

# SUCCUBUS SUMMONER

Part  
Two



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# SUCCUBUS SUMMONER PART 2

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# DEDICATION



This book goes out to Samuel L. Jackson  
for being a true man of courage

He knows that if you lack courage, you may never have  
the opportunity to use any of your other virtues

# CHAPTER 1



Samuel's coffee was bitter this morning, but life in hiding have proven surprisingly sweet. The routine of married life suited the young Summoner and formal nun more than Samuel thought it would. As he stirred his drink and chewed the remnants of his breakfast, he couldn't help but daydream about his beautiful make-believe wife.

A few months had passed while Samuel and Aurora resided at Holbeck Hall, living under assumed identities provided by the Mysterium. As the guild responsible for all activities relating to Summoners, they had been the natural choice when seeking aid. Both the church and government had seemingly turned on the Summoners, declaring them as heretics, rogues, or whatever label was the most incendiary one to assign them at the moment. They had been accused of crimes they had not committed for reasons they didn't fully understand.

Samuel had spent a great deal of time trying to puzzle it out while in hiding. He would stare out into the distance as the sun set, thinking in the same circles he had been since they first arrived. During the day, he could put it out of his mind as he assisted the people here with problems that required an Arcanist's touch—after all, he couldn't perform summonings in front of those he helped, so he was forced to pretend he was a simple magic user.

To that point, Aurora was the only one who was allowed to perform summonings between the two of them, so it was through her *nom de guerre* that the pair were registered at the Holbeck Hall's Summoner's Guild. Being a Lust Reaper, Samuel obviously couldn't take summoning jobs. He smirked to himself as he imagined old Gretchen Culler's face if he'd



summoned Hecate the hellhound succubus to help with her innocent odd jobs.

Mental meanderings like that helped to keep him amused at his situation, but truth be told, it wasn't all that amusing. When the work was done at the end of each day, and he had a moment to himself, his thoughts would always return to the flagrant accusations against them.

Samuel stood accused of over a dozen murders in what was being called the "Runerock Massacre" by the papers. It hadn't been by his hand that the soldiers there had been slain; that had been the work of the High Summoner who had been meant to train him. Nor was it a massacre, but self defense, the result of a battle instigated by the Justicars that had come to take Samuel into custody for dubious reasons.

Samuel flinched whenever he thought of that battle—the fire, the blood, the fear that lived in the back of his mind ever since that day. High Summoner Elantrica Ilmora had given her life to protect him. Now she was little more than a blurb in the papers, her name just another one of his supposed victims. Her death had become a tool for the Justicars, a convenient lie used to drum up fear that Samuel was an evil Summoner of great power.

Aurora's name had been similarly muddied. The public viewed her as a heretic or defector from the church, a nun who had forsaken her oaths and been seduced by the powers of the fiendish Summoner Eamon. It was bullshit, Samuel thought, and because it was obvious bullshit, it had no staying power in the press. Runescribe Ilmora had been so much more powerful and learned than Samuel that any ranking Summoner worth his or her salt would detect the obvious lies in their story—and that's to say nothing of the eleven others he murdered. But the lies weren't for the Summoners. It was for the unwashed masses who wouldn't know any better and would believe whatever the newspaper told them.

There was also the fact that the people who had known the two of them had spoken up loudly and clearly on Aurora

and Samuel's behalf, condemning the accounts of the papers as gross mischaracterizations. The pain Samuel experienced seeing his father defend him in writing had been a daily occurrence until the lack of developments in the story forced the papers to move on to other things.

The one grimly amusing part of it all, of course, were the accounts of his and Aurora's schoolmates citing their bitter hatred of each other as a reason why the story couldn't be believed. That had been the one aspect of it that bore hints of the truth, and even he couldn't believe it when he thought back to their unfriendly relationship back at the academy.

In fact, Aurora was the best thing in his life right now. Samuel and Aurora had finally set aside their differences and come together as a team and a couple. At least, it felt like they had. Nevertheless, it was difficult for Samuel some days to determine where the fiction of their cover ended and the truth began.

They had changed their appearance subtly and taken on the role of newlyweds who had moved out to the country. It was true that the two had become intimate, yet their relationship remained...complicated. They expressed affection for each other daily, much of it being a performance to maintain their ruse. Still, it was becoming increasingly real to Samuel. He would find himself getting lost in those moments sometimes, preferring the lies they told themselves and those around them to the grim reality that lurked just beneath the surface at all times.

"Where are you right now, Arcanist Mason?" Ketan asked Samuel, using his pseudonym. The elderly elf peered over his spectacles at him from the other side of the desk. An ancient age had claimed most of his hair and faded the luster of his blue eyes, but the High Summoner's voice still felt clear and strong every time he spoke.

"Hm?" Samuel responded, coming out of his cyclical daydream.

“Mentally,” Ketan said, pulling his spectacles off and setting them aside. “Where are you in your head right now?”

“Oh,” Samuel sighed, “Just thinking about stuff. As usual.”

“Mm,” Ketan grunted noncommittally. “Well, I need you mentally present now.”

“Yes, sir,” Samuel said respectfully, “Sorry.”

Ketan set a folder down and pushed it across the desk toward Samuel. “These are the latest reports. I want you to take a look at them, either when you get back or during the trip.”

“Get back?” Samuel asked, his brows furrowed in confusion. “Get back from where?”

“Your wife didn’t talk to you about it yet?” Ketan asked, his lips pursing to fight the smirk that tried to creep onto his face whenever he referred to them as husband and wife.

“Evidently not,” the younger man replied. “Which isn’t particularly surprising.”

“I’m sending you with her on a little errand. There’s a kid over in Wolfwater who got hurt in an accident. Some kind of fall or something. His parents want someone to come take a look, see if it’s broken.” Ketan rapped his knuckles on the desk a couple of times before pointing at Samuel. “You’re going with her as a precautionary measure.”

