

"It is good to see you, my son." Nathaniel gave him a wide smile. "Though you do need to come around more, your mother misses you."

"Just mother?"

Nathaniel shrugged. "I miss you too."

They talked for a moment or two longer before Tobias had to go find his mother. Clara would be quite offended if he didn't say hello to her as well.

Tobias pushed the small door between the living room and the kitchen open. He had hardly made it a step through when his mother was yelling out his name.

"Tobias!" She yelled at him, causing a shudder to run down his spine. He couldn't remember the last time his mother had actually used his given name. "Where have you been?"

"Mother?"

"Oh no, you don't! You cannot be so busy that it takes you far too long to come and see us again." Clara planted her fists on her hips as she glared at him.

“I will endeavor to do better, Mama. I promise.” Tobias leaned in to kiss her cheek.

“You better!” She scowled at him. “Now, go say hello to your friends.”

Tobias frowned, turning his gaze to the kitchen table tucked into the corner. Isobel smiled at him from her seat. But it was the figure beside her that caught his attention.

“Antony?”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Lying to Tobias was one of the hardest things Antony had ever done. To sit there and tell him to his face that he didn't want to spend time with his family. Tobias was a soldier and kept his expressions well masked, but the disappointment radiated off of him. It was almost enough for Antony to break his resolve.

Almost.

He was eternally grateful that he hadn't. The look of complete shock Tobias wore as he stared at him across the small kitchen table. It was enough to know that Antony had made the right choice.

Antony pushed away from the table, coming to stand in front of Tobias. He grabbed him around the back of the neck, pulling the smaller man in until their foreheads touched.

"I didn't expect you to be here," Tobias muttered.

"Surprised?"

“More than you can ever know, especially since you told me an hour ago that you weren’t going to come.”

“I’m sorry for that. Isobel and I already worked out the surprise with Sylvia and I couldn’t waste their hard work.”

Tobias gave a small wavering smile. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Antony said softly. “I know that this is important to you. For so many years, I was afraid of this - becoming intertwined with your family.”

“Antony,” Tobias started but stopped when Antony gave his neck a squeeze.

“Let me finish. This is not something I know because I never had it. A warm place to come home to, a mother to complain about how much I didn’t visit. This is all so new to me. But I’m willing to try for you, for us.”

“Us?” Tobias asked in a whisper.

“Both of us,” Isobel interjected, slipping up beside Antony.

They both wrapped an arm around her without a thought, pulling her into the bubble they had created.

Antony couldn’t believe this was his life. Or rather this was what his life was becoming. He knew he had taken Tobias’s loyalty for granted, expecting him to always be there when he needed him. Now, Antony knew he had to do the same thing back, when Tobias needed him.

Antony only knew love as something that needed to be protected at all costs, the love he had for his sister. That he

would do anything and everything he could to make sure she was safe and she was happy. Even at the expense of his own. Those similar feelings manifested as he held Tobias close with Isobel pressed against his side. To protect them, to make sure no harm ever came to them. Would Antony say he was in love, no he couldn't. Not that all-consuming passionate love he saw reflected in Ilaria's eyes when she looked at Dimitri and then at Sebastian.

Did he have hope that one day he could feel that way? Who didn't wish for that? But Antony accepted that he was too broken, his heart too frail to even trust emotions like that. It would make him weak and vulnerable. After so many years of being that way, he vowed never to again.

Tobias pulled back first, placing a peck on Antony's cheek and then Isobel's. "Thank you both. Today was very special."

"Should I even ask what's going on?" Clara interjected from her place by the stove.

Antony felt the heat rising in his cheeks and up the back of his neck. He almost forgot they had an audience. And for reasons he didn't quite understand, he didn't mind it.

Isobel gave a nervous giggle and pressed closer to Antony's side.

Tobias turned to his mother and with more courage than Antony could even fathom having, replied, "We're together. The three of us."

Nor did Antony expect the giant smile that spread over Clara's face. She scurried over and gave them all a big hug, Antony awkwardly patted her back.

"I'm happy for you, my boy," Clara said. "You deserve all the happiness. Does that mean there will be grand babies now?"

Antony almost choked on his tongue. Glancing down, he saw Isobel turn a bright shade of red and try to hide her face in his arm.

"Mama!" Tobias protested.

Clara patted his cheek. "A mother can hope. Now, let's get the others in here so we can eat."

Antony waited until Clara had left the room before he turned in Tobias.

"I can't believe you just said that to your mother." He tried to keep his voice calm even if it was the furthest from the truth.

"It's the truth, isn't it? I'm not ashamed of it. Not everyone is going to understand what we have or could have, but I never fear the judgment from my family," Tobias explained, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"They have been more than welcoming," Isobel piped up. "There are things I fear more than your family."

She didn't need to say more. Antony knew what she was referring to - their common relatives. However, he chose not to comment on it. Now was not the time to be worried about that.

They were there for Tobias and Antony was determined to be in the moment.

Clara returned a moment later with Nathaniel and the three sisters in tow.

The rest of the evening was spent sitting around that small table in the warm, cozy kitchen. Eating a home cooked meal that Antony was sure he had never had anything like that before. Listening to Tobias's parents and sisters tell personal and embarrassing stories. A side of Tobias, Antony had never seen.

This was something he could get used to.



Antony couldn't quite figure out why, when everything seemed to be going so well, his mind decided to play games with him. He'd had dreamless sleep for over a week, which he couldn't remember happening since he was a teenager. Maybe because he was comfortable - even if their bed felt a little crowded with three bodies in it. Isobel had elected to stay a little bit longer than she normally did and having her beside him, warm and safe, should have been enough to ease his mind.

Unfortunately, it had other plans.

Once more, Antony found himself awake in the middle of the night, perched on the window seat in the sitting room, his sketch pad in his lap. His fingers long covered in black charcoal dust, smudging more of the lines as he went.



This was a face he had drawn before. So many times. An entire book's worth that now sat in ashes. A face he drew both from memory and from life. The soft curve of her jaw, the slight roundness to her cheeks.

*Isobel*

Antony had never been able to get her out of his head, then, now and all the times in between. It had changed in recent months. From simply seeing her in his space, to seeing them intertwined in passion, to seeing himself with her and with Tobias. It was more than he could ever imagined or hoped for. That all his years of misery and suffering might actually come to an end.

Until tonight. Until he dreamed of things he didn't want to begin to comprehend. But it stared back up at him from that simple piece of paper. The pain, the sadness, so intense and so deep, reflected in the depths of her bright eyes, the evidence of tears streaming down her cheeks. The pain he saw in that drawing radiated through his own chest.

There was nothing about this he understood, none of it even remotely close to what he knew. Antony didn't want to imagine or guess as to what could possibly bring her this level of pain. Especially, since everything seemed to be going so well.

"Antony?" The soft whisper pulled him out of the cloud he found himself in.

Isobel stood in the doorway to the bedroom, her hair a tousled mess as she rubbed the heel of her hand against her

eyes.

“What are you doing up, Angel?” Antony asked. He closed the sketch pad and set it aside. This was a drawing she didn’t need to see right now. He reached for a nearby cloth to wipe the black from his fingers.

“I woke up and realized you were gone. I wanted to make sure you were all right,” she replied, shifting her weight between her feet.

“Come here.” Antony lightly patted his leg.

Isobel scurried over and climbed up into his lap. Her knees on either side of his hips as she sat back on his thighs. His arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her flush against his chest. Isobel sank her fingers into his hair, catching the strap of his eyepatch in the process. He felt her hesitation before he nodded. It wasn’t anything she hadn’t seen before at this point. It simply became a habit of his to put it on as soon as he woke up.

She eased the strap away and once loose, tossed it over her shoulder.

“I like to be able to see your whole face,” Isobel murmured, dragging her lips over his.

He gave her a squeeze. “Does it please you?”

“Very much.”

“Even with my disgusting eye?”

Isobel pulled back and gave him a stern look. “It’s not disgusting. It is part of who you are, your history. We can’t change the past. And don’t forget, I’ve only ever known you this way and I like you just as you are.”

Antony buried his nose in her hair, holding her that much closer. Her words were genuine and sincere, he wouldn’t doubt that. But it didn’t make it any less difficult to hear. He barely even liked himself most of the time, especially after so many years of being beaten down and told he wasn’t good enough. And yet, he somehow managed to find not one but two people who did like him for who he was. Who made whatever lingering sadness that laid in his heart to dissipate.

“Thank you,” Antony muttered into her hair. “Sometimes I forget that.”

“Well, if you ever need an ego boost, I’ll be more than happy to tell you how happy and lucky I am to have found you.”

Antony snorted before he pulled back. He tucked a close strand of hair back behind her ear. He was going to have to tell her the truth of what happened all those years ago. This secret and this guilt were not something he could hold onto for too much longer.

“I will remember that. Let’s get back to bed.”

Isobel nodded, leaning in for a soft kiss before she slid off his lap. Antony stood too and together they crept back into the bedroom in an attempt to not wake Tobias.

Antony had no real desire to go back to sleep and he probably wouldn't. Instead, he could lay there and watch them sleep. Something he didn't think he'd ever tire of.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Three Months Later

There was something off with Antony and no matter how hard he tried; Tobias couldn't quite put his finger on it. Ever since that night after his birthday almost three months ago, Antony had become a little more withdrawn. A little bit quieter. More times than not, Tobias would find him by that window in their sitting room, his familiar sketch pad in his lap.

Antony didn't share what he was drawing, always muttering something about not really knowing himself. He'd shut it and stash it away before Tobias could ever see anything.

It honestly felt to Tobias that Antony was regressing. That all the time he and Isobel had spent trying to get Antony out of his shell, for him only to retreat back into that space. They both had tried to get him to talk about what was bothering him but it was like being met with a stone wall.

Tobias sighed, running his fingers through his hair as he sat perched on the side of their bed. Antony had long gotten up and disappeared into his formal office. Isobel was still curled

around a pillow, her hair falling into her face. Tobias reached over to tuck it behind her ear. She stirred a little bit.

He hushed her softly, lightly kissing her temple. “Go back to sleep. I’ll see you later for training.”

Isobel muttered in her sleep but all he could make out was her calling him “Toby”. That was something that warmed his heart and he couldn’t help but smile. His sister was clearly rubbing off on her, but even if that wasn’t the reason, he liked the way it sounded from her.

Getting up, Tobias quickly dressed and slipped out of the room without waking her. He still marveled at how easily and effortlessly she had found a place in their lives. As far as he was concerned, he couldn’t imagine life without her anymore. But she was still so young, and even he had a hard time justifying keeping her with them permanently. Not until she readily chose that for herself.

However, her leaving was not a fear Tobias possessed and he wasn’t quite sure why. And it wasn’t something he wanted to ever think about either.

Tobias spent the day in his office shuffling through all the necessary paperwork and correspondence, meeting with some of his Captains, as well as the new recruits to see where they felt they were in their training. He knew there was also a trip down to the barracks to make at some point that day as well. He wanted to grab a set of wooden swords for him and Isobel to use. He wanted to start having her actually get used to a

longer weapon than a dagger but that seemed to be working for her.

Tobias was exceptionally pleased with how well and how fast she learned. He had no doubts that she would be fully capable of defending herself if the need arose.

Just as he was ready to call it an afternoon, there was a loud knocking on his office door. Frowning, he called out for them to enter. He wasn't expecting any other appointments that day.

A rather frazzled looking messenger stuck his head through the door and Tobias recognized him immediately.

“Arthur Balerio,” Tobias greeted him even as the younger man rushed over. “What’s the problem?”

Arthur inhaled sharply and in one breath said, “Forgive me for the intrusion, General. An urgent message has arrived for the Chieftain with explicit instructions that he is supposed to receive it immediately. However, I couldn't find him anywhere and thought you were the next best thing.”

“Indeed,” Tobias intoned as he held out his hand for the letter. “I’ll make sure he receives it.”

“Thank you, General.” Arthur shoved the letter in Tobias’s hand before he spun on his heel and disappeared out the door.

Tobias fell back into his chair with a groan, the letter falling on the desk in front of him. If the messenger couldn't find Antony, that was never a good thing. It meant one of two possible reasons. Either the man hadn't looked hard enough, which Tobias very much doubted. Most messengers hated

having to come to him if they didn't have to. The second being Antony had purposefully hidden himself away somewhere where he didn't want to be found. Which, in Tobias's estimation, were very few places.

As much as Tobias wanted to follow the compulsion to find Antony, he knew he shouldn't. Not right now. Antony's current state of fragility was not something Tobias could underestimate. He'd like him to have his time and find out after the training sessions if he was still in hiding.

Instead, Tobias turned his attention to the letter in front of him. It was addressed to the Chieftain of Clan Drakos, not Antony personally. Very few letters came with such urgency that weren't addressed to Antony by name. Tobias could have sat there all day contemplating the severity of the letter and whether he should just open it himself. However, now was not the time for that. It wasn't like he hadn't opened other letters to Antony. And if he was lucky, it could be something he could deal with without getting Antony involved.

Tobias seized up the letter and stared at the handwriting on the front. It was not one he recognized. Turning it over, however, the seal on the back was familiar.

Clan Bakken.

Why were they writing to Antony? Tobias knew that Antony did exchange letters twice a year with the Chieftain of Clan Bakken, but it was hardly that time of year.

Before he could overthink it, Tobias broke the wax and opened the letter.



Tobias felt sick to his stomach and he'd hardly read half of it. Letters of this nature weren't totally uncommon, but they were rare. This left Tobias wondering who Antony had pissed off in Clan Bakken. The wording did not feel like the few letters Tobias had read from Lars Eklund. Skipping the rest of it, Tobias flipped it over to stare numbly at the name scrolled across the bottom.

*Maxim Devarik*

Why the fuck was Antony's exiled older brother writing to him at all? Why did Lars Eklund allow Maxim to send this letter?

There was a sentence above the signature that caught Tobias's attention.

*Don't you dare fucking ignore me again.*

Again.

Again?

Tobias shot out of his chair so fast, it crashed to the floor with a loud bang.

A guard rushed through the door. "General? Is everything okay?"

"Get the fuck out!" Tobias shouted before he could actually process a single coherent thought.

His knees hit the floor as soon as the door shut again. He hung his head, his hands pressed to his eyes.

*Again*

The word repeated itself over and over in his mind.