“Precautionary?” Samuel asked, but Ketan’s eyes drifted toward the folder, and Samuel realized what this was all about.

The frequency of monster attacks in the countryside had only increased with the passing months. Aurora was a capable Summoner in her own right, but there was no need to have her on the road by herself if Samuel didn’t have business he was attending to elsewhere. Wolfwater was only the next town over, so it wasn’t as though the trip would take them very long.

“Right, of course,” Samuel grunted as he got to his feet, snatching up the folder in the process. It contained the compiled reports of monster sightings and attacks in the surrounding area. Though violence of this nature should have fallen to the military to handle, the current situation with the war had them all tied up. So it fell to the Mysterium to do what they could and hold the line for as long as possible.

Terth hadn't entered the war yet, but keeping the border secure while their neighbors tore into one another was important. Terth's standing military had been relatively small in the years leading up to the war, but as tensions rose, the army had been built up rapidly as a precaution. Unfortunately, this precaution had drawn the ire of other nations who accused them of taking one side or another. In truth, they simply wished to remain neutral while also remaining protected.

“Kid,” Ketan said, grabbing Samuel's attention as he turned to leave. “Be careful. Things are getting worse out there. Head on a swivel.”

“Head on a swivel,” Samuel confirmed as he took his leave. There were times that Samuel felt the High Summoner was a bit paranoid, but lately, something in the air felt particularly foreboding. What Samuel once regarded as nothing more than the strange idiosyncrasies of an old elf had begun to make much more sense, not through logic or reason, but rather through a gut feeling that only grew with each passing day. With how things were going, he wondered if all of Midgardia didn't feel the same way.

“Good morning, sleepy head,” Aurora chirped as Samuel passed the stairs. “How are you this morning?”

“Great,” Samuel replied, beaming at her the former nun's voice like a resonant bell and her face the ray of sunshine that shone directly into his soul. She'd become medicine for his anxiety in these tense times. “But who are you calling sleepy head? I've been up for an hour already while you're just crawling out of bed.”

Try as he might, Samuel still wasn't quite used to how different Aurora looked with just a few minor adjustments. The blonde looked like a completely different person by simply losing her nun's habit, changing into Mysterium garb, putting her hair back in a bun, and sporting a pair of fake spectacles. On the other hand, Samuel had been forced to darken his hair considerably with magic, style it differently, alter the way he walked, dressed, and even used magic for added details. The spear he had acquired from Ilmora before her death had to be capped because of how uncommon of an implement it was in spellcasting of any kind outside of his rather unique summoning tradition, making it appear as a staff.

"Beauty such as mine requires upkeep, darling," Aurora said facetiously with a flip of her hair over her shoulder. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Sure," Samuel laughed. "Did you get any breakfast yet?"

"Not yet," the blonde replied, looking a little suspicious.

"Ketan informed me I'm to accompany you on your trip today," he said with a hint of accusation in his voice. "Must have slipped your mind."

"I don't need a babysitter," Aurora groaned as she reached the bottom of the stairs, dismissively waving a hand at him. "I'm every bit the Summoner you are and then some."

"I know," Samuel agreed, disarming her defensive nature in the process. "It's merely a precaution. He's got a stack of these reports coming in every other day. He's the one in charge here, like it or not."

"He's paranoid," Aurora grumbled as she turned to face Samuel, "I can handle myself."

"Then think of it as me keeping you company," Samuel suggested. "There's not much to do on the trip, after all. So we'll talk or something."

Aurora's eyes flashed with defiance. She wanted to argue the point further, but she had come to recognize a peace

offering from her fake husband when she saw it. Of course, he was merely trying to keep the peace between her and the High Summoner in charge. “Alright,” she relented.

“I’ll even get the wagon hitched up for you,” Samuel said cheerfully. “Why don’t you grab some breakfast real quick? I should be ready by the time you’re done.”

Aurora’s smile conveyed her gratitude without a need for words, but she thanked him anyway before kissing him on the cheek and venturing off to the kitchen to find something to eat.

Holbeck Hall wasn’t like many of the other Mysterium Guildhalls. The Summoner who had established it had built it in the style of a manor, which he then retired to. He’d had little call to use it as a guildhall for the rest of his life but had wanted it to endure for whenever the Mysterium was needed. It felt much more like a home than anywhere else Samuel had been in the last year, which was slightly comforting considering everything else he had been through.

“Master,” Snowball said as he stepped into the morning sun. “We going somewhere?”

“Only if you want to come,” Samuel answered with a smirk. He had gotten into the habit of letting his familiar roam the grounds to keep herself occupied, provided that she dressed as a human and behaved herself.

Snowball had been where it all started, manifesting at his Proving as a rabbit succubus rather than the simple rabbit he had been attempting to summon. Though she preferred to prance around in little to nothing, Samuel had convinced her to dress more modestly with a bonnet that concealed her ears. When not on the grounds of Holbeck Hall, she passed herself off as his and Aurora’s assistant. Considering all of the small jobs the couple had been doing in the area, their needing an extra pair of hands was a very convincing ruse.

“Is job?” the familiar asked in her unusual speech pattern.

Samuel nodded, “Yeah, but it’s Aurora’s job. I’m just going to keep her company. So if you want to come, you have

to stay out of her way, alright?”

“Yes, out of way,” Snowball replied with a nod.

The two of them hitched up one of the wagons with a pair of varo, large flightless birds with dark feathers. Samuel checked the supplies in the back of the wagon to ensure Aurora had everything she needed for whatever situation might arise while they were in Wolfwater before motioning for Snowball to hop in the back.

The trip to Wolfwater wasn't long, only a couple of hours, and passed quickly as the two talked to each other about nothing in particular. Samuel had to admit that times like these were some of the best in recent memory. It didn't feel like anything was at stake, or anything terrible was happening in the world when they were together like this. The sense of foreboding he experienced daily was lifted, and he was simply allowed to live his life in his new pastoral surroundings with a woman who was very convincing as his perfect wife—even to him.