Somehow the last three months carefully clicked into place and Tobias felt the tears burning the back of his eyes. Obviously, this wasn't the first letter Antony was to receive. He had received others and by the sound of it, several others. If there was anything or anyone that was going to get under Antony's skin and fuck with his head, it was Maxim. The person who was single-handedly responsible for Antony's torment and misery for the vast majority of his life.

This explained so much of Antony's recent behavior but not all of it. Tobias had suspicions that Antony's dreams had changed as well but he was too afraid to admit to it. Confronting Antony with this information was not something Tobias was looking forward to, but he was going to have to. If only to find a way to help Antony out of this regression of his and to deal with Maxim once and for all.

Tobias gritted his teeth as he pushed himself from the floor, tucking the letter into an inside pocket of his jacket. He would hold on to this personally. Right now, he still had his training session with Isobel and hopefully that would help him clear his mind and get his thoughts in order before he talked to Antony.



Isobel wasn't surprised when she woke up alone. She had a vague recollection of Tobias getting up but not Antony. She

couldn't tell when Antony would get up since it was usually sometime in the middle of the night. It had become a habit of his within the last several weeks and there was part of Isobel that was disappointed by it. She missed waking up to the three of them together. However, she understood that both Antony and Tobias had responsibilities but that didn't mean she couldn't want it.

Breakfast waited for her in the sitting room. She ate alone and then wondered what she was going to do with herself. It would be several hours yet before she had to meet Tobias for their next training session. Something she was very much looking forward to since he promised her swords today, even if it was just wooden ones.

So, she walked the halls of the palace for a while, exploring whatever little nooks and crannies she could find. Eventually she found herself in the library, combing through the books. She picked out a small green leather-bound tome. Taking it with her, she retreated to Antony's conservatory. He had told her she was welcome there any time she wanted, even if he wasn't. Antony had, in fact, done up the space a little bit more since Isobel arrived, getting a few more chairs and a much larger couch.

Isobel sank down into the pillows, her book resting in her lap. She tilted her head back and enjoyed the warm sun that streamed through the glass enclosure. Breathing in the warm fragrant air reminded her of home, of days spent on the beach. When she was a child, she made her father take her down there as often as he could allow. He'd sit with her in the sand

digging holes and building massive piles. She'd be pink across her nose and cheeks by the time they got home. Sebastian too spent a good amount of time with her down by the water.

It was one of the small things she missed about Ulrich, of home. And she couldn't begin to imagine how grown her little cousins will be after a year. As much as she wanted to go home, she knew she'd be leaving a piece, well two pieces, of her heart behind.

Never had she thought this would be her life, having the attention and care of two men who would do anything for her, as she would for them. Isobel wondered if this was what it was like to be in love, though thinking the word made her nervous. The idea of love came with too many conflicting thoughts in her head. Could she really be in love with two people at the same time? Could they love her like they quite obviously loved each other? It was definitely something she was going to have to take into serious consideration. It had only been four months after all.

Isobel was lost in her thoughts, half dozing in the sun, when she heard the crunch of feet on the gravel path. Peeling her eyes open, she found Antony standing by the foot of the couch. He looked rather haggard, his unruly curls falling into exhausted eyes. His lips pressed into a thin line. He looked paler than usual.

Setting her book aside, Isobel opened her arms to him. Without a single word spoken between them, Antony settled down between her legs. His head came to rest on her chest,

and his arms around her waist. Isobel hugged his shoulders, lightly kissing his forehead. His entire body sagged and she could feel his tears against her skin, making her heart break. She ran her fingers through his hair and over the back of his neck, giving him what comfort she could.

Isobel didn't want to guess what had him so upset or if it was simple exhaustion since she knew he hadn't been sleeping. Instead, she enjoyed the comfort of his weight and let him take what he wanted from her. Eventually, he did fall into a listless sleep.

Tobias was going to be worried when she didn't show up for training, but she knew he would find her anyway. And he did a short time later.

"I'm sorry," she mouthed silently over to him before looking down at Antony in her arms.

Tobias gave a grim nod. He grabbed one of the chairs and brought it over to them. Reaching out, he lightly ran his thumb over her cheek and then Antony's.

"How long has he been asleep?" Tobias whispered just loud enough for her ears.

"An hour, maybe two," Isobel responded. "He didn't say anything when he came in, but I could tell he needed comfort and sleep."

"I'm glad you were here then."

Antony twitched in his sleep and Isobel tightened her arms. He settled down for a couple more minutes before he started to

tremble again.

Before Isobel knew what was happening, Antony bolted awake and jerked back hard with an ear-piercing scream.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

**H**is head was spinning and what vision he had was blurry. The scream that had woken him up made his throat hurt. His heart felt like it might explode in his chest, it raced so fast. He stared down at his shaking hands, as they slowly came into focus.

Clean.

His hands were clean.

Though, it was like he could still smell the blood. Thick and sticky as it covered his hands and seeped through his fingers. Intermixed with the fine pieces of shimmering hair.

“Antony?”

His name barely penetrated through the thick fog around him. He felt soft hands on his face.

“Antony!”

Jolting back, her worried expression slowly came into focus. Her big blue eyes stared at him.

With a rigorous shake of his head, he pulled back out of her reach. His stomach twisted and rolled, though he tried to calm his breathing so he didn't throw up.

Antony had grown accustomed to his nightmares but this was different. The smell of burned flesh and blood stuck to the inside of his nose and the sight of it burned into the back of his eyelids. It felt real, too real. Even if he knew they weren't but there was always the possibility that they could be. No, he couldn't allow that to happen. He couldn't see that pain brought to her eyes.

When Isobel tried to touch him again, he jerked back and raised to shaking legs.

“Antony?” She whispered, the hurt clear on her face.

“Don't,” the single word was hissed through clenched teeth. He had to be able to think straight and he couldn't do that if she was touching him.

Antony knew he made mistakes when it came to her. That he should have done everything in his power to prevent what he had seen for over a year, especially once he found out who she was. But as soon as he set eyes on her, he was doomed. There could be no letting her go. However, he hadn't been honest with her and the weight of that was becoming unbearable. Especially after what he had seen.

Dreams that real only meant one thing - that whatever he was seeing was imminent. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do to prevent that. Even if it meant breaking her heart... and his.



“Isobel,” Antony whispered, her name somehow feeling strange in his lips.

Her head tilted to the side with a frown. “I don’t think you’ve ever used my name before.”

“No, I haven’t.” It wasn’t an easy admission to make. He knew why he hadn’t used her name to her face. “I couldn’t. I wanted to believe you were anyone but who you are.”

“Why?” Her question was small and quiet.

“Antony.” There was no mistaking the serious tone in Tobias’s voice.

Antony chose to ignore it. He closed the small distance between himself and Isobel, taking her by the shoulder, his fingers digging into her arms.

“Despite your uncle marrying my sister, do you know why you and I never met eight and a half years ago when I was in Ulrich? Why I was at their wedding much like you were but I was hidden so no one could see me?”

Isobel struggled against his grip, but it only tightened. He had to make her understand, for her to finally see him for the monster he felt he was. All this time, hiding himself, pretending to be something he wasn’t. People like him didn’t deserve a happy ending. Maybe all those years of being called useless and worthless, actually meant something.

“I found you were there later,” Isobel admitted. “After Uncle Bash was kidnapped and Aunt Ilaria went with you and others to save him.”

“Yes, myself, Ilaria, General Bauer, and Tobias.”

“Why are you telling me this?” She whispered.

“What do you remember about the day your father died?” He tried to keep his voice calm even if he was screaming on the inside. Fighting against every instinct to continue to hold onto this secret. But Antony couldn’t hold onto this anymore. She had to know, to keep her safe.

Antony felt Tobias’s hand grip his shoulder, but he didn’t take his eyes off Isobel.

“Tell me,” Antony insisted.

Isobel chewed her lower lip. “There was a fire the day Uncle Bash became Chieftain, the day my father retired so he could spend more time with me and my mother. But when everything went up in smoke, my grandmother rushed me out and I lost sight of him. We found him a short time later, burned and bleeding. He died in my mother’s arms with his last words to me, telling me how much he loved me.”

Antony watched a tear slide down her cheek and it was almost enough to break him. But then his nightmare flashed through his mind again and it steeled his resolve.

“Did they ever tell you what started that fire?” Suddenly, he felt calmer than he ever imagined.

“N-no. Why?”

Tobias’s grip on his shoulder became almost painful, like he wanted Antony to stop. There was nothing that was going to hold him back now. This was the point of no return.

“Because I did.”

The statement hung in the air. Everything was perfectly still and Antony was sure he had stopped breathing.

“Say that again.” The words were spoken without a hint of emotion.

Antony swallowed the lump that formed in his throat. Tobias’s fingers no doubt were leaving bruises on his shoulder. He had yet to say anything, allowing Antony to dig his own grave.

“I am responsible for the death of Rudolf Hartmann.”

With more strength than he anticipated, Isobel wrenched herself from his grip. The slap that followed echoed in the silence of the conservatory. Though there was a slight tingle in his cheek, Antony didn’t feel it. Nor did Antony care. She could do whatever she wanted and he’d take it without a sound. It didn’t matter to him anymore. The truth was finally out and while it was excruciatingly painful to say, he finally did.

Antony wasn’t sure what kind of reaction he had been expecting. It wasn’t this. Isobel just stared at him, her nose slowly turning pink and tears glistening in her eyes though none fell. He wanted her to be mad, to yell and scream at him. But she didn’t.

After what felt like an eternity, Isobel pressed her lips together. Her eyes found Tobias over his shoulder.

“Did you know?” The question was quiet and broken.

Antony could feel Tobias tense behind him even as he responded, “Yes.”

The tears that threatened to fall slid down her cheeks. She stepped around them, heading for the door. She hadn’t made a damn sound, and it worried Antony.

“Isobel,” he whispered. It was enough to get her to pause. “Angel.”

Her back went stone stiff and her hand clutched at her sides. “Don’t call me that.”

The door slammed shut behind her a moment later and it felt like a spoke to Antony’s chest. He took a step like he wanted to follow her but was stopped by Tobias’s hand on his chest, who gave him a light shove.

“What the fuck was that?” Tobias hissed.

Antony took a step back.

“The truth. She deserved to know.”

“Not like that, you dumb shit. You didn’t kill Rudolf Hartmann. He died from injuries he sustained because his mobility made it hard for him to escape a fire. You didn’t stab him in the fucking chest.” Tobias’s volume grew with each passing word.

“He had to escape a fire I caused.”

“Because you feared for your life! For fucks sake, Antony! Why is it so difficult for you to understand that it was not your fault? You are the only one who still carries that guilt.”

Tobias was yelling now and Antony flinched back a little bit.

“Even if you can accept that I didn’t kill her father, that doesn’t mean she can understand it that way.”

“She won’t when you put it like that. Sebastian forgave you.”

“Only because he loves my sister,” Antony shouted back now. Why was it that Tobias couldn’t see it the way he did? “He tolerates me because of Ilaria.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is. All I’ve ever been is tolerated.” Antony paused, sucking in a deep breath. Tobias stood his ground, his arms crossed over his chest. His face was like a stone statue.

“Do you think I only tolerate you?” The sudden gentle tone startled Antony more than if Tobias had yelled it.

Antony took the last few steps backward until his legs hit the sofa. He sank down, burying his head in his hands. He let out a deep groan.

“For most of my life, I’ve been told that everything bad that has happened has been my fault. That my life isn’t worth anything. I’ve been beaten down so many times, Tobias. Don’t you understand? I ruin everything.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do! My own fear and guilt are what pushed Isobel away. It will only be a matter of time before you get sick of

dealing with me too.” His words caught in his throat, the last few coming out at barely a whisper.

Antony waited to hear Tobias walk away, to hear the door close shut behind him like it had for Isobel. But it never came. Instead, he felt Tobias’s hands on his, carefully peeling them away from his face. Tobias knelt before him, tears in his eyes.

“Listen to me, Antony Devarik. I will never get sick of you. Until the day comes where you decide that you don’t want me here anymore, I’m not going anywhere. I cannot leave you.”

“Why?” Antony could barely get the word out.

“Because I love you.”

“Y-you do?”

The idea that someone, who wasn’t his sister, could actually love him was foreign to Antony. He’d be lying if there wasn’t a deep level of affection and trust between him and Tobias. But for Tobias to actually admit to loving him, Antony struggled with the concept.

Tobias gave him a sad smile, taking the place next to him and still holding his hand.

“Of course, I do. I’ve loved you since we were awkward teenagers and still figuring things out. I loved you even when I thought you were dead and despite that, you were the reason I kept going. I wouldn’t change anything in the last eight and a half years. I’ve been able to have you as my own and I couldn’t want more than that.”

Antony buried his burning face in Tobias's chest as he held him close, the sudden sobs making his shoulders shake. He didn't want to believe it but Tobias never said anything he didn't mean.

Once he was finally able to calm down enough to get words out, Antony replied, "I wouldn't change it either. You are one of the very few good things about my life."

It wasn't an "I love you" but it was as close as Antony was going to get at the moment. Saying those words was not ever something she thought himself capable of anymore. But knowing he had Tobias's love was enough.

They both curved a hand around the back of each other's neck and leaned in for a soft kiss.

It reminded Antony of the first time they kissed in the darkness of their bunk. Tobias had caught Antony silently crying, cradling a bruised arm to his chest. Without a word, Tobias nudged Antony over to lay down beside him, pulling him into his arms. Even by nineteen, Antony was too tall for his own good. Tobias leaned down to press a kiss to Antony's forehead, but Antony had moved his head and their lips touched instead.

Antony could taste the salt of his tears then as they kissed like he could now. When they finally parted, Antony searched Tobias's face and could see he remembered too.

"No matter what happens," Tobias whispers quietly. "I will always be here for you."

“Thank you.” Antony swallowed the lump in his throat.

He should tell Tobias about his most recent nightmares, especially the one that had jolted him awake not too long ago. The one that made him decide that hurting Isobel had been considered a good idea. Antony knew he had kept himself too closed off these last couple of months in an attempt to protect himself and them from what he saw. However, as it had already exploded in his face, he needed to figure this all out and he couldn't do it alone anymore.

“I need to tell you what I've been seeing,” Antony started slowly.