Summer was in full swing, and school was out for the children that lived in the area. They could occasionally be seen running and playing along the roads or helping their families out in the fields with work. This far north, the heat wasn't as oppressive as it was in the south. Thanks to the mountain range in the distance, they got regular rains each day, three hours past noon for roughly fifteen or twenty minutes. Everything in the valley remained incredibly green, there was a daily reprieve from the heat, and the incredible scenery seemed to stretch on and on in every direction.

As they neared Wolfwater, the road turned slightly to run alongside the railroad that came into the town. Most of the rail lines for civilians had been shut down for the last few years, dedicated entirely to moving supplies and troops in the military build-up. But rampant sabotage to the lines and damage from passing monsters had forced the military to resort to standard convoys along the roads. This left the lines free in some areas to resume limited service in the hopes of

recovering enough funding in fares to pay for much-needed repairs in other areas. Samuel had only seen the train a handful of times but had been told it had come through twice a day like clockwork before the build-up.

Samuel and Aurora had been to Wolfwater enough times that people recognized them on the road as their wagon rattled into town. They exchanged a dozen waves and greetings with people they had met or assisted in the last few months as they proceeded down the main thoroughfare. From here, Samuel became less chatty. Instead, he let Aurora focus on what she needed to do while he remained on the lookout for any trouble that might come their way. Still, he managed to listen in on her business when the opportunity afforded it.

The young boy they had come to see, roughly eight years of age, was surprisingly calm for someone who had indeed broken his leg. Aurora assured him and his parents that he would be alright. The break was not serious, and she was well acquainted with methods of treating it.

It was a similar line of conversation as it always was. Once people were put at ease, they would begin to ask about Aurora or Samuel and want to know more about them. They would be evasive as often as possible, remaining humble and only referencing their cover story when backed into the proverbial corner of a conversation. Neither of them liked lying to people they were helping, and neither was pleased with having to keep the lies straight.

Aurora made use of the healing she had learned from the church, using the same rosary as she always had. It was common enough for people to carry such items that they didn't have to be explained away. No one ever seemed to question its use as her primary implement. Samuel doubted that with the limited presence of the Mysterium this far out in the country, they would even know to question it in the first place.

The boy, Cody, was the only son of the couple who had sent for them. This made them particularly anxious about the process as Aurora set the break, braced it, and began mending



it with the soft blue glow of her healing magic. At higher circles of mastery, the blue light would shift to gold, but Aurora seldom used such powerful spells when something more conservative would do the job. Once the glow faded, she announced that the break was healed.

“He should stay off of it until the end of the week, though,” Aurora cautioned as she sat back from the boy’s bedside.

“Is it not fully healed?” The mother asked fretfully.

“It is,” Aurora assured her, “but it can take time before the new bone is as strong as the old bone. Placing too much stress on it can cause it to fracture again.”

The boy’s mother nodded in understanding as she shot a look of warning at her son. Samuel chuckled as he stepped out of the bedroom to make his way back out to the wagon.

“Everything alright, then?” The father asked around his pipe as he leaned on the porch railing.

“Yeah, he’ll be fine,” Samuel replied. “How’d he break it?”

“Him and the boys were bridge jumping,” the father said a little incredulously. “Doesn’t matter how many times I tell him the water ain’t deep enough.”

“Bridge jumping,” Samuel repeated, not wanting to appear entirely ignorant.

“I suppose they don’t do much of that down south, hm?” The man chuckled, tapping out his pipe as he did.

“South?” Samuel replied, feeling a slight tingle of panic on the back of his neck.

“I figured from your accent,” the father said, looking back off the porch. “Besides, don’t most of you guild folk train at that school?”

“Ah, yeah,” Samuel responded, trying not to sound too relieved. “I’ve been trying to get rid of the accent.”

The father nodded before gesturing vaguely past some of the other houses, “There’s a bridge out that way for the train. Ever since they reduced service, the kids have taken to jumping off of it into the stream that runs under it. I say stream, but it’s more of a creek for most of the year.”

“Like in the summer,” Samuel concluded. If the water wasn’t deep enough, breaking something on the rocks below the surface became much more likely.

“Like in the summer,” the father agreed, raising his pipe. “But I suppose that’ll be a lesson to them. At least, that’s the hope.”

Aurora stepped out of the house and onto the porch with them, nodding respectfully to both men.

“Ready to go?” Samuel asked casually.

“Yeah,” Aurora answered with a sigh, clearly not looking forward to sitting on a wagon for another two hours.

“Guess that means it’s time to settle up,” the older man grunted as he came off the railing. Then, after briefly fishing around in his trousers pocket, his hand returned with some coins that he handed to Samuel.

At first, Samuel raised a hand to refuse payment, “Oh, no, sir. That’s not necessary, really.”

“I insist,” the man said, firmly taking Samuel’s hand and planting the coins in his palm. “We always pay our fair share around here.”

Samuel smiled a little, realizing now that refusing the payment would be rude. Glancing at the coins, though, he realized there were a few too many. Even though they hadn’t intended to charge them, Samuel knew the guild rate for such services. He plucked two coins from his hand and held them back out, “this is all we need.”

“Consider the rest a tip,” the father replied, not reaching for the coins. “For timely service and good company. I know what a bother it is to make this trip.”

Samuel glanced over at Aurora, who nodded to let him know it was alright to accept the money. It wasn't a comfortable experience for him, but when regular folk like this paid for something, they expected it to be taken respectfully. It was more than a simple transaction. It was an unspoken social contract that existed between them that helped to bind the community closer together.

"Besides," the man muttered around his pipe as he glanced up at the sky, "still pretty warm out. Might want to get some lunch to give things time to cool off."

He was right. Even though it was still sunny, the rain would be rolling in within the hour, and they wouldn't want to be caught in it, no matter how brief it was. So it was better to find somewhere to eat and wait it out before getting back on the road. Snowball sat up at the mention of food in the back of the wagon. The bonnet barely contained the ears that had perked up at the mention of it.

"Thank you," Samuel finally said, not just for the extra coin but for the reminder about the weather. The man simply nodded before stepping back inside to check on his son.

"He seemed nice," Aurora commented as they returned to the wagon. Samuel nodded his agreement, though he had reservations about lying to the man and deceiving such generous and honest people. When everything was done and over with, and his name was cleared, such deception would be a thing of the past. But as the pair settled in on the wagon to find a tavern to eat at, Samuel couldn't help but get lost in Aurora's smile. Helping people like this was what she was meant to do, bringing a unique kind of happiness to her every time she did. It was hard for Samuel to feel sore about the deception for long. Looking at her, he found it difficult to think about returning south to rejoin his father.

## CHAPTER 2



**A**fter waiting out the rain and enjoying lunch in town, the trio was back on the road, arriving at Holbeck Hall around mid-afternoon. Samuel saw to unhitching the varo and stowing the wagon for any other guild members who might need it later, not that he thought there would be any. Aurora unpacked some supplies she had picked up for the guildhall while they were in Wolfwater.

Though the general store of Mirfield was serviceable for most of the daily needs of the local population, the Mysterium required supplies that the locals didn't stock much of. It was one of the ways Aurora and Samuel made themselves useful around Holbeck. Any time they went to Wolfwater, they checked in to see if the guildhall needed anything and picked it up along the way.

"Can you help her with those?" Samuel asked Snowball, gesturing briefly toward Aurora as she lifted a few sacks out of the back of the wagon.

"Of course!" Snowball cheerily replied, jumping at the opportunity to relieve her boredom. Aurora smirked at the familiar, handing her a sack before glancing in Samuel's direction with a smile in her eyes.

As they went inside, Samuel stayed behind to finish up before circling around back to the large deck that was there. He enjoyed sitting and gazing into the distance every afternoon he could. Watching the light shift to golden hour and then to blue hour was one of his favorite things since coming to Mirfield. He was surprised to see Ketan sitting at one of the two tables, sipping something from a glass as he sifted through a package of correspondences.

“Sir,” Samuel began respectfully, “were you feeling a little cooped up in your office?”

Ketan glanced up at him over his spectacles before returning his attention to the mail. “Yes, I find that as I get older, it agrees less and less with me, in fact.” The High Summoner motioned toward the horizon with its rolling green hills and lush treeline. “When I was a child, I couldn’t be kept indoors for more than an hour at a time. My mother used to say that the spirits of our ancestors were whispering in my ears.”

“What happened?” Samuel asked as he sat across the table from the older elf.

Ketan pursed his lips, considering the question momentarily before raising his brows, “Responsibilities, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” Samuel sighed, beginning to understand what such responsibilities could cost a person over their lifetime. “If we got a few more people up here, it could free you up to go on walks in the woods, at least.”

“Perhaps,” Ketan muttered noncommittally before holding up a letter for Samuel to see. “Looks like we have a response from our colleagues.”

Jerking forward with anticipation, Samuel eyed the letter carefully. “It’s about time. We’ve been putting letters out for months now.”

“Just an abundance of caution, I’m sure,” the high Summoner assured him, cutting the envelope open in a single stroke with the ornate letter opener he kept on hand. Then, after only a brief moment of looking over the contents of the first page, he sighed and set it down.

Samuel peered over to see that the page wasn’t filled with letters but an array of symbols he only vaguely recognized. “Encoded?”

Ketan nodded as he removed his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose, “Correct. Unfortunately, it’ll take me

some time to decipher, so I'm afraid you'll have to wait a little longer for your answer."

The younger Summoner opened his palms. "Well, at least we know they've been receiving them. I was beginning to wonder if they were being intercepted."

Ketan nodded in silent agreement before sifting through the pile absently in frustration. Deciphering messages when he had so much else to go through would consume a lot of extra time. The elf was stretched thin as it was. Samuel could read that much on the old man's face.

"Anything I can do to help out?" Samuel inquired in an effort to shoulder some of the load.

The high Summoner shook his head as he placed the spectacles back on his face, "No, that's alright. Why don't you get washed up and relax for a bit. There's no telling when we might have to send you back out, so best to use the time while you can."

"Alright," Samuel agreed. It was good advice, but the suggestion felt more like a polite way of asking to be left alone for a little while. If that's what the man needed to get through his workload, Samuel would readily obey. The two bid each other farewell with an exchange of nods before the younger Summoner stepped inside through the back door.

With everything quiet, Samuel supposed there was no harm in washing up. He had been on the road all day, after all. Climbing the stairs and making his way to the end of the hall, Samuel arrived at his and Aurora's assigned room. From what he was told, it was a little bigger than some of the other rooms, but not by much. There were enough vacant rooms for them to each have one of their own, but having one together helped maintain the ruse that they were a married couple. They had taken advantage of the added privacy for the two of them on the first day they had moved in.

The room had come furnished but still looked relatively bare when they'd first arrived. Now, it showed signs of being

lived in for the last several months. Books, scrolls, folded laundry, and a few snacks were all telltale signs of the passage of time. Across the room, a privacy screen was interposed between the door and the bathtub. Aurora's clothes were hung over the top. She'd had the same idea about getting washed up as him.

"Everything alright?" Aurora asked as Samuel closed the door behind him. "You were out there for a while."

"I was just talking to Ketan," Samuel told her as he removed his cloak and hung it on the rack next to the door.

"About your letters?" She replied amid the subtle sound of water as she shifted her weight in the tub.

"Yeah, we got something back, but it's in code so he'll need a little more time with it before we know what it says," Samuel explained. "I just feel better knowing we got something."