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Tobias still couldn't quite believe that after twenty-one years he had finally confessed his true feelings to Antony. Granted he might not have realized his own feelings until years later, it didn't matter to him. He'd had Antony in his life, in one way or another, for that long and to Tobias that was all that mattered. He felt lighter somehow now that he got that out into the open. Falling in love with Antony had never been part of his plan, but once it happened, there was no going back.

Not that Tobias would want to anyway.

Currently, he remained on the sofa as Antony scrambled over to his desk. He rummaged through the increasing piles of paper before pulling out a few sheets. He then grabbed a blank page and quickly started to scribble something on it.

Tobias wanted to ask what he was doing, especially since Antony said he wanted to talk about his dreams. Then he proceeded to not say a word. After what felt like too long, Tobias cleared his throat.

Antony's head snapped up with a frown. Setting his charcoal aside, he took his stack of papers and rejoined Tobias. Antony sat on the floor, however, with the pages in his lap.

“What do you have?” Tobias asked.

Antony kept his hands over the pictures.

“I know I haven't been very open about the extent and sometimes graphic nature of the nightmare I have. It was not a burden I wished to place on your shoulders. I dealt with them as best I could for years. Drawing out what I saw helped me process what I was seeing. I know you know this because I've shown you a number of these pictures before. But somehow these are different.” Antony paused with a groan, pinching the bridge of his nose with his charcoal-stained fingers.

Tobias couldn't keep the chuckle in at the black mark now on Antony's nose. And while Antony frowned at him, Tobias took the sleeve of his shirt to wipe it away.

“Can you try not to get this shit all over your face?” Tobias remarked.

“Oh, you mean like this?” Antony took his fingers and left a long black streak down Tobias's cheek.

Tobias scowled even as he wiped at his face, he tried not to smile to encourage Antony any further. However, it was nice to see this more playful side to Antony despite whatever darkness he was going to show.

“What do you have?” Tobias asked, nudging back towards the piles of papers.

Antony gnawed in his lower lip for a moment before answering.

“It started again about four months ago and—”

“Four months?!” Tobias shouted before he could stop himself. “You’ve been hiding this for four months?”

Antony’s expression turned grim. “In the beginning, I didn’t think it was that bad or that important. Things always change and I was simply waiting for it too. However, it didn’t. The night after your birthday, I saw something that has haunted me since.”

The first paper from the stack was carefully pulled out and placed next to Tobias on the sofa. Isobel stared back up at him from the picture. Her face and eyes were sad, much like she had been when she stormed out of the room.

“But her being sad, doesn’t—”

Now it was Antony’s turn to interrupt.

“No,” he admitted but took another sheet and laid it on top. “But every time it just kept getting worse.”

Tobias felt his pulse rising as Antony laid down pages and pages of drawings. Each one showing her sadder, pain increasingly resonating through her eyes. He was beginning to understand why this had become so upsetting to Antony. This was not something anyone wanted to go through with someone they cared about. Especially, repeated in dreams where it couldn’t be controlled.

Just as Tobias was going to say something about the severity of the images, Antony laid out the second to last one.

“This was from last night,” he whispered, barely brushing past Tobias’s ears.

Tobias felt his throat go dry and his fingers trembled as he picked up that single sheet. Antony had drawn him any number of times before, so it shouldn’t be so much of a shock. It was the physical pain and anguish that had been reflected in Isobel’s face that was now mirrored in his own.

“What causes this?” Tobias asked, not taking his eyes off the paper.

“I don’t know.” Antony gave an aggravated sigh. “I wish I did, then I would do something to prevent it.”

“And just now when you woke up with a scream?”

Antony handed him the last sheet of paper, the one he had just finished scribbling. All it consisted of was a hand, its fingers broken and twisted, blood dripping down the wrist. Even in black and white the image was haunting. His own fingers twitched at the visual.

“I don’t know if this is your hand or mine,” Antony finally spoke up. “My gut reaction thinks it’s mine but I also saw pale hair covered in blood. But that doesn’t make it any clearer.” He groaned, dropping his forehead to Tobias’s knee. “I can’t keep doing this. I can’t continue to see this suffering and not be able to do anything about it. I’ve seen so much in my life. So much I’ve avoided and so much that I couldn’t prevent. I

feel so lost. I just can't have anything happen to either of you. I can't—"

Tobias ran his fingers through Antony's hair, gripping his chin to get their eyes to meet.

"You don't have to suffer through this alone. You never had to but you chose to for reasons I will not pretend to understand. But you are not alone, Antony. Share this burden with me and maybe it will be less of a heavy load. Please."

Antony gave a small nod. "I will endeavor to try."

Tobias gave him a soft smile and lightly pecked his lips. "Good. Now, tell me what triggered this?"

The letter Tobias had from Maxim in his pocket felt like it was going to burn through it. Tobias only hoped that Antony would be fully honest with him.

Antony hesitated for a moment, trying to move his face out of Tobias's hand but he was held fast. His shoulders sagged.

"I received a letter from Clan Bakken. Initially from Lars Eklund about the state of his prisoner. As you know, Maxim can rot for all I care. But Lars claimed some level of rehabilitation, which I refused to hear. I burned that letter without replying." Antony paused, swallowing hard and Tobias maintained eye contact. "I've since received other letters."

"From Maxim," Tobias stated. He was already so pleased with how much Antony had already shared. He saw no harm to offering a hand up.

Antony's eye went wide. "How did you—"

Tobias released Antony's face, reaching into the pocket in his coat and pulling the letter out. He turned it over before holding it out to Antony.

"This came for you this afternoon. The messenger brought it to me when he couldn't find you. I'm sorry, I read it without telling you first but it was addressed to the Chieftain and not you explicitly. I thought if it was important that I should know," Tobias explained.

Antony took the letter and tucked it away unread. "There is a good chance I'll burn this one without reading it either. You must think I'm weak for allowing him to still affect me like this."

"Of course not. He controlled your life for far too long. You lived in constant fear because of him. Of what he'd do to you and to Ilaria. But you don't have to fear him anymore. He can't hurt you anymore. I won't let him."

"Tobias."

"I mean it, Antony. You've never let anyone protect you, let me."

Tobias watched the myriad of expressions flicker over Antony's features for a long moment. Eventually, Antony pulled him into a tight embrace. Tobias hugged him back, enjoying this one small second of closeness.

Eventually, Tobias pulled back and tucked a loose curl behind Antony's ear.

“We should go find Isobel to make sure she is all right. She’s had long enough to stew and you have a lot of groveling to do.” Tobias stood and offered Antony his hand.

“Do you think she’ll forgive me?” Antony asked as they left the conservatory.

“I don’t think it will be all at once,” Tobias admitted. “But I have faith, she’ll come around.”

“If you say so.”

They continued on in silence until they reached the door of Isobel’s room. She hadn’t spent much time there of late, since they had convinced to share a bed with them instead.

Tobias knocked on the door, calling out to her. He was met with pure silence. He tried again and a second time there was no answer. Knowing it might be a breach of her privacy, he tried the handle and found it unlocked. Sticking his head inside he called out again.

“Isobel?”

The room was dark and silent. It was then that it hit him full force in the chest.

Antony’s voice trembled as he said, “She’s not here.”

## Chapter Thirty

The tears began to freeze on her eyelashes.

Isobel couldn't stay in the palace one more minute. She couldn't bear the idea that they had kept this kind of secret from her. That this was something Antony had hid from her and Tobias withheld. Wanting to believe they formed a bond and a trust after everything they shared together.

Instead, she rushed back to her rooms, threw what little possessions she had there into a bag and grabbed her cloak. She was going back to Sylvia's and she didn't care if she had to walk down there alone. It has become an increasingly familiar path that Isobel was certain she would be able to follow.

But now as the cold evening wind whipped strands of hair and tears clouded her vision, she wasn't quite sure where she was. She almost didn't care either. She needed to clear her head before she faced even Sylvia who would no doubt read the devastation on her face.



Her numb fingers reached up to touch the pendant around her throat. Her grandmother would know what to do, she always did. But not having her here now, when she needed someone the most only amplified the pain in her chest.

She thought of her mother, who despite her own sadness tried her best for her only child. Isobel wondered if what she was feeling was only a fraction of what Johanna had felt about Rudolf. Thinking of her father only made the tears fall faster. The day he died was permanently burned into her mind. How she had lived the next almost nine years without him.

The scary thought accorded to Isobel that a day would come where she would have spent more time without him than all the days they shared together. But he would never truly be gone. She remembered something Sebastian had told her shortly after Rudolf's death:

*But as long as we remember him, think about him, and hold him in our hearts, he will never leave us.*

Isobel wiped angrily at the tears in her cheeks, sucking in a breath of cold air. The burn in her lungs was almost welcoming. It made her feel something other than numb, sad and angry. Angry at Antony for lying to her, angry at Tobias for keeping this secret, angry at herself for coming to care for two people who couldn't even be honest with her.

Rounding a corner, the forge was only a little bit further down the lane. She didn't see the ice until she stepped on it, the thin coating breaking under her boot, her foot falling into the shallow hole. Her ankle gave an audible crunch as it bent

to the side and she landed hard on her ankle bone. A scream of agony was wrenched from her and she fell forward, bracing her hands on the stones beneath her. Pain shot up her leg from where it was still stuck in the hole and up her one arm from where she landed on her wrist.

*“Fuck!”* She cursed through clenched teeth. It took a moment for the pain to subside enough for her to catch her breath. Pushing herself up by one arm, she yanked her foot out of the small hole. She leaned against the stone wall behind her.

In addition to being sad, now her ankle and wrist throbbed, she was freezing. All she wanted to do was climb into her bed and pretend that today hadn't happened. Maybe even to pretend like the last four months hadn't happened. That she hadn't gotten tangled up with two men who captivated her mind and her body. Who made her feel wanted and special.

*Damn them.*

Isobel scowled as she carefully pushed herself off the ground. The sweat gathered in the back of her neck from forcing herself to rise on one leg. She tentatively set her aching ankle on the ground and a shot of pain jolted all the way up her leg. There was no putting any significant amount of weight on it. If she was lucky, she could get the rest of the way to the forge without passing out from the pain.

Today has gone from bad to worse and Isobel just wanted it to be over. Adjusting the strap of the bag on her shoulder, she gritted her teeth as she restarted with a slow, torturous limp. It

took her twice as long as it should have to cross the small distance from where she fell to the door of the forge.

She leaned heavily against it, slamming her fist against the wood and calling out to Sylvia. Silence followed. She tried a second time but was still met with no response. Maybe Sylvia wasn't home, Isobel rationalized, since she hardly kept tabs on her mentor and she wasn't expected to return until the next day.

Reaching into the pocket of her dress, she pulled out her key to unlock the door. However, once the key was inserted and she tried to turn it, Isobel realized the lock was broken. She frowned, pushing the door open with a quiet squeak.

Sticking her head through the doorway, she saw a small fire still burned in the hearth. Sylvia would never leave a fire if she was going to be out.

“Sylvia?” Isobel called out again, though not as loudly as before.

She dragged herself through the forge to the door in the back that connected to their living space. That door too, which usually contained a deadbolt lock, was broken. Isobel reached out along the wall to grab onto anything that could be used as a weapon. Her hand finally fell on the hammer they used to pound the metal. It couldn't have been a coincidence that both of the locks were suddenly broken.

Isobel crept through the doorway into the darkened kitchen. She could see very little but heard the rustling of what she assumed were clothes off to one side. Catching the sight of a

tall shadow, much taller than Sylvia, out of the corner of her eye, she swung the hammer at it but her wrist was caught in a painful grasp before she could hit anything. Without warning, it was twisted so hard, the tool fell from her fingers and the small bones in her wrist snapped with an audible pop.

A shriek ripped from her lips as she grasped her limp hand to her chest. Her knees gave out from the pain radiating up her arm and still from up her leg. The world started spinning as she forced breaths through her teeth and tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Well, this is interesting,” a dark voice mused as it stepped from the shadows. “You are the last person I expected to become my brother’s whore.”

Isobel snapped her head up to meet a brilliant pair of green eyes she hadn’t seen since she was ten years old. The eyes of the man who had attempted to kidnap her all those years ago. Until her uncle sacrificed himself for her. Yet, it wasn’t a face she was soon to forget.

Maxim Devarik.

“You!” Isobel hissed.

He cocked his head to the side. “I’m pleased you remember me.”

Isobel ignored his comment, frantically looking around the room. “Where is Sylvia?”

“Oh, you mean her?” Maxim asked with a dark chuckle. He kicked something next to him. Sylvia hit the ground hard,

bound and gagged to a chair. She let out a deep groan, blood trickling down from her temple.

“Sylvia!” Isobel tried to nudge herself closer, until Sylvia’s head was in her lap. A single question slipped from her lips. “Why?”

“Because her brother was one of the five who condemned me to that hell hole in Bakken.” Maxim’s words were calm, too calm. “When Antony didn’t have the courage to do it himself, he had his pet, Tobias Victarian, do it for him. Though, I think I now have a greater prize than her.”

Isobel felt a cold chill run down her spine. There were no doubts he meant her.

“What are you going to do to me?” she whispered.

“That all depends on how cooperative you want to be,” Maxim mused. “How cooperative she is going to be and how much you both matter to Antony and his pet.”

## Chapter Thirty-One

Antony still couldn't believe she simply walked out. That she couldn't stand being under the same roof as him. Finding her room dark and empty was as if she had taken a blade and skewered him with it.

Even now as he stood in the cold, crouched down with his head in his hands. His stomach twisted into just a tight and painful knot. It was hardly a dignified position, but at least Tobias had no problems taking his frustrations out verbally. The two guards in charge of the front gate were currently enduring a tongue lashing from their commanding officer. If he wasn't so worried, he might have been more shocked to hear Tobias yelling. He had never quite seen him so angry even if it was justified. The guards never should have let her out alone this late in the day.

Antony straightened up and ran a hand through his hair.

"Tobias." He said loud enough to get the other man's attention. "She probably just went back to your sister's. We

should go there and deal with this security issue once we know she is safe.”

Tobias pressed his lips into a thin line. Antony could tell he wanted to protest if only for the fact that he didn't like to put things off but even Tobias knew the logic behind Antony's words. Eventually, Tobias nodded.

“Let's go,” he replied, before giving the two guards one more scathing look. “This is far from over.”

Together, they headed out the front gate. Antony's anxiety spiking with every step. They hardly made it ten feet down the path from the palace to the main road, when they caught sight of a figure running towards them.