"Does Arcanist Mason have any other business to attend to this afternoon, or would he like to join his beautiful wife, Carolyn, in the bath?" Aurora asked coyly. She enjoyed using their assumed names as often as possible for her amusement. Samuel had assumed the identity of Deckard Mason, an Arcanist who had formerly been in the service of a minor lord in the south. Aurora had become Carolyn Wild-Mason, a licensed Summoner from the same region as Deckard.

According to their cover story, the only reason that Deckard was residing at the guildhall was due to his marriage to a guild-sanctioned Summoner and his work assisting her with her needs. It wasn't often that the Mysterium accepted or housed non-Summoner mages, but special exceptions had been carved out in the rules for precisely this sort of thing.

"Why no, he doesn't," Samuel chuckled as he removed his clothing. He wasn't one to hesitate at an invitation like that. He stepped around the privacy screen where the blonde was slouching low in the tub. Little islands of soft, white bubbles obscured her body in places, but where they had

separated, he could make out tantalizing curves and flawless sun-kissed skin. She'd taken to the additional time outdoors better than him at first. His first few weeks had been spent contending with sunburns, while she never seemed to have the same problem.

Samuel eased himself into the hot water, which meant she couldn't have been in the bath for long. Aurora moved a little to one side to give his legs room as he sat down opposite her so they could look at each other. One of her feet caressed his calf a few times as he got settled.

"Oh, that feels incredible," Samuel groaned as the heat sank deep into his muscles. "I didn't realize how much I needed this."

As he rested his head back against the edge of the tub, Samuel closed his eyes to bask in the warmth. Aurora's hand replaced her foot, rubbing at his leg playfully. At first, it was just an idle motion of her fingers. But upon seeing how positively he responded to it, she began to rub a little more firmly down into the muscle.

"You need to be walking more," Aurora suggested. "Build your muscles so a light workday doesn't take it out of you."

Samuel opened one eye to peer at her, one brow arched. "Is that right?"

"Mhm," she intoned with a hint of teasing. "You're getting soft."

"Soft?" Samuel scoffed as he sat up a little, "Excuse me Carolyn my dear, you were in here first—and you were the one who slept in today."

Aurora's grin became mischievous, her hand creeping from his calf up to his thigh. "Yes, but my reasons for waiting in the tub have nothing to do with *anything* soft."

As the blonde eased forward to his side of the bath, her hand came to rest between his legs, taking the shaft of his manhood into her gentle grip. Just that act of her moving so



close to him with that look of trouble in her eyes had been enough to get him half erect.

“See? Already an improvement,” Aurora teased.

“Ah, so now you’re coaching me?” Samuel croaked. It still took him off guard when she got into one of these moods. A year ago, he never would have thought such a situation was possible, but now it occurred with increasing frequency. Being booted from the church seemed to have Aurora in the mindset to make up for lost time. Despite her inexperience, relative to his, she always managed clever improvisation.

“You could say that,” Aurora agreed, biting her lip as her hand stroked and coaxed him into a full erection. “How am I doing, Lust Reaper?”

Samuel nodded before abruptly shaking his head. “Not bad at all,” he confessed. Her grin widened as she firmed her grip. Her eyes searched his hungrily, savoring every little detail of his expression as she jerked him off.

“You better get Snowball in here,” she advised, moving closer to him until her warm, slick breasts squished against his chest, her nipples hard despite the heat.

“W-what?” Samuel was confused, and the fact she was climbing into his lap to straddle him wasn’t helping.

“It’s about time she got fed, isn’t it?” Her eyes gleamed as she guided the tip of his erection to her waiting entrance and sank down onto it. The water was nothing compared to her heat. He let out a low gasp that brought a look of satisfaction to her face.

“I think so?” he grunted, adjusting how he sat in the water to give her a little more leg room. Her hands went to the tub’s edge on either side of his head to provide her with additional support as she brought her hips up and down in a long stroking motion. Combined with how tight she was, it felt like he was being milked for his most vital essence.

“Well, then you need to call her,” Aurora repeated. “Don’t think I’m letting you cum inside me. I just got clean, so

I don't want to be dripping your nasty seed all over the place for the rest of the night, you horny dog.”

Though she feigned a vague tone of disgust, Samuel knew it was just one of her games—honestly, from her actions, anybody could tell. He knew that saying such things, speaking so crudely, got her going—truth be told, Samuel enjoyed it too. It wasn't about the words in general, but more specifically, *her* saying them. She had a way of conjuring mental images that always added extra flavor to the reality of what she was doing. Besides—given their peculiar past, her light bullying juxtaposed in an erotic setting was actually... cathartic.

“I don't have all day, Arcanist,” she insisted. She bit her lip and pawed at one of her breasts before letting it bounce a mere inch or two from his face as she moved up and down on his cock. “If I cum before you, I'm getting out.”

She wouldn't, Samuel knew. Part of the fun for her was making him squirm and watching him reach climax. It was the same for him as well. When they had sex, it was seldom for the purpose of getting themselves off, but rather, it was to revel in the other's bliss. It was why her little games and their dynamic worked so well. It echoed the antagonistic relationship they'd once had but with an underlying focus on acts of service to the other.

Aurora had only recently become acclimated to the idea of Snowball, or any of his summons, joining them in their sexcapades. It had always been difficult for her, even before they had found their way into bed together. She at first had mixed feelings about the indecent nature of his summoning tradition that required sexual acts to sustain the succubi he exclusively summoned. She had come around to the idea, though, when she realized that time with them didn't have to mean less time for her. And now that she was comfortable with it, she liked to add it to her rotation of games she played with him. He loved her sexual creativity.

“A-Alright, alright,” Samuel surrendered. He turned his head to call for Snowball, even as the grip of the woman’s pussy around his cock tightened. She was purposely trying to throw him off, adding her own loud, performative moans to the mix to fluster him. So, rather than calling out for Snowball, he reached out through the link between him and his familiar, beckoning her to join them. It had the added advantage of conveying a feeling along with the request so that Snowball knew precisely what she was in for when she arrived.

Within the span of a minute, he heard the door swing open and then close heavily. The sound of the latch followed. Snowball stumbled a little as she threw her clothes off, causing Aurora to ‘break character’ slightly as she stifled a giggle. Snowball emerged from around the screen as Aurora stood to make room for her in the tub, leaving her lover’s throbbing cock unfulfilled.

Snowball looked much different without human clothing. She had a subtle, soft layer of fur across her forearms and lower legs and was much more toned than one might initially suspect. Her feet were decisively rabbit-like but not as obvious as the pair of rabbit ears that emerged from her head. Her nose would twitch in different ways depending on her mood, working in tandem with her ears to let him know exactly how she felt at any given moment, even without the benefit of the link. Her red eyes focused instantly between his legs under the water.

“Is close?” The familiar asked eagerly.

“I don’t know,” Aurora coyly replied. “It’s hard to tell sometimes with how hard his desperate cock gets. Would you like to help me out?”

“Yes!” Snowball got into the tub, pecking Aurora on the cheek before leaning down to kiss Samuel as well. The poor thing was starving. Even with the vegetables they had gotten her at lunch, her primary source of nourishment was her master’s orgasm. It didn’t matter how she received it, he’d learned. He could blow his load in her pussy, ass, or mouth,

and she seemed to extract the same amount of sexual energy from it. Aurora sometimes got a thrill out of watching him do things to her that she wasn't quite ready to try. It was a sort of tutorial for her, an opportunity to learn.

The succubus reached down between his legs, taking hold of the firm length of his erection and stroking quickly. "Very hard," she confirmed approvingly, glancing over her shoulder at Aurora.

Aurora crowded in next to Snowball, capturing Samuel's lips while Snowball maintained her rhythm. Then, after a moment of their tongues dancing with one another, Aurora retook the lead as Snowball shrank back behind her. But the familiar wasn't retreating from the situation; instead, she reached to rub between the blonde's legs.

"Ohh," Aurora moaned as the succubus rubbed firmly at her clit, teasing at her entrance with one finger. She'd told Samuel once that Snowball had a particular knack for fingering her exactly the way that she fingered herself. The fact that she had spent any time at all masturbating had come as a surprise to him then, despite his sneaking suspicions.

Snowball crept up behind Aurora, kissing along her back up to her shoulder before nibbling at her neck. Her eyes continued to look in Samuel's direction, clearly indicating who the show was for. As she eased Aurora back away from Samuel, he felt a pang of confusion before her plan made itself known to him.

Sitting on her knees on the other side of the tub, Snowball pulled Aurora into her lap as an improvised chair. Aurora spread her legs, revealing the pretty pink slit below the well-kept tuft of blonde pubic hair. Snowball had her at just the right height for him to advance on her and take control of the situation. He didn't hesitate.

Water splashed from the tub as he lurched across it and plunged himself to the hilt inside of Aurora with hardly any delay to line himself up. Aurora let out a cry of delight as he sank into her before quieting herself with a bite of her lip. It

wasn't meant to last, though, as Snowball's hands crept up around Aurora to massage her breasts and tease her nipples. Samuel was quick to work his hips into a frenzy as he plundered the depths of the woman caught between him and his feisty servitor.

"Praetia's mercy," Aurora gasped happily, reaching up and holding his face in her hands. "Don't stop, Sammy, you brute, don't fucking stop!"

Samuel placed a hand on the edge of the tub to provide a little more leverage as his aching erection crushed her cunt in swift, powerful motions. The pretense of the game had melted away, giving rise to the unabated and unabashed desire of the blonde and the man that had once been the object of her childhood bullying. They'd come to an understanding about their past, which had come as a surprise to Samuel. But when that had happened, he had never dreamed that he would be in the situation he was in now, brutally assaulting her pussy as his familiar groped her soft tits and kissed at her slender neck—all while she urged them both on.

Snowball's eyes briefly looked up at Samuel, wordlessly asking him permission to proceed with an idea. The link between them, igniting scarlet with their shared arousal amid the threesome, told him everything he needed to know. He signed off on the idea with a nod as he repositioned the angle of his hips to dig deep inside the tight, slick pussy desperately trying to wring him out. One of the familiar's hands came off Aurora's breast to go down between her legs, rubbing wildly at her engorged clit. When married to the new strokes and aggression of the man deeply dicking her with long powerful strokes, Aurora had no choice as to what came next.

"Ah, AHN!" She cried out wordlessly, her eyes widening as her world shattered to pieces under the weight of her orgasm. After the briefest of moments, frozen in the initial impact of her climax, Aurora's eyes rolled back into her head. Her body tensed and shook for a few seconds longer as she rode the waves of her pleasure, using it as best as she could to coax the seed from her precious lover.

Her efforts paid off as Samuel barely managed to slide his swollen cock out of her and up to Snowball's waiting mouth. His familiar sucked and gulped as hard as she could to make the transition as seamless as possible, but there was little need. His back arched as he threw his head back, a thick load of cum shooting right across the surface of her tongue and back to her throat to fill her belly. Then, as he was coming down from the last of several spurts, Aurora joined Snowball, licking up and down his shaft as the familiar extracted every last drop of jizz from her master's tip.

Samuel slumped a little as he let out a groan of satisfaction. As he pulled away from the two women, Aurora and Snowball took a moment to show each other a little attention, sharing a sloppy kiss with the taste of Samuel still in the familiar's mouth.

As he eased himself back down into the water on the other side of the tub, Aurora gave a contented sigh. "Mmm, the things I do to ensure this creature of yours is well fed."

"You're quite the altruist," Samuel scoffed.

"I am, of course—also for satisfying that beastly dick of yours," Aurora said with a grin as she twirled a finger in Snowball's hair. "Practically a saint."