“Sylvia?” The question barely made it past Tobias's lips before he took off into a mad dash. Antony didn't take a second to react, following closely on his heels.

“Toby!” She cried out and threw herself into his arms as soon as he was within reach. Her words started coming out a mile a minute. “I'm so sorry. He's got her, Toby. I tried to stop him but he came out of nowhere and—”

“Whose got her?” Antony interrupted, already feeling the blood drain from his face.

Sylvia met his eye. Her own wet with tears, the trickle of blood from her temple had long dried and her dark hair escaped her tight bun and plastered to her neck. Her chest heaved with every breath she struggled to take.

“Maxim Devarik.”

Antony didn't wait a second longer to hear more. His feet went into overdrive and he took off down the road. Not even Tobias shouting his name was going to get him to stop. This was every worst nightmare but this was real. Too real and Antony would give anything to have her back.

A hand grabbed at the back of his coat and yanked hard enough for him to skid on the heels of his boots.

"Antony!" Tobias shouted at him and quickly spun him around. "You cannot run in there without a plan. No matter how much we both might want to."

Antony felt his shoulders sag. "I know. I just don't want to imagine what he's doing to her. It's like everything I've been fearing is happening. Like I can't protect her. Like I couldn't protect Ilaria."

"Look at me," Tobias murmured, taking him by the back of the neck. "You did not fail them. Ilaria is happy, very happy, with the family she always wanted. She wouldn't have been able to do that without you."

"And Isobel?"

Tobias offered him a small smile. "Isobel will be alright. She can stand on her own two feet and I've been teaching her some self-defense. We wanted to surprise you once she became proficient enough, but I know she is more than capable."

As much as Antony hated to admit it, Tobias was right. Tobias was always right. He refused to see past his own shortcomings, to realize he had done good things with his life.



He almost forgot Sylvia was there until she cleared her throat, drawing them both out of their little bubble.

“As adorable as this is right now, can we please move? Whatever faith you have, Toby, in Isobel’s ability to defend herself is moot at this point,” Sylvia rambled off quickly.

“What makes you say that?” Antony asked, though fear for the answer reared its ugly head.

“He snapped her wrist and said that for every minute we dally, he’d hurt her further.”

Antony suddenly felt light headed. Maxim had never laid a hand on Ilaria, Antony had made sure of that. So, to hear that he had already harmed Isobel was almost more than he could stomach. Before he could ask why, Tobias called out to the guards to get two more to follow them immediately.

The trio took off down the road again. Tobias started rattling off a list of questions of his own. Sylvia answered quickly and clearly.

She had come home to find her home had been broken into. After sneaking in through a side door, she was almost instantly knocked on the head. The next thing she remembered was waking up, tired and gagged to a chair with Maxim Devarik staring down at her. It wasn’t until almost twenty minutes later when Isobel showed up.

“I wasn’t expecting her back,” Sylvia concluded. “At least not until tomorrow.”

“We... got into a disagreement and she took off,” Tobias explained, though said little else.

“We didn’t think she would go all the way back to you this late in the day,” Antony finished the thought.

“Regardless,” Sylvia said with a sigh. “And pardon me but what the fuck is your psychotic brother doing in town anyway? I thought he got banished to some faraway clan years ago.”

Antony swallowed hard. “He did, and until I can speak to him, I have no idea how he ended up here. And for the record, he’s not my brother.”



Tobias, for all extents and purposes, was rather impressed with how well Antony was taking this news of Maxim’s return. Eight years ago, hell, even a year ago, Tobias was certain this would have sent Antony into a downward spiral that he would not recover from.

There was a new found strength in Antony that Tobias admired. There would always be traces of the sad little boy he had been, but now, Antony seemingly held no fear. Running in the direction of his former tormentor and abuser instead of hiding. Tobias liked to give himself some of the credit for that, always pushing Antony when he needed it. But it was something Antony had to come to terms on his own, and Tobias was proud to see how far he had come.

“What do you mean, he’s not your brother?” Sylvia asked with a loud gasp.

“Just so,” Antony replied. “I’ve found proof that he’s not my father’s son. He holds no legitimate claim.”

Tobias had heard all about the journal Ilaria’s children had found. And a lot of that also helped to ease Antony’s mind. It was like a weight off his shoulders that Tobias could practically see.

“Well, that’s a new twist. Does he know this?”

Antony nodded. “Yes, my father told him the night before he was murdered. Maxim probably still thinks that I don’t know the truth.”

“But why would he want Isobel when he had me?” Sylvia’s question hung in the air.

“With Isobel he can hurt Antony, Ilaria and Sebastian,” Tobias explained. “I’m sorry, sister, that you were even in his crosshairs, because I was one of the five to condemn him.”

Antony continued, “If he held onto you both, then he would have no idea when someone else would show up. Letting you go meant you would run straight to us.”

“I hate to be a useful pawn to him,” Sylvia grumbled.

Tobias reached over as they continued walking to squeeze her shoulder. “Better get to Isobel sooner than having you both suffer needlessly.”

They ignored the strange looks they received as they picked up their pace and sprinted down the road. Arriving at the forge a few moments later, Tobias dreaded what they would find behind the heavy wooden door. He paused only long enough to pull the dagger from his belt, the one Isobel had made for him, and pressed it into Antony's hand.

“Don't fear having to do what you must,” Tobias murmured to Antony even as he shouldered the door open.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Antony stared down at the dagger in his hand for a moment, as it all clicked into place. This was actually happening. He quickly tucked the blade up his sleeve facing down, so a small shake down and it could be in his hand. He was not prepared for this, physically or emotionally. However, he was determined to do whatever it took to ensure Isobel's safety and everyone else he cared for.

Following closely behind Tobias into the dim lighting of the forge, Antony felt his heart stop. Every nightmare he'd had over the last several weeks was before him as clear as day. The drawings he had done to capture that vision were nothing compared to seeing it with his own eye.

Isobel knelt on the hard ground. The coarse rope wrapped around her shoulders and down her chest, effectively pinning her arms to her sides. He could see her right wrist hanging limp and turning purple. From his vantage point, her ankles too were bound together. There was no moving in that position except maybe to tip over. Which she couldn't do anyway, not

with Maxim beside her, her blonde hair wrapped around his hand and a metal poker in his other. The rod pressed against her throat with the red-hot tip not far away.

But it was the pained look in her eyes, the tears streaming down her cheeks, her bottom lip bitten until it bled, the pink flush to her cheeks.

“She really is not much fun,” Maxim commented before anyone else could get a word out. “She stopped screaming a long time ago.”

All Isobel could do was whimper as he trailed the burning tip along her collarbone, the skin blistered instantly.

“Stop!” Antony shouted. “Leave her alone. Whatever quarrel you have, it is with me not with her.”

Maxim smirked, pressing the metal to the side of her throat. Her lips parted like she wanted to scream but only a strangled choking sound came out. It was then that it hit Antony right in the chest - she didn't scream because she couldn't. She already lost her voice to the screaming she had already suffered.

Antony could feel Tobias vibrating with anger beside him. But Tobias was calculated, he wouldn't just jump out and risk more harm to Isobel. Antony also had to weigh his options. He had to keep Maxim talking to keep him distracted.

“You see, that's where you're wrong, brother,” Maxim remarked. “You always needed some motivation. Too bad our sister isn't here for this.”

Antony shouted before he could think through what he was saying. “You aren’t my fucking brother! You’ve never been my brother and you will never be my brother.”

“I don’t know—”

“Don’t try that shit with me. I know, Max,” Antony sneered. “We found my father’s journal. You aren’t his son; your mother was a lying bitch. Because you are such a psychopath, he was going to disown you and you fucking killed him, because you couldn’t stand the idea that I could be better than you.”

Maxim’s face twisted into something Antony had not seen in over a decade, but had haunted his nightmares ever since. “Artem was training me to take over for him, teaching me, guiding me. Can you imagine my surprise when he told me he was going to cast me aside for a fucking six-year-old? You were this scrawny pathetic little thing, who was nothing more than his sister’s shadow. I made you into a man.”

The door behind them burst open again, which the two guards who Tobias ordered to follow stepped through. Antony held up his hands to get them to stop. Fearing that more hostility would only cause more harm to Isobel. But now having four at his back while Maxim stood alone gave Antony a courage he never expected to have. To help him realize his own self-worth.

He will save Isobel. He will get rid of this perpetual fear, because the fear he felt wasn’t for himself anymore. It was for the poor innocent girl who had stumbled into his dreams and

then into his life. Who had captivated him from the first moment he saw her. An Angel. His Angel.

Antony inhaled sharply through his nose and maintained his focus on Maxim and Isobel. When he spoke again, his voice was calmer than he thought himself capable.

“You taught me what it meant to fear. To live each day like I might not see tomorrow. Four and a half years in a fucking hole in the ground, because even by twenty-one you realized I was taller than you, stronger than you and had the military on my side if I had only opened my eyes to see it. That they gave a shit about me, that Tobias gave a shit about me. While you only saw me as something to be stepped on. But not anymore. You will not hurt anyone else that I care for.”

Antony felt like a heavy weight that had been sitting on his chest had finally lifted and for the first time in years, he felt like he could really breathe again. The things he had spoken had long dwelled under the surface but to actually speak them out loud was the most liberating feeling he had ever experienced.

However, he didn't expect it to go that easily. For Antony to speak his piece and Maxim to drop whatever vendetta he had against him. If anything, his words only made Maxim angrier, realizing that Antony would not be so easily broken by seeing this harm to the woman he cared for.

Maxim released Isobel's hair and shoved her forward until she hit the ground, her cheek biting into the stone floor. His full attention on Antony, as he took the hot metal again and



pressed it against Isobel's shoulder. One more of many welted and blackened pieces of skin that were bared to Antony's vision. It made Antony's stomach flip and twist into hard, painful knots.

He felt Tobias moving ever so slowly beside him, slipping off to one side. Antony knew what he was up to without being told. All Antony could do was keep Maxim's attention solely on him.

"You think you're so important now, don't you? Was that because I was mean to you that you can be mean to me?" Maxim asked through clenched teeth.

"If me calling you a useless piece of shit is me being mean to you, after everything you have done to me? To Ilaria? To this poor innocent girl whose only crime was showing me kindness? You got what you deserved," Antony fumed.

"To be locked away in the shithole—"

"And the basement you had me in wasn't a shithole?" Antony interrupted. "I'm sure Lars Eklund was more hospitable than he should have been."

Maxim growled, giving Isobel a kick causing her to moan and curl into herself. Antony would have done anything to get his hands around Maxim's neck, but Tobias was still creeping around.

"Lars Eklund is a moron who doesn't know his ass from a hole in the ground. The man is so boring and bland, he decided

he wanted to acknowledge I existed. But it didn't take much to convince him to let me go," Maxim explained.

"He wasn't supposed to let you go; you were intended to stay there until you fucking died." Antony thought it would hurt more to say it but he no longer cared. "What lies did you have to tell him?"

Maxim shrugged. "I promised him double what you were paying him to keep me there. I wore him down enough to agree to send out the letters I wrote to you. Unfortunately, you were not courteous enough to respond. I was most disappointed and thought I'd come back to surprise you."

Antony rolled his eye. "If I never saw your face again, it would be too soon. What do you want, Max? You know I'm not giving up my rightful position nor will I tolerate your presence longer than is necessary."

Maxim bared his teeth. "I'd see you dead sooner than you'd see me that way."

"Is that what you want? A fight to see who can kill the other?" Antony hissed. "Because I'll gladly put you underground."

Before Maxim could reply, Antony caught sight of Tobias over his shoulder, but tried not to look too long. Tobias swung out his fist, but Maxim caught it without so much as a backward glance. He twisted Tobias's arm until he screamed and slammed it back against the wall.

Antony had no time to react before Maxim took the still hot metal rod and jammed it through Tobias's hand, pinning him to the wall, blood running down his wrist.

“Stupid idiot!” Maxim growled. “You think I'm too stupid to not see you trying to sneak up on me. I lived my entire life worried about getting stabbed in the back.”

Tobias ground his teeth, reaching over and yanking the rod from his hand. “You are fucking crazy.”

Maxim had the audacity to laugh. It was enough to jar Antony out of his temporary shock.

Antony whipped around to face Sylvia who was still on his other side, silent and unmoving.

“Grab her,” he muttered.

While Maxim was still standing over Tobias, chuckling at his own mutilated and bloodied hand, Antony ran at him. Using his shoulders to hit Maxim full force in his side, his large body hit the ground with a thud. Antony landed hard on his chest, using his legs to pin the other man down. With the quick shake of his arm, Antony had the dagger in his hand. The tip pressed to his throat, a small pinpoint of crimson forming there, was enough to stop Maxim from struggling, holding up his hands as if in surrender, but Antony knew better, pressing a little harder.

“Think about what you are doing, Antony,” Maxim sneered, though he showed no fear. All Antony could see was the

continued defiance radiating through. Like he had eight and a half years ago at the Tribunal that condemned him.

Antony had spent so much time worrying about turning into Maxim. That somehow their shared blood meant he too could turn into this monster he didn't even recognize. However, knowing now there was no blood between him, gave Antony a clearer mind than he ever thought possible.

“I feared condemning you to death all those years ago would turn me into you. That I would be no less the monster that you are. But my fear stopped me from doing what needed to be done then,” Antony kept his words quiet and controlled. For Maxim's ears only. Antony wouldn't let his emotions get the better of him now. “But I cannot keep letting you control my life through fear, worrying about what might happen if I were to see you again. I also will not have you hurting the people I love anymore to try and hurt me. Ilaria. Tobias. Isobel. They will be safer without you. I will be safer without you.”

Antony didn't put anymore thought into it if he ever thought about it at all in that moment. All he knew was that he would finally be free. Free from the fear, the pain, the heartbreak. Free to live his life as he saw fit and not be constantly looking over his shoulder for some ghost coming back to haunt him once more.

“Antony...”

It was the last word that slipped from Maxim's lips before Antony shoved the dagger into his throat.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

**I**sobel shivered even if it still felt like her skin was on fire. The cold cloth was coated with snow and laid across her back and shoulders, helping to cool then throbbing of the burns. Her wrist was splinted and wrapped up tightly, so it couldn't be moved. She had wanted to scream when the physician tried to get the bones lined up again, but her throat was far too hoarse. Barely being able to get out a whimper of protest. Her eyes too were burning, the tears long gone, though she kept them shut and burrowed deeper into her pillow.