## CHAPTER 3



Samuel's head came off the pillow in a jerking motion in response to the knock at the door. He glanced around the room briefly, thinking perhaps he had been dreaming and the knock had been part of it. But when the sound came again, he knew it wasn't the case. Beside him, Aurora grumbled as her eyes came open to stare up at the ceiling. Snowball pulled herself closer to the blonde, determined not to comply with the demands of the knocking.

Swinging his feet over the side of the bed and walking naked across the room, Samuel leaned against the door before speaking, "Yeah?"

"Ketan wishes to speak with you two," the voice of an older man replied. Samuel recognized it as Marl, another Summoner who had been working in the guildhall for longer than Samuel had been alive. He likely had enough experience to hold a higher position if it weren't for the fact that there were no positions to advance into around here.

"Alright, I'll be down in a moment," Samuel answered.

"Make it quick," Marl grouched. "He's been waiting long enough."

Samuel supposed Marl must have been knocking for some time before getting a response. Of course, it was also possible that he was being impatient the way Marl often was. Despite being the man in charge and high Summoner, Ketan was far less demanding of people's time than the wizened human.

"Alright," Samuel assured him as he stepped away from the door. Aurora was already pulling herself out of bed. Snowball made a whining sound of dismay at losing the

additional body heat. He paused to watch as the blonde Summoner brushed her hair out and got some clothes together.

“Are you going to move your ass or just gawk at me like a pervert?” she asked without taking her attention off of what she was doing.

“Just thought I’d take a moment to stop and enjoy the view,” Samuel laughed. “Besides, I don’t see you rushing to cover yourself up, you naughty exhibitionist.”

Aurora suppressed a smirk. “I’m not about to dance around to avoid your lechery just because you can’t keep your perverted eyes under control.”

“I dunno,” Samuel chuckled with a shrug, grabbing his clothes from his dresser, “watching you dance in the nude sounds like a great idea.”

Her brush flew past him, smacking the corner of the dresser before falling to the floor in a clatter. Samuel turned, feigning a little shock while she struggled not to laugh at his foolishness. “My heart, my dear wife, why would you do such a thing?”

“Because you’re a prick, and you deserve it,” Aurora huffed as she pointed at him. “You’re going to make us late!”

Samuel glanced down at the brush and spread his arms to make himself a target. “Would you like best two out of three?”

It didn’t take long for them to dress, despite their antics. Samuel even managed to get Snowball out of bed and properly attired as well, as they had appearances to keep up, even though most of the senior members of the guild knew what she was and the nature of the ruse.

The two Summoners were down in the main meeting hall within minutes. It was a large room to house the more substantive meetings for Summoners and host any non-mysterium members who had business to bring to the guild. By the looks of things, a small meeting had been let out just minutes before their arrival. Ketan glanced up, motioning with two fingers for them to approach.



“High Summoner,” Aurora said respectfully, observing the protocol for official business matters.

After shuffling a few papers, the elf stepped out from behind the podium. “Sorry to interrupt your evening of bliss, but I’ve got some news and a job for you.”

Samuel’s face turned a little red at the mention of their prior activities. How had he known? “Uhm, excuse me?”

Ketan’s lips pursed in that characteristic way when he actively resisted a grin or a smirk. “The ears aren’t just for show, son,” he said as he tapped the end of a long elven ear.

Aurora stifled a laugh with her hand over her mouth as her cheeks turned a shade of red. Judging by how hot it suddenly felt in the room, Samuel was certain his face was doing the same. With the formality of the moment effectively dismissed, Ketan handed him a piece of folded parchment.

“Deciphered the message if you’d like to give it a read,” the high Summoner explained.

“Is this something we want to be discussing in here?” Aurora wondered aloud.

“Probably not,” Ketan admitted as he motioned for the two to follow.

The high Summoner led them out through the back, where they walked one of the many paths that led to and from the guildhall into the surrounding town. The one they walked specifically wound out toward the tree line that Samuel and Ketan had been observing earlier that afternoon. It was blue hour, with the sun now under the horizon but some of its fading light remaining in the sky above. Soft azure hues dominated the sky, with only a few stars beginning to appear. The moon was full, so the light level wouldn’t drop much further, only shifting into a gentle silver.

“So, the message,” Ketan said, pointing at the parchment. “It’s from High Summoner Udozhal; your old headmaster.”

Samuel raised a curious brow as Aurora leaned in closer, just as interested.

“You can read it over when you have a chance,” Ketan explained. “It’s sort of long and rambles on, specifically to make deciphering it such a chore. But the general gist is that they’ve located a teacher for you and that she’ll be arriving shortly by train in Wolfwater.”

The pair of Summoners exchanged surprised glances before turning to face Ketan, each of them ready with a battery of questions. The high Summoner raised his hand to quell their inquiries preemptively, “I’d be happy to answer your questions later, but as I said, I also have a job for you, and it is time sensitive.”

Banishing the contents of the letter from his mind temporarily, Samuel took notice of the tone of urgency in Ketan’s voice. “What’s going on?”

“There was an attack at the north edge of town,” Ketan explained. “A couple of late traders coming in along the road were injured. So I need Carolyn to see to their wounds while Deckard goes to the site of the attack to determine what we’re dealing with. Take it out if you can.”

“Can I borrow a varo?” Samuel asked. Neither he nor Aurora was about to delay when the safety of innocent people was involved.

Ketan nodded, motioning toward Aurora. “You too. We’ve been told that their wounds were particularly serious. Unfortunately, one of them may not make it.”

The response was immediate as they slipped into a more focused mindset. Each had their task and said very little to one another as they retrieved their gear and mounted their varos.

“Be careful, Sammy,” Aurora whispered, a look of affectionate concern on her face as they brought their steeds into a light canter.

“Good luck,” Samuel responded, guiding the large bird off the path as they parted ways. Samuel would have taken the

road into town before going north if he weren't pressed for time. The situation called for a more direct route, however.