She had slipped in and out of consciousness several times over the last several hours, whether from whatever bitter medicine they forced her to swallow or her mind protecting itself. When she woke again, the room was dark, save for a small lantern on her end table. The moonlight streaming in through the open window, allowing in cool, fresh air. Another shutter ran through her when she felt the cloth being replaced again.

Turning her head to the side, she peeled her tired eyes open. Isobel wasn't sure who she was expecting to find taking care of her, but it certainly wasn't Tobias's mother.

"Clara?" The name was no more than a soft whisper.

The older woman gave her a gentle smile, tucking loose strands of hair behind her ear.

"I'm here," she murmured. Isobel tried to form words, but Clara stopped her. "Save your voice. Sylvia sent word to me to come. She was watching over you until I finally sent her to bed an hour ago."

Isobel licked her lips and managed to form a very quiet, "How?"

"How did you get back here?" Clara asked, and waited for Isobel's nod. "From what I understand, Sylvia pulled you out of the forge, but Antony carried you all the way home. I think Toby was upset that he couldn't have been more of a comfort but his hand is a burned and a bloody mess too. Your wrist will heal, broken bones stitch themselves back together. Toby will be lucky if he can ever make a fist again."

Isobel felt a single tear slip out the corner of her eye. Even though she ran from them, they still came and saved her.

"I can get them for you, if you want," Clara offered. "I had to keep them both from barging in while the doctor tried to treat you."

Isobel shook her head. No, she couldn't. There was still too much residue anger from the secrets they kept from her. Her

father's face as he lay dying flashed through her mind and it was enough. She couldn't face them, not now. Not when her own body and mind were still hurting so bad.

Clara helped her with a few small sips of a medicated tea before she settled back down again. Everything hurt - the burns on her arms and shoulders, her broken wrist, her twisted ankle, her raw throat and her heart ached. It was all too much. Too painful. Too sad.

Leaving a small bell within reach of her good hand, Clara left her to sleep with the instructions just to ring if she needed anything.

Isobel wanted to sleep, thinking it would help some of the burning to get away. But she couldn't sleep even if she tried, even with whatever tea Clara had given her. Her mind was too much of maelstrom, swirling and spinning until she no longer knew which way was up. She never fully got to understand Antony's revelation to her before she ran away, before she twisted her ankle, before she ran into the manifestation of her nightmares.

She didn't want to think about what had happened that night, only hours ago. She couldn't, the pain and the hurt were still too raw. That was a pain and fear she never ever wanted to feel again. Seeing Antony kill Maxim was a small comfort she didn't want. Isobel wasn't the sort of person to wish death on anyone, but the man who had physically tortured her, maimed Tobias's hand and was Antony's abuser for years on end... his death she could stand.

Sleep finally started to creep into her bones when she heard quiet muffled voices arguing outside her door.

“I can’t let you in there,” Clara protested. “She needs to rest and I don’t think she is ready to see you yet.”

There was a deep groan.

“Please, Clara. I need to see her. I need to know she is alright.”

Isobel squeezed her eyes shut as her heart pounded in her chest.

Antony.

Even hearing his voice made her ache. She didn’t know if it was from anger or this desperate need to have him comfort her. For him to hold her and promise her that it was going to get better. She wanted that more than she would admit at the moment. To have the comfort from Antony. And Tobias. From the two men who had taken a stranglehold on her heart.

There were some more muffled words before Isobel finally could make Clara’s voice out again.

“If you wake her and upset her—”

Antony cut off her threat. “I won’t. I promise.”

The handle of the door rattled slightly as it was opened. Isobel kept her head turned away from the door. Keeping her eyes closed, she tried to keep her breathing under control, so there was no indication that she wasn’t actually asleep.



She sensed Antony coming to stand next to the bed, the soft thud of his knees hitting the floor. He ghosted the tips of his fingers over her cheek before reaching for her hand. Cradled within his larger one, he pressed to his cheek. Isobel could feel the wetness of his tears.

“I’m so sorry.” His voice cracked. “I’m so fucking sorry. This is all my fault. I never should have hurt you like I did. I should have told you months ago but my fear of losing you kept my tongue still. And my fear only led to you getting hurt - emotionally, physically. Maxim got to you because of me. I shouldn’t have feared him either, I should have responded to those fucking letters and —” Antony paused with a ragged sigh. “There are a lot of things I should have done but I cannot change the past no matter how much I might want to. I can only look to the future and hope there is a small glimmer of hope that you can look at me again like you once did.

“When I first saw you over a year ago, when you first crept into my dreams, I didn’t know what I was seeing. All I knew was that you would be important to me. I had an entire sketch pad filled with nothing but drawings of you. I think it was even making Tobias a little jealous. But when I met you, you were so much more than I could even imagine. When I found out you were Rudolf Hartmann’s daughter, I thought it was over before it could even begin. I burned all those pictures, hoping that purging myself of them would get you out of my head, but you persisted.

“I called you Angel, not only for your beauty and gentle soul, but because that is what you are to me. My salvation. My

chance to atone for all the mistakes I've made in my life. Having you see me for more than the shell of the man that I am. I will always be a mess of broken pieces. But with you and Tobias, maybe some of those pieces can be put back together again. I don't know if I deserve that chance but I want to earn it. To prove to you every day that I do care, that I need you in my life." Antony paused with a small chuckle. "Yet, I can't say this to your face. That I have to sneak in here like a ghost to be able to tell you how I really feel. Maybe someday, if and when you can forgive me, I can tell you."

Isobel could feel her pulse in her ears and was marginally grateful she had no more tears to cry, otherwise, she would be a blubbering mess. She wanted to open her eyes and look at him, but not wanting to freak him out to the point where he would push her away again.

Antony kissed her hand one more time before tucking it back underneath her pillow. She heard him rise and quietly walk back towards the door.

He hadn't said he loved her but Isobel was smart enough to read between the lines because she too felt that emotion welling in her chest.

"Antony," her voice was barely able to make the sound of his name. She heard the door shut behind him. "I forgive you."

## Chapter Thirty-Four

**H**is hand looked like a club or rather what would have been his hand. The white bandages engulfed it so much that he couldn't even see his fingers.

Tobias knocked back the rest of his drink, the liquor burning a path down his throat. He didn't really care that it was barely after breakfast and all he managed to force himself to eat was a single piece of buttered toast. At the very least the alcohol made him numb, the painful throbbing in his hand slowly dissipating.

He still couldn't believe he fucked up so royally to get a red-hot poker literally through his hand. He was smarter than that, more careful than that. Tobias had never quite felt so much like a failure in his entire life than he did in that moment. The only good that came from his incompetence and injury was it was enough of a distraction for Antony to act. Tobias didn't revel in the idea of death, but this one... he might reconsider.

His eyes found the letter that sat on the top of his desk. It had been the first thing he had dug out of a drawer when he came

in that morning. Now, it sat there tempting him. He should do it. There was no reason to hold back anymore. A glance at his hand was motivation enough. Tobias tucked the letter into his pocket before heading out of his office.

Traveling down the hallway, everything was eerily quiet. Perhaps it was because it was still early or everyone was choosing to keep a low profile in light of the previous day's events. Either way, Tobias reached the door of Antony's formal office without any sort of distraction. This had to be done in that space and not in their personal ones because what Tobias needed to do was not personal.

He paused for a moment, taking a deep breath to steady his nerves before knocking. Hearing Antony call out, Tobias slid inside.

"Do you have a minute for me?" Tobias asked, approaching Antony's desk.

"Always." Antony gestured to the seat in front of him, which Tobias settled into. "I take it that this isn't a social visit if you are finding me here."

"No," Tobias replied with a sigh. He ran his good hand through his hair.

"How's your hand?" Antony asked.

"Oh, this thing?" Tobias chuckled, holding up the massive bandage. "The physician says that once the hole in my palm closes and heals, there is a chance I can move my fingers again. Right now, it just goes between numb and throbbing."

“I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t, Antony,” Tobias interrupted him. “If it meant saving her and you, I’d do it again without a second thought. I made my choice.”

Antony sagged back into his chair. “Then why are you here? I’m assuming on official business otherwise you would have waited.”

Tobias nodded, pressing his lips into a thin line. He reached into his pocket and handed Antony the letter he hid away. Not saying anything and watching as Antony broke the wax seal to read the contents. After a few lines, Antony snapped his head up to stare at Tobias.

“I think I originally wrote that resignation letter a week after you made me Commander General all those years ago,” Tobias said, trying to keep his tone calm. “I did it for you, Antony. Not for myself. I didn’t want it nor did I ever think I earned it. But it was what you needed me to be. I think we are past me trying to find excuses to stay in your life.”

Antony blinked slowly, before clearing his throat. “If this is what you truly want. I cannot deny you this but what will you do?”

Tobias grinned, leaning forward and grabbing Antony’s hands. He gave them a tight squeeze. “What I have always done. Supported you, loved you. I don’t need a fancy title or more responsibility in order to do that. All I want is a place by your side.”

“And you will always have it,” Antony murmured. Standing, he quickly moved around the desk to pull Tobias into a tight embrace. “By my side and in my heart.”

Tobias buried his face in Antony’s neck, breathing in that familiar scent of charcoal and peppermint. It was more comforting than anything else, a familiarity that couldn’t be denied.

Antony took Tobias’s desire to resign a lot easier and better than he imagined. However, he shouldn’t be so surprised by it. Especially in light of the events of the last day. There was a relief Tobias never thought he’d feel.

Easing back, Tobias gave him a smile, patting his shoulder.

“Thank you. I’ll have a list of replacement candidates for you within a few hours. There is one more thing I would like to ask.”

“Anything,” Antony replied.

“Allow me to be your messenger and travel to Ulrich with the news. It is best that they hear the news of Maxim and Isobel personally, instead of in writing. And I feel it should be me since it can’t be you.”

Tobias did not want to leave, not with Antony in a still fragile state and Isobel recovering. But this was news that he felt was too important to send in a letter.

Antony’s eye clouded with concern. “Are you well enough to travel?”

Tobias shrugged. “It’s just a hand and it’s not like I have to sail the ship or anything.”

“Then I can think of no one better. Get me that list of names and I will get you a letter I want you to bring to Ilaria personally for me,” Antony replied, pulling him into one last hug. “Will you see Isobel before you leave? If you can get past your mother.”

Tobias nodded. “I intend to go now and hopefully she’s awake. I’ll send word down to the docks; I hope to sail by nightfall.”



Seeing Isobel looking so sad and pale, curled around her pillow broke Tobias’s heart. She lay on her side, propped up by some pillows underneath her chest. He ran his fingers over her cheek as he settled into the chair his mother had just vacated to give them some privacy.

“Thank you for her,” Isobel said. Her voice was still a little hoarse and scratchy.

“Of course. Though it was Sylvia’s idea. Sometimes you need that motherly attention.” Tobias regretted his words as soon as he said them and watched the smile drop from her face.

“Six years, nine months, twelve days,” Isobel responded with a sigh. “That’s how long it’s been since I’ve known my mother’s love. And I miss her every single day. At least I had my grandmother, but it’s not quite the same, you know. So,

having you share yours with me, means more than you can know.”

“I’m sure she will stay as long as you need her. I think she misses having someone to take care of after six children and not having any grandchildren nearby,” Tobias chuckled.

Isobel turned her cheek in his hand, pressing a light kiss to his palm. “Maybe that can change one day.”

Tobias felt his eyebrows shoot up into his hairline, but chose not to comment on her statement. He simply attributed it to whatever medicine the physicians were giving her for pain. Especially since she still looked a little glassy-eyes.

So, Tobias changed the subject entirely. “I’m leaving this evening to go to Ulrich. Your uncle and aunt should be made aware of your condition as well as the less than savory appearance. Antony and I thought it wise that this news be given in person instead of in writing. However, if there is a message, you’d like to send to them, I will gladly take it. Be it verbal or written.”

“Just tell them that I love them and miss them very much,” Isobel murmured, her eyes starting to droop again. “Will you stay until I fall asleep?”

Tobias leaned in, kissing her forehead. “Of course.”

Isobel nuzzled into her pillow and she was asleep a heartbeat later. It made Tobias smile; he could watch her sleep forever. When she was feeling better, he looked forward to crawling back into bed with her again. He didn’t want to admit it but he



was going to miss her in the r days he was gone. Her and Antony. This would be the longest he had been apart from both of them at any one time.

Tobias sighed, pushing away from the bed. He kissed her forehead one more time.

“I love you,” he barely whispered against her skin. She didn’t even stir.

Leaving her room, Tobias passed his mother who was reading in the sitting room.

“She’s sleeping,” Tobias said. He dropped down on the sofa beside her.

“How long will you be gone?” Clara asked.

Tobias had already informed his mother of his intent to travel to Clan Ulrich.

“Hopefully no more than a week. I trust you will look after them for me.”

Clara patted his knee. “Of course. I will stay here until you come back. Your father won’t be particularly happy but he’ll understand.”

“Have him come stay too, if you feel it necessary,” Tobias remarked with a shake of his head. That sounded very much like his father. “It will ease my mind that Antony and Isobel have you looking out for them.”

“Sylvia said she will stay too,” Clara added. “I don’t think she’ll be able to look at the forge the same way for a while.”

Tobias felt his chest constrict. He'd be surprised if Sylvia would ever go back after what happened there. The feeling of being safe in one's home was taken from her. Tobias made a mental note to discuss it with Antony when he returned. He might have a solution to help Sylvia and keep Isobel close.

They talked for a couple more minutes before Tobias finally took his leave of his mother, lightly kissing her cheek.

Tobias still had a good deal of work left to do before he was due to leave. But once he got it all done, he felt better. Writing the list of names for Antony was like closing the door on that part of his life, even if he was grateful for the time he held it. Moving on was never easy. However, he had a feeling the future was going to be brighter after all.

The letter Antony wrote to Ilaria was safely tucked away in his travel bag, slung over his shoulder. He and Antony had bid each other a private and rather quiet farewell. It wasn't like Tobias wasn't coming back and he wouldn't even be gone very long. They both still felt it necessary for Tobias to go personally.

Standing by the railing of the ship, watching the sun set over the distant horizon, Tobias wondered what kind of reception he would receive from Ilaria and Sebastian, considering the news he carried.



Tobias picked at the bandages on his hand. Thankfully, after the three days at sea, he could wrap it a little smaller and less

cumbersome than it had been. His fingers wanted to twitch every once in a while, which gave Tobias a certain level of hope for the function of his hand.

Standing there in the hallway outside of Sebastian's office made Tobias itchy and nervous. It felt too much like it had nine years ago, when he stood in the very same spot, carrying messages that would not be well received. He spent a good deal of time on the ship going over again and again how he could possibly tell them this news. It would not be easy for Ilaria to hear of Maxim even if it did ultimately involve his demise or Sebastian, on the harm to his niece.

Caution and tact were going to be his greatest allies.

Tobias leaned back against the wall, his head falling back against it with a soft thud. He hated waiting but it was late. Very late. Ilaria and Sebastian were no doubt already asleep but he had made it quite clear to the sentry outside, the guard inside and the grisly old butler that he would be seen. And now. Dropping his name would be enough to get them to see him.

The soft click of heels on the stone floor jarred him out of his own head.

“Toby?”

Tobias snapped his gaze down the hall, finding his sister scurrying in his direction.

“Ophelia?” He echoed the question.

As soon as she was within arm's reach, he pulled her into a tight embrace.

“I'm so glad to see you.” Ophelia returned his hug. “But what are you doing here, Toby? It must be incredibly important if Antony Devarik sent his Commander General as his messenger.”

Tobias shook his head. “Just a simple messenger. I resigned before I left.”

Ophelia blinked up at him, the shock clear on her face. “But —”

The old butler, who Tobias was certain would have retired by now, came out of the study before Ophelia could finish her question.

“We'll talk soon,” Tobias said to her, kissing her cheek.

He followed the butler into Sebastian's study, though he had yet to appear. Tobias was worried and anxious and nauseous. All he could hope for was that Sebastian didn't want to kill him.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Ilaria had long grown accustomed to being awakened in the middle of the night. After a pair of restless twins who could not be consoled no matter how hard she tried and then a third baby who always insisted on being hungry at the oddest hours. Then if it wasn't the babies, then it was her husband. Not that she would complain when Sebastian woke her up, since that usually involved his head between her legs. Even after almost nine years of marriage, he still couldn't keep his hands to himself. Not that Ilaria was complaining.

However, a messenger from home was not what she would have expected or wanted. She and Antony continued their regular correspondence. There was no indication in his letters that anything was so wrong to send a messenger with a personal message.

Sliding out of bed, she slipped on the robe Sebastian held up for her.

“What could possibly be wrong?” Ilaria asked out loud though it was more to herself.

Sebastian shrugged, pulling on a shirt. “I’ve stopped trying to guess when it comes to your brother.”

“I know Antony is unpredictable sometimes, but this simply doesn’t feel right.”

Ilaria couldn’t quite shake the feeling that something was indeed wrong. Though, she was going to reserve speculating until she had more information.

She followed her husband out into his study. The messenger’s back was to her but she recognized the dark hair and posture almost immediately.

“Tobias?” She gasped, her heart dropping into her stomach. He spun around and she could see the exhaustion and anxiety in his dark eyes. His lips pressed into a thin line. “What are you doing here? Is everyone alright?”

Tobias’s shoulders sagged. And suddenly Ilaria was transported back to a day that was still very clear in her mind. When Tobias had been sent on behest of Maxim to bring her home.

“I’m sorry to have arrived so late,” Tobias said quietly, lacking any of the confidence she remembered of him. Even from only four months ago. “I come with news from Clan Drakos, which Antony and myself thought best to come from me personally instead of simply in a letter.”

Ilaria felt a certain numbness creep into her bones. Sebastian had taken his seat behind his desk and Ilaria carefully perched

herself on the armrest. She offered Tobias the seat on the other side and he settled into it, if only sitting on the edge.

“What news do you bring then?” Sebastian asked when no one else said anything.

Tobias reached into his pocket and slid a letter across the table to Ilaria.

“From Antony,” he said. “To be read when I’m finished.”

Ilaria took the letter, however, noticing the way Tobias tugged on the sleeve of his jacket to try and hide his hand. Ilaria saw it anyway.

“What happened to your hand?” She gestured towards it.

If Tobias could have gotten any paler, he did. “An injury that is part of my story.”

“Then out with it.” The growing frustration was clear in Sebastian’s words.

Tobias inhaled sharply before speaking again.

“I come on behalf of Antony Devarik, Chieftain of Clan Drakos. I don’t even know how to say this without it sounding too blunt or insensitive. Nevertheless, he wished for me to convey the news of the death of Maxim Devarik.”

Ilaria felt her heart leap into her throat. That was a name she had never wanted to hear again. Yet, somehow hearing it paired with the word “death” somehow made it less startling.

“How did he die?” Ilaria asked without another thought.

“Antony killed him.”

“What?!” Ilaria shouted surging out of her seat but Sebastian quickly grabbed hold of her hand.

Sebastian gave Tobias a rather dark look. “You better start talking, and fast.”

Tobias launched into his story that Ilaria would have thought to be outlandish and fantastical if it wasn't coming from his mouth. For her brother to send his general and his lover with this news meant that Antony was taking thought to her feelings much as he always had.

Tobias talked of the letters Antony received over the course of several months, to the unexpected arrival of Maxim and the confrontation in his sister's forge that resulted in the injury to Tobias's hand and Maxim's death.

Ilaria's nails bit into Sebastian's arm and if he noticed he didn't say anything. She still couldn't wrap around the fact that Maxim was actually and truly dead. Not even simply that Antony had finally taken matters into his own hands.

“This brings me to the second part of my message,” Tobias paused, daring to meet Sebastian's eye. “Isobel was also in the forge that day and got caught by Maxim. Thankfully, Sylvia was able to run fast enough to get Antony and myself. However, she was still hurt in the process.”

“If that fucker even laid a hand on her,” Sebastian growled through clenched teeth. “He's lucky he's already dead.”

“He broke her wrist,” Tobias stated evenly. “And she suffered burns from the iron that punctured my hand.”



Ilaria felt Sebastian tense beside her. He had always been protective of Isobel and had taken her care onto himself ever since she was young. To hear that harm had come to her was not going to be something that Sebastian was easily going to accept.

Sebastian pushed away from his desk, wrapping his arm around Ilaria's shoulders. She looked up into his face and almost without words, they knew what they must do.

"We need to see her and I need to see him too," Ilaria whispered to him.

Sebastian nodded before turning his attention back to Tobias.

"I know that was not easy for you but I appreciate why you felt compelled to come all the way here to tell us. Sleep tonight, and we will sail back to Drakos no later than midday tomorrow." Sebastian paused, glancing down at Ilaria again. "We will bring the children and Ophelia with us. So, you may see your sister as well as I'm sure the children will want to see Isobel."

"Of course," Tobias replied.

Ilaria skirted around the desk and pulled Tobias into an unexpected hug. "Thank you, Tobias Victarian. Your loyalty to my family means more than you'll ever know. And hopefully, one day we can call each other family."

## Chapter Thirty-Six

The joy Isobel felt at finally being allowed out of bed was so much more than she anticipated. Her burns healed enough that having clothes covering them was more tolerable. Her ankle was still a puffy mess and her wrist was another matter entirely. Thankfully, she could marginally wiggle her fingers if she tried hard enough. Otherwise, it was completely immobilized - useless and painful.

She tried to distract herself from the pain by keeping herself busy as best she could. Clara had become a fixture in her room and she would be forever grateful to Tobias's mother for her care. Sylvia would come and sit with her most afternoons as well. Antony would come visit first thing in the morning and then would spend his evenings with her. These were some of her favorite times. Tobias's absence was profoundly felt but she knew he would be back any day.

On this particular evening, Isobel insisted on getting out of bed. Antony carried her into the sitting room, settling her on the sofa. He sat beside her, her legs up on his lap as he

messed her swollen ankle. She winced when he hit a tender spot.

Despite all the time they had spent together over the last week, Isobel had yet to bring up what he said to her while she slept. She wasn't quite sure how to bring it up and though she might come to regret it, she thought direct was going to be best. There was no point in avoiding the inevitable.

“Antony?” She asked, drawing his attention from her ankle. “How were you seeing me for a year when we've only known each other for five months?”

Antony tensed, his fingers stilling. He sucked in a hard breath through his nose. “You heard me that night, didn't you?”

Isobel nodded. “Yes.”

“I see things sometimes,” Antony began slowly. “When I sleep. Good things. Bad things. Things that will be and things that will change. About a year before we met, you came into my dreams. At first it was just shadows and then your face. We never met all those years ago, and even if we had, I don't think the memory of a little girl would have registered in my mind.”

“And you would draw me out of your head?”

Antony's lips twitched into a small smile. “Yes. Dozens of pages of them. I wanted to remember every detail so if the day came where I would meet you, I would know.”

“I'm sure Tobias didn't like that very much.”

“Tobias always encouraged my drawings as a way for me to process what I was seeing.” Antony paused with a chuckle. “I just don’t think he anticipated my obsession with the idea of you.”

Isobel scooted closer to his side, her feet dangling off the side of the sofa. She leaned her head on his shoulder, as he wrapped an arm around her. This was a comfort she had grown so accustomed to and never wanted to give up.

“Angel,” Antony murmured. “I’m sorry—”

Isobel pressed her fingers to his lips. “No more apologies. I forgive you, Antony.”

“You shouldn’t, Angel. I’ve done nothing to deserve that.”

“You saved me.”

“You wouldn’t have been in that situation if it wasn’t for me.”

Isobel grabbed his face between her hands, staring into his face. “You can’t tell me how I feel because I love you, you stupid idiot. I don’t care anymore about what’s happened in the past. All I care about is moving forward with you and Tobias. This is what I want.”

Antony averted his eyes for a moment before looking at her again. “You really mean that?”

“Of course, I do,” Isobel replied, leaning in to lightly press her lips against his.

“But what about—”

“Stop questioning this, Antony. No matter what you say at this point, you aren’t going to change my mind. I knew who you were the first time we were together and even then, I didn’t care.”

“And your family?” Antony managed to slip in.

Isobel sighed, her shoulders sagging a little bit. She tried not to think about that too much, even if it was something that was going to need to be dealt with at some point.

“Our family,” she corrected him softly. “My uncle would only want my happiness as would your sister for you. The fact that they are together has no bearing on my decision to be with you.”

“I’m still sixteen years older than you, Angel. As is Tobias. I don’t think—”

“Age is a number, Antony, used to distinguish the passing of time, no more, no less. So, you’ve been around longer than I have, so what? It doesn’t matter to me as it shouldn’t matter to you. I don’t know why you keep fighting this. Because you deserve to be happy.”

Antony carefully wound his arms around her waist and pulled her into his chest. She draped her arms around his neck, mindful of her wrist as he burrowed his nose into her hair.

“You do make me happy,” Antony muttered against her neck.

Isobel smiled. It was enough. She didn’t need to hear Antony tell her he loved her. She could feel it, in the way he held her,

the way he looked at her. To be the subject of his time and attention was worth more than three small words.

She didn't know how much longer they sat there together before there was a knock on the door. They didn't even have time to answer before it was opened. Isobel peeked over Antony's shoulder to find Tobias taking long strides across the room.

"You're back!" Isobel said happily, holding her hand out towards him.

"Yes," Tobias replied, taking her hand and giving her hand a squeeze. "Me and—"

Before Tobias could answer, Isobel heard an excited squeal.

"Isbel!"

"Emrys?"

Isobel barely had enough time to untangle herself from Antony before the little girl threw herself into Isobel's arms. Isobel moved her arm at the last second so Emrys didn't fall on her already broken wrist.

"I miss you, Isbel," Emrys muttered against Isobel's chest.

Isobel kissed the top of her head. "I missed you too."

She looked up to ask Tobias where in the world her little cousin came from when the rest of her family - the twins, Ilaria and Sebastian - came barreling into the room.

Tobias simply smiled at her with a shrug. "They insisted on coming."

Isobel felt her heart close to bursting. She knew her family loved her, but for all of them to suddenly pick up and come see her, meant more than she could put into words.

“Thank you,” she whispered to Tobias.



Antony made himself scarce when everyone descended on Isobel’s room. Instinctively grabbing his eyepatch and sliding it back into place. He embraced his two nephews who had attached themselves to his legs. A phenomena Antony didn’t quite understand but was happy for regardless. He gave Sebastian a tight-lipped smile and embraced Ilaria before disappearing into the hallway.

He leaned back against the wall, letting out a heavy sigh. This was not what he was expecting tonight. He wanted to continue to live in the comfortable little bubble that was his relationship with Isobel and Tobias before having to disclose anything to his sister. Or Sebastian. The other man was going to kill him the moment he found out what Antony had been doing with his niece... daughter... *fuck*.

Antony wiped a hand over his face. He hated to think about it but he knew he had to. Nothing was going to stop him from keeping Isobel in his life. Not even Sebastian Hartmann.

“Antony?” Ilaria stuck her head out of the doorway.

“I’m here,” he replied.

Stepping out into the hallway, Ilaria approached him again. “You seem lost, brother.”

Antony snorted. “Lost is hardly the beginning of it.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I suppose.” Antony shrugged. Did he want to talk about it? No, not really but he knew he needed to. He needed the clarity that only Ilaria would be able to give him. To reaffirm the choices he had made. “Do you want to walk? Or we can go back to my rooms and have a drink?”

Ilaria looped her arm through his. “Does this discussion require a drink?”

“More than likely.”

Antony led the way back to his sitting room. The entire time trying to figure out what in the world he was going to tell Ilaria. Everything that ran through his head started to sound crazier and crazier than the last. By the time they got to his rooms, Antony was no closer to an answer than he was before.

Ilaria settled into one of the couches, while Antony went to the sideboard and poured them both a liberal amount of brandy. He took a seat in the wing backed chair beside the sofa. They sipped on their drinks for several long moments before Ilaria finally cleared her throat.

“I read the letter you sent with Tobias,” Ilaria began. “I will not pretend to understand what you went through that day. But know that I hold no ill will towards what happened with Isobel



and am eternally grateful for the choices you had to make. For her and for myself.”

“I never thought it would come to that. Killing is not in my nature.”

“And it doesn’t have to become a part of you. You finally faced the man who had hurt you, abused and tormented you for almost two decades. And he was further hurting people you care about.” Ilaria reached over and grabbed a hold of Antony’s hand, giving it a quick squeeze. “You are finally free, Antony. Free of that past which has haunted you. You never have to worry or even think of him again. And neither do I, thanks to you. We will talk of this now and never talk of him again.”

Antony chewed on the inside of his cheek. She was right. This was a whole new beginning for him. A chance to finally love the life he wanted to live. To not have to see the past or it ever coming back. He had quite literally slain the demons who tormented him for so long, he almost didn’t know how to react to it.

“How did you do it?” Antony asked, meeting her gaze. Her soft blue-green eyes smiled back at him, glittering with unshed tears. “Move on, I mean.”

Ilaria took a hearty swallow from her glass. “I found love again. I found someone who understood the broken pieces of me and wanted to put them back together. Who saw past all my attempts to push him away but he never gave up on me. He

fell in love with me despite all that. It also doesn't hurt that he likes to fuck as much as I do.”

The brandy stuck in Antony's throat and almost threatened to come out his nose. It burned so bad but he managed to cough through it.

“Please don't ever say that again,” Antony finally managed to get out, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth.

Ilaria gave him an innocent look, though Antony knew she was anything but.

“But you understand my point. You have come so far in the last almost nine years, don't let that old fear still control your life.”

“I know.” Antony paused, leaning his arms on his knees and rubbing his hands together. “Old habits are hard to break. I still worry about you.”

“Antony, you don't have to worry about me anymore.” Ilaria patted the spot beside her on the couch. Antony moved to sit beside her, leaning his head against her shoulder. “I am happy. I am loved. I have the life I always dreamed of having. And a lot of that is because of you. You practically forced me to marry Sebastian, which in hindsight I am most grateful for, even if it was a crazy notion to start.”

Antony let out something of a chuckle. She wasn't wrong. He had withheld important information from her until he knew she was married and safe.

Ilaria continued, when he said nothing. “And you deserve the same, Antony. Love, happiness, family. All the things we were denied as children. I found mine and I don’t think you’d have to look very far to find yours.”

“I don’t —” Antony started before he cut himself off. There was no point in hiding it anymore, he knew that. Even if admitting anything out loud was still more difficult than he imagined it to be. “Tobias and I—”

“I know, Antony,” Ilaria whispered, touching his cheek. “Well, I had my suspicions. You always write so highly of him and when I was here last, I could see the admiration you two had for each other. Tobias’s loyalty is unmatched. He didn’t have to come all the way to Ulrich with that news, but he did because he cares about you.”

Antony felt a tear run down his face and she wiped it away. “He loves me.”

“Because you are worthy of love, you deserve love. Killing is not your nature, but protecting, cherishing, loving is. You have done so much for those you love. Now, do you love him?”

“I do.” Antony admitted it with a pained chuckle. Of course, he did. He’d loved Tobias for years and was simply too scared to admit it to anyone, least of all himself. How the other man had put up with him for so long, Antony will never know.

Ilaria embraced him tightly. “See, that wasn’t so hard, was it? Now, you just have to tell him that and not me.”

“I’ll find the opportunity, I’m sure.” Antony hugged her back. It felt like a weight had been lifted off his chest. There was some lingering doubt as to the wisdom in what he was going to say next. However, if ever there was a chance to get Ilaria’s unfiltered opinion on the matter, it was now or never. “But it is no longer just the two of us.”

The gasp that Ilaria emitted was shocking and she jumped back, grabbing Antony by the shoulders. “What—”

Antony nodded, biting his lip to keep from smiling. He quickly launched into a shortened version of the visions he had seen in his dreams. Knowing Ilaria, who was plagued by the same circumstances, would be the only one to truly understand. Who knows what he went through and what he continues to deal with?

When he finished, Ilaria stared at him with wide wet eyes.

“Who?” Was all she managed to get out.

Antony kissed her forehead before rising from the couch. He went over to his desk and pulled a couple of pages from his drawer. The good and happy ones. The sad ones he had already burned.

It was going to be easier this way. To show Ilaria, instead of simply telling her. Showing her these pictures made it more real, that everything he had just told her was the honest truth.

He stood in front of her, the paper close to his chest. “You have to promise not to freak out.”

“Why would I freak out?” Ilaria asked, cocking her head to the side. “Antony, I could cry with how happy and proud of you I am. That you not only found love but found it twofold. If there was anyone who deserved it more, it is you.”

Antony felt his pulse begin to rise and the heat creeping up the back of his neck. There was no turning back from this. Turning the paper around, he handed it to Ilaria. She stared at it for a long hard moment. Her eyes grew wider and wider, if it was at all possible as the recognition slowly started to sink in.

“Is this—”

“Yes,” Antony said before she could even finish the question. “It’s Isobel. I love her, Ilaria. I never intended for it to happen, but it did and I can’t fight it anymore. Believe me, I tried. She managed to forgive me, much like Sebastian. I can no longer imagine my life without her in it.”

“And Tobias?”

“Feels as I do.”

Ilaria lowered the picture and Antony watched the unease and the uncertainty swirling through her expression. Her next words were like ice to his heart.

“Sebastian intends to take Isobel home when we leave.”

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

**T**obias had seen Antony leave Isobel's room with Ilaria following shortly thereafter. This was time Antony was going to need. If there was anyone who understood him more than Tobias, it was Ilaria.

So, Tobias leaned against a nearby wall, his arms crossed and a smile on his face. Seeing Isobel this happy was well worth the week he was away. Ophelia slid up beside him and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"Our parents will be happy to see you," Tobias said to her.

Ophelia nodded. "I will surprise them in the morning. Maybe Ilaria and Sebastian will let me bring Emrys with me."

"That will make Mama very happy. But they have been staying here since she had been watching after Isobel when Antony and I couldn't. Sylvia too."

"Are they still here?" Ophelia asked.

"Do you want to see them?"

Ophelia gave an enthusiastic smile. “Yes please.”

Looking back over at the scene, Isobel was tucked under Sebastian’s arm, while Emrys laid with her head in her lap and the twins by her feet. Ophelia checked on them before Sebastian encouraged her to go visit her family.

Tobias walked her down to the rooms where their parents were staying. He leaned down kissing her cheek before knocking on the door for her.

“There is another empty room on the other side of these that you are more than welcome to take while you are here,” Tobias said. “If you need anything, Mama has gotten quite comfortable getting whatever she needs.”

Tobias waited until his father answered the door, grinning ear to ear when he spotted Ophelia, before turning back down the hallway.

He was bone tired after so many days away, accompanied by the worry he felt at leaving Antony and Isobel for this long. Heading in the direction of his rooms, he hoped that either Antony and Ilaria were done talking, or they had gone somewhere else. Because all Tobias wanted was a clean set of clothes and his bed. Though, there was a small bit of disappointment that Isobel wouldn’t be there too, though Tobias knew why.

Ilaria was just leaving when Tobias arrived. They stared at each other for a long moment, Tobias wondering if she would give him any indication of what he was going to walk into. Instead, she stared up at him with those wide eyes of hers,

searching for something. When she seemed satisfied, she reached up and lightly touched his cheek.

“Thank you,” she whispered, before turning around to head back in the direction of Isobel’s room.

Tobias frowned as she walked away, left wondering what she meant.

Antony was still awake when Tobias walked into their bedchamber, though he would have been more surprised if he had fallen asleep that quickly. In fact, he was still undressing, having kicked off his boots and tugging his shirt over his head.

Tobias leaned against the doorframe, admiring the way the muscles of his back and shoulders flexed as he moved. Antony caught sight of him when he finally turned around. There was a calm and a clarity on Antony’s face that Tobias was sure he had never quite seen before.

“I trust your conversation with your sister went well,” Tobias commented, deciding it was best to speak first.

“Indeed,” Antony replied.

He was standing in front of Tobias a second later. Before another thing could be said, Antony pulled him into a soul melting kiss. Their mouths fused together, stealing the very air from his lungs. Tobias was sure he’d never been kissed like this. When Antony finally pulled back, Tobias felt himself breathless and his head spinning.

Antony leaned his forehead against his.



“That was one hell of a welcome back kiss,” Tobias managed to get out.

Antony grinned, taking Tobias’s face between his hands. “I missed you. I think that’s the longest we’ve been apart in nine years.”

“I was only gone for a week.”

“A week too long,” Antony sighed. He closed his eyes for a moment before opening again. Even if one eye was blind, Tobias could still stare into them and read Antony better than anyone else. “Ilaria gave me some serious clarity and I know I have taken your loyalty and devotion for granted.”

“Antony...”

Antony shook his head. “Let me finish before I lose my nerve. Because you need to know the depth of my affection for you. For everything you have done for me over the years. Loved me when I couldn’t even love myself. For standing by me, even as teenagers, when it would have been easier to leave me to my own misery. I’ve run away from anything that could have made me happy. But I won’t, I can’t do it anymore. I love you, Tobias Victarian. I think I always have.”

Tobias felt the tears stream down his face. Only in his imagination could he have thought this would ever be possible. He swallowed on the lump in his throat and he could feel his pulse in his ears.

Antony used his thumbs to wipe away the tears.

“Do you have any idea how long I’ve waited to hear you say that?” Tobias’s voice cracked.

“Far too long,” Antony conceded.

“I would have waited the rest of my life and into the next.”

“Thankfully, I’m not that slow.”

Tobias lightly pecked Antony’s lips. “I’ll have to thank your sister for giving you the shove in the right direction.”

“Yes.”

Tobias watched as the joy Antony just had slid from his face. “What’s the matter?”

“Ilaria also told me that Sebastian intends to take Isobel home.”

“Well,” Tobias started, chewing on his lip. “We are just going to have to convince her to stay.”



Waking up alone in her bed was a situation Isobel found herself no longer accustomed to. Since it was either beside or between Tobias and Antony.

Isobel never expected to fall in love. Least of all with two people who also loved each other. It was a dynamic and experience that would have blown her mind only five months ago. Even her rather boisterous grandmother would have been shocked. Isobel was sure of that but Amalie would have supported her anyway, simply because it made Isobel happy.

Stretching out her arms and legs, she rolled her ankle, which was finally getting to be less sore. She was very much looking forward to being able to put an actual shoe back on so she could walk somewhere instead of being carried like Antony insisted. Though Isobel was quite sure he liked carrying her simply for the fact that he liked holding her more.

Turning her head, watching the sun rise over the distant trees. It was early, and she was still going to have a decent amount of time to herself before anyone decided to see her or help her to breakfast. So, she rolled over and propped her bandaged wrist up on a pillow. It ached terribly but it was getting a little more tolerable, though it would still be weeks until she could try moving it again.

She started to doze off again when there was a light tapping on her door. Antony stuck his head through a second later.

“I didn’t want to wake you if you were still sleeping.” Antony closed the door behind him.

“I’m awake,” Isobel replied, carefully pushing herself to sit up. Antony was across the room in a blink of an eye, helping to rearrange the pillows and make sure she was comfortable. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I know.” Antony sat down beside her, stretching out his long legs as Isobel pressed up against his side. “I like taking care of you.”

Isobel hummed softly, laying her head on his shoulder. “A girl could get used to this.”

“I’d hope so.” Antony trailed the tips of his fingers over her cheek and along the slope of her nose. “Because I’d like to keep you here.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Antony. I can’t, I won’t leave you.”

“Oh Angel,” Antony sighed, kissing the top of her head. “Your uncle wants to take you home.”

Isobel bristled at the statement. Sebastian always had her best interest at heart, she knew that. However, she was no longer a child that needed to have decisions made for her. While Ilaria made Ulrich her home, Isobel fully intended to make Drakos hers.

“Where did you hear that? He made no indication to me last night of his plans.”

“Ilaria told me when we spoke, after I told her a great deal of things. If you want to go home, I’d understand and—”

Isobel pressed her fingers to his lips. “I won’t go, Antony. He can’t make me.”

“Yes, but—”

The door creaked open again and Tobias stuck his head through.

“I knew I’d find you two here,” he said.

Antony rolled his one eye, which always made Isobel giggle. “Not like I didn’t tell you where I was going.”

Tobias settled on the other side of Isobel, dropping down to kiss the top of a bare shoulder.

“I can’t wait until we can have you back in our bed as opposed to being separated.”

Isobel held up her arm. “As long as one of you promises not to roll over on my hand.”

Tobias waved his bandage too, making the three of them laugh. “Same here.”

“As I’m the only one here with two functioning hands,” Antony chuckled, reaching over to grasp each of their good hands.

Isobel shook her head, the smile falling from her face. They had to get back to this inherent problem.

“We’re going to have to tell them,” Isobel finally confessed. “Uncle Bash might think it best for me to go home and be around the ones I love and who love me. But I already have that here. I’ve found love in the last place I ever thought to look.” She paused looking over to Tobias and then to Antony. “I love you as I love you. I can’t imagine my life anymore without both of you in it. I’ve found my home and this is where I belong.”

Tobias tilted her face towards his, pressing a kiss to her lips. “And I love you, kitten.”

As soon as Tobias pulled away Antony touched her chin, getting her to meet his gaze. He kissed her next.

“I love you, Angel,” Antony murmured against her mouth before kissing her again.

Isobel melted into the kiss, feeling so completely surrounded by him. This was what it meant to be in love.

The next thing she knew, Antony was yanked away and slammed up against the nearby wall by a very angry looking Sebastian.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Antony waited for the blow that never came, having well prepared himself for a bloody nose. Instead, Sebastian stared at him, long and hard, a tick working in his jaw. He gripped the front of Antony's shirt. Antony might have had the height but he had no doubts that Sebastian would level him if given the chance.

Antony held his hands up in surrender. He wasn't going to fight Sebastian, least of all physically. But for the first time in his life, Antony could not have been more certain of what he wanted. And he sure as hell wasn't going to give it up without a fight.

The very air had been sucked out of the room with everyone and everything completely still. This was honestly the worst possible way for Sebastian to find out about his relationship with Isobel but Antony was going to have to defuse the situation.

Antony caught Isobel out of the corner of his eye scurrying off the bed and grabbing her robe. She tossed it on before

running over to them and seizing hold of Sebastian's arm.

"Uncle Bash, let him go," Isobel pleaded, pulling on his arm.

"Tell me he didn't take advantage of you," Sebastian hissed through his teeth.

"Uncle Bash—"

"Promise me, he didn't do anything you didn't fully consent to."

"Of course not!" Isobel exclaimed. "I love him and he loves me."

Sebastian's grip tightened at her words, even if they made Antony's heart melt. He swallowed hard, thankful Sebastian had his hand on his shirt and not around his neck. The anger was slowly dissipating, the tension in his shoulders relaxing. There was no mistaking that he was incredibly pissed off but at least Sebastian didn't look like he wanted to kill him.

Sebastian gave Antony one more rough shove into the wall before letting go. He marched over to the door before glancing over his shoulder at Isobel. "Get dressed. We're not done talking about this." He was gone a moment later.

Tobias caught Isobel before she could hit the floor, she instantly buried her face in his chest. Antony approached them, rubbing his hand against her back.

"That's not how I wanted him to find out," Antony muttered.

"And he only knows half of it," Tobias added.



Isobel groaned, lifting her head. “I don’t even want to think about that. I don’t even think he realized you were here.”

Tobias shrugged. “Might not have been a bad thing.”

“I suppose,” Isobel sighed. “But I’m not leaving. He can’t make me leave. I want to stay here with the men I love and finish the apprenticeship I always wanted. I’m glad they came; I’ve missed them so much. But I have found what makes me truly happy and I’m not jeopardizing that for anything.”



Antony wasn’t even remotely hungry as he sat back in his chair with a cup of tea. The hot liquid burned all the way down. For some reason this felt more intimidating than being pressed up against a wall. He knew Sebastian was making them wait on purpose. Isobel was seated between him and Tobias, the two of them needing to feel like she was safe there.

A small hand crept over his thigh and he almost jumped out of his seat. Isobel giggled.

“Relax, Antony,” she said, squeezing his leg. “It will be alright.”

Antony took her hand and raised it to his lips. “I wish I had your confidence, Angel.”

“I know my uncle. We just have to convince him that this is what’s best for me. That staying with the two of you is what’s best for me.”

Antony opened his mouth like he wanted to argue with her further but chose against it. She was right even if he didn't want to admit it. This felt like he was waiting for an interrogation, much like he had so many years ago. Antony's only comfort was his sister's influence over her husband. If there was anyone who would be able to help them, it would be Ilaria.

Tobias tapped his fingers against the tabletop. "I think making us wait is probably a good thing though."

"I can't imagine why," Antony grumbled. Unless Ilaria was trying to talk Sebastian out of killing him. "I'd rather get this done."

They only had to wait a few more moments before Sebastian and Ilaria joined them. Antony looked to her first, and she gave him a small smile behind Sebastian's shoulder. It was a comfort he didn't know he needed.

Antony did catch Sebastian giving Tobias a rather inquisitive look.

"I'm staying," Tobias grumbled without being prompted.

Ilaria fixed herself and Sebastian a cup of tea, while he leaned forward on his elbows, staring at them rather intently. Eventually, he sat back in his chair, pressing the tips of his fingers to his temples. Antony was of the opinion to let Sebastian speak first and waited until he did so.

"I want to start with an apology," Sebastian started slowly. "I acted rashly when I walked into a room without knocking.

However, imagine my surprise. I don't even know what to think about what I saw."

"I didn't want you to find out that way," Isobel murmured.

Sebastian chuckled. "I'm sure you didn't. So, let's start with you telling me what's going on."

Antony knew that the question was directed at Isobel but this was their chance to present a united front. Like they had on Tobias's birthday with his family. To finally come clean to the one person who could actually make or break their relationship.

Laying his hand on the table, Isobel laid hers over Antony's and Tobias placed his on top.

"We're together," Antony said with as much courage as he had.

"The three of us," Isobel finished.

Antony waited for some sort of reaction out of Sebastian who continued to stare at the three of them. Ilaria, on the other hand, was quietly crying into her napkin, wearing the biggest smile Antony had ever seen. They had Ilaria's support, Antony knew that unequivocally.

"Are you happy?" Sebastian asked, never taking his eyes off Isobel.

Isobel nodded with a sniffle. "I've never been so happy."

It took a moment but Sebastian eventually nodded. Standing, he held his arms open to her and she limped over to give him

the biggest hug.

“I’m sorry, sweetpea,” he whispered to her. “In my mind, you are still that little girl who cried when I’d leave to go to sea. Who would come hide in my room when a thunderstorm was too loud? You’ve grown up and I don’t think I was prepared for what that might mean. All I’ve ever wanted is your happiness, however that may come.”

“Thank you, Uncle Bash.” Isobel buried her face in his shoulder. “They love me. They will protect me like you always have.”

Sebastian kissed the top of her head, but Antony caught his gaze. “They better, otherwise they will still have to answer to me. I had thought to bring you home with us, but it seems you are happier here.”

“I am,” Isobel replied. “When my wrist is healed, I want to finish my apprenticeship. I never thought I would love it as much as I do. Sylvia has been an amazing teacher and friend. And I want to build my life here, with Antony and Tobias. We understand and support each other. Isn’t that what you always taught me what love should be?”

“You are too much like your grandmother,” Sebastian said.

When Sebastian’s finally released her, Antony was at Isobel’s side a second later. To offer his support as she hobbled back to her seat, which Tobias had pulled out for her. He knew he was making a show of it, but there was still a part of Antony that wanted to prove to Sebastian that he was good enough for Isobel.

They finally settled in to eat their breakfast after that. Ilaria and Sebastian shared news from Ulrich while Antony and Tobias did the same. Tobias broke the news of his resignation, something no one other than Antony knew. To say that everyone was surprised would be an understatement.

“But isn’t that what you wanted?” Isobel asked Tobias once he finished.

Tobias shook his head with a shrug, finishing the rest of his tea. “Not particularly. I did it because I thought it was the most useful but I will find other ways once my hand heals.”

Once breakfast was concluded, Isobel went off with Ilaria to spend time with the children since they were all there. This left Antony and Tobias alone with Sebastian once more.

“This is the last thing I will say on the matter,” Sebastian said, crossing his arms. “I will not pretend to understand Isobel’s mind or her heart. She has always loved deeply and after the hurt she has faced in her life; I will not tolerate seeing it again. If she has decided you two are what she wants, I will not stand in the way of it. But I swear to you, if you ever make her unhappy, I will personally make both your lives living hell. Am I understood?”

“Understood,” Antony replied, Tobias echoing his sentiments.



“I couldn’t have imagined that going any better,” Isobel said, sinking down onto the lounger.

“My face is still intact.” Antony chuckled.

Tobias rolled his eyes, falling down beside Isobel and pulling her into his lap.

It was well after dinner and after the excitement of the morning and then not seeing each other the rest of the day, they convened in Antony’s conservatory. Which Antony was more than happy to share and enjoyed the fact that they had a place all their own that wasn’t necessarily their personal living space.

Digging through the various apparels on top of his work table, Antony found a mostly empty sketchpad and his tin of pencils.

Antony was sure he’d never felt lighter in his entire life. For the first time, things actually seemed like they were going his way. That he no longer lived in fear of his best or wallowed in that sadness. Tobias wouldn’t allow him to either, Antony knew that. Having Tobias’s love meant so much to him after all this time and finding Isobel was almost too good to be true. There would always be a small part of Antony that worried something would eventually not go totally their way, but he was prepared to face whatever the future held for them.

“We have a surprise for you,” Tobias muttered, pressing his lips to the side of her neck.

“Oh yeah?” Isobel asked. The smile lit up her entire face.

“I’ve spoken at length with Sylvia this afternoon and

she expressed a desire to not return to her home and forge for reasons we will not discuss,” Tobias said.

“But what does that mean for my apprenticeship if she doesn’t want to go back? I do absolutely understand why she wouldn’t want to; I don’t know if I would either.” Isobel sagged back against Tobias’s chest.

Antony nodded. “However, we have found a solution to that problem and our own desire to not have you leave us ever again.”

“Our armory is well overdue for repairs and upgrades,” Tobias explained. He ran his fingers through her hair. “We will expand the small space we have to make it larger. Sylvia will take over the role of head armorer and you will continue on as her apprentice. It will be a lengthy project but it will give your wrist time to heal while the work is being done. This way, she is more comfortable here and you don’t have to travel back and forth from town with any frequency.”

Isobel had tears in her eyes and Antony leaned down to softly kiss her lips.

“You would do that for her? And for me?” she whispered.

“I would do that and so much more, Angel.” Antony grinned. “All you ever have to do is ask.”

“Thank you.”

Antony grabbed one of the pillows beside her and tossed it on the floor. He settled himself in it and leaned back against the table. The scene in front of him was something he needed

to capture. The two people he loved the most, wrapped in each other's arms, Tobias tucking loose strands of hair behind Isobel's ear as she looked up at him in admiration.

Dipping through his case, he found the pencil he wanted. Drawing always brought Antony a sense of peace.

Nothing could have been more perfect.

THE END



## Epilogue

*Six years, two months, fifteen days.*

That's how long it had been since Isobel stepped off the ship in Drakos and inevitably changed her life forever. To meeting the two men she loved and who loved her as much as they loved each other. Theirs was not a relationship that everyone understood but it didn't matter as long as they had each other.

*Four years, ten months, eight days.*

It was Antony's idea for the three of them to get married all to each other. A concept that took a lot of thought and effort to completely work out. As Chieftain, Antony was going to need a more formal marriage contract than most others would, if at all. The fact of three parties involved instead of two made things more complicated than they needed to be. Antony and Tobias sought her opinion on the matter but Isobel has no more insight than either of them. So, she left the formal details to them.

The wedding itself was a rather small affair, all things considered with only family. All of Tobias's sisters attended, even the one who lived further away. Sebastian, Ilaria and the children came from Ulrich. Isobel opted to wear the same pale lavender dress as Ilaria, since her own mother's dress no longer existed. And her grandmother's choker, even if it didn't match.

The day before Sebastian approached her with a gift wrapped in light pink paper.

"What is it?" she asked, taking the heavy package from him.

"Just open it," he chuckled.

Isobel sat down with the box and carefully ripped open the paper. The small wooden box stared up at her and Isobel felt the tears burning her eyes. It was her grandmother's jewelry box. Lifting the lid, she found it empty except for a small thin gold bracelet and a note.

*Dearest Isobel,*

*I'm sorry to be missing the day you will finally marry. I hope you have found all the love and happiness you deserve. Do not settle for anything less. I wanted you to have this box to mark the occasion and for you to fill it with all your beautiful memories. I thought to start with the*

*bracelet your grandfather gave me for our first wedding anniversary. I know you will cherish it like I did.*

*Love you always,*

*Grandmama*

Sebastian took the bracelet from her numb fingers and secured it around her wrist.

“She gave this to me when she gave me the necklace for your birthday,” Sebastian explained.

Isobel gave a teary chuckle, wiping the moisture from her face. “Of course, she would have this all planned out. It’s like she’s here with me.”

*Four years, one month, twenty-one days.*

Isobel shouldn’t have been as surprised as she was to find out she was pregnant barely a month after getting married. Considering she had two husbands who were both particularly handsy, it was bound to happen.

Angelina Devarik was born in the middle of a snow storm. They were lucky the midwife made it on time, otherwise Clara was going to have to do it for her. Though, Isobel was still forever grateful to her mother-in-law keeping her calm, as well as keeping Antony and Tobias from equally freaking out.

There was no guessing who the father was as soon as she arrived. Angelina had the unmistakable Devarik red hair, though it was pale and wispy.

She had a full set of lungs and showed them off any chance she got. The only time she seemed not to be crying was either while eating or sleeping quite literally on top of Antony. Not that he minded it in the least, Isobel observed. Even if it didn't allow him to sleep all that much, something Antony was already quite accustomed to. But the love he had for that little girl; Isobel knew she would have her father wrapped around her finger.

Despite Angelina's attachment to Antony, that didn't mean Tobias was left out. He was able to calm her down enough or keep her out of trouble when Isobel and Antony did need to sleep. Or work.

Antony still had a clan to run and Isobel still spent what small amounts of free time she had in the armory with Sylvia. It gave her a purpose and made her feel like she was actually accomplishing something with her life. As a result, Tobias still got his fair share of quality time with their daughter. Even if she was biologically Antony's, it didn't matter in the least.

So, when Isobel fell pregnant for a second time, just weeks before Angelina's first birthday, she was significantly less surprised.

*Two years, four months, three days.*

Isobel decided she very much hated being heavily pregnant in the middle of the summer heat. However, when Eleanor

Victorian arrived only days after Antony's birthday, they couldn't have been happier. A second beautiful little girl and very much Tobias's daughter. Clara insisted that Eleanor looked exactly like all of Tobias's sisters when they were born. The same dark hair but Isobel's bright blue eyes.

Eleanor was very much the opposite of her elder sister. Quiet, reserved and hardly ever cried. She was always more than content to lay there and suck on her fist. However, having the calm little sister did help Angelina mellow out a little bit. They always had to be together.

That didn't change as they grew up.

Isobel leaned against the doorframe, crossing her arms as she watched her girls, now four and two years old. Eleanor curled up against Angelina's side, but both fast asleep and sprawled all over Tobias. He glanced up, catching Isobel's eyes and smiled.

Arms wrapped around her waist from behind, pulling her back against a strong chest. Antony dipped down to kiss the top of Isobel's shoulder.

"I never thought this would be possible for me," Antony murmured against her skin. "Love and a family."

"If there is anyone who deserves it, Antony, it's you."

"You do too. Come on, let's free Toby from his trap of little girls so the three of us can have some playtime of our own." Antony smirked suggestively.

Isobel giggled as she pulled away. It might have been six years but she still couldn't get enough of her men.

She carefully extracted Eleanor from her sister's grasp and she didn't even wake up. Isobel carried her over to her crib and laid her down. Antony did the same with Angelina though she woke up for a moment, snuggling deeper into her father's chest before he laid her down.

Tobias rose from the couch with a soft groan.

"Thank you," he whispered. "My legs were starting to go numb."

"You like it too much," Isobel murmured.

"Otherwise, they wouldn't have fallen asleep on you," Antony continued.

Isobel shook her head, taking a hold of each of their hands. She tugged them towards the door.

"Let's go before they wake up. I want some attention too."

They yanked her out the door and they hurried through the connecting doorway into their own bedroom. Isobel quickly found herself sandwiched between the two of them, hands and mouths everywhere.

Just when Isobel thought life couldn't get any more perfect, Antony and Tobias always found ways to prove her wrong.

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