The look of worry on Aurora's face lingered in his mind. She knew how capable of a Summoner he was, but while operating as Arcanist Mason, he couldn't use his summoning abilities. The fact that every summon he used would manifest in the form of a succubus was a dead giveaway to his identity. Instead, he had to rely on other forms of magic that had once been merely considered foundational studies while training. He'd become rather adept with them in the last few months, cooking up various workarounds from his typical methodology when needed.

At a gallop, it didn't take long for him to reach the site of the attack. Varo were known for their swiftness and strong maneuverability, making them ideal for crossing rough terrain at speed. The scene was a mess, with the remains of the trader's wagon strewn across the road chaotically. What was left of the supplies was covered in blood, and the corpse of the varo that had been pulling the wagon lay in the grass a few yards off the road.

"Psst!" Someone whispered from somewhere nearby. It took Samuel a moment to realize it was coming from a particularly dense patch of long grass.

"Hello?" He asked, moving his mount forward to try and get a better look at who was there.

"Shh!" the person replied. It was evidently a young woman with brown hair and a smattering of dark freckles on her face. "Shut the fuck up and get down!"

Samuel sighed as he swung his leg off the saddle and slipped off the back of the varo, the gravel crunching under his boots as he did. "Relax, I'm here to help."

The girl poked her head up above the grass slightly. "I don't care; you're going to get us both killed if you don't hide right now!"

“Can’t really hide the varo,” Samuel replied incredulously with a vague gesture back at the beast. After a moment of consideration, the woman crept from the grass, clearly irritated at his arrival rather than grateful.

“What are you doing here?” he asked as she brushed herself off. Her eyes kept scanning the horizon every couple of seconds. Even in the moonlight, there wasn’t much to see.

“Hunting the beast,” she whispered. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here—” he began before she interrupted.

“—to help, yeah. But why *you*? You’re not a Summoner.” As Deckard Mason, Samuel didn’t dress like a Summoner. His credentials weren’t as apparent due to the slightly different practices with licensed Arcanists. Reaching into his coat, he produced a medallion, marking him as a Mysterium adjunct.

“I might not be a registered Summoner, but I assure you that as an Arcanist, I’m more than prepared to handle the situation.” After she had a look at the medallion, he placed it back inside his coat. “Are we good?”

“Yeah, we’re good,” the woman agreed. “I’m Billie Malta, a hunter.”

The surname sounded familiar to Samuel. It only took him a moment to place it, “Vin’s kid?!”

“I’m eighteen!” Billie objected with an offended huff.

“Your father is gonna have a fucking fit,” Samuel groaned. While Billie had good intentions, she had struggled to prove herself as a capable hunter around town for the last half year. Her father, who ran the local general store and had once been a professional hunter himself, had repeatedly lamented the situation to Samuel and Aurora.

“Not if I fucking kill it!” Billie spat. Samuel wasn’t so confident that success would be enough to assuage her father’s concern for her safety.

“Right,” Samuel answered her, smacking his lips. “So what exactly is it? You’ve been stalking it, I assume?”

“I don’t know,” Billie admitted. “I can’t see the damn thing.”

“Well, it is pretty dark, so—”

“No, no!” Billie interrupted again. It seemed to be a habit with her. “You don’t understand. It was right there, tearing the flesh from the varo, and I couldn’t see it.”

Samuel’s brow arched as a shiver ran down his spine, immediately causing him to check their surroundings again. This time, instead of surveying the damage, he was looking for tracks. “It’s invisible?”

“I guess?” Billie admitted, holding her bow at the ready as if they were about to jump into the fray. “I saw the meat tearing free, then just vanishing while it was chewing.”

“It’s invisible,” Samuel concluded. “Delightful.”

Billie hunched a little lower, her eyes wide in fear. She hadn’t been convinced about what she’d seen with her own eyes, but now that he’d weighed in on it, the reality of the situation came rushing back to her. “Fuck!” she whispered, “What do we do?”

Samuel forced calm into his voice before answering. It wouldn’t do either of them any good to panic and lose their cool. “Well, the first thing we’ll have to do is make it visible.”

“Okay,” the young girl agreed. “So, how do we do that?”

Samuel reached over to his varo and pulled the capped spear from the holster. It looked more like an ornate staff with the end concealed how it was.

“Teamwork,” he said confidently as he touched the bow with the end of his staff, speaking a word of magic as he did. “Liwepo.”

Veins of magical energy snaked across the surface of the bow, eventually igniting the string with a soft purple glow. The

arrow Billie had nocked on the string began to hum with stored potential in the form of lightning. The young girl's eyes went wide as she stared down at it.

Samuel was a capable magic user, even without the use of summoning. But if the creature was what he thought it was, every little bit of extra preparation would be needed to ensure they both got home unharmed.

“You want a chance to show them what you can do,” Samuel said, nodding to the weapon. “Here it is. Don't screw it up.”

Billie stared at him, steeling herself before answering with a nod of her own. Behind them, the varo began to stomp its feet and shift around uncomfortably. Even though the predator nearby was invisible, the creature could still smell it. Samuel briefly regretted not tying it off to prevent it fleeing the danger, but there wasn't time for it now.

Stepping into the middle of the road, Samuel began to draw a single rune in the dirt with the end of his staff. Runes were a common enough practice among Arcanists that their use wouldn't tip off the casual observer to his real identity. Indeed, he doubted even more skilled individuals would suspect anything of it by itself. The key was to use different runes than he had favored in the past.

The tension rose as the varo began to back away from them, thrashing its head from side to side with each step. Billie reached out to the creature with one hand while holding the arrow in position on the bow with the other, “Shh, girl. It's alright. We're not going to let anything happen to you. It's okay.”

The beast visibly calmed, much to Samuel's surprise. The girl had a way with animals, it seemed. With the rune completed, he stepped away to join her. “When I cast the rune, it's going to get messy. I need you to remain focused and shoot the first thing you see once everything is drenched.”

“Drenched?” Billie asked, hastily placing her other hand back on the bow to draw the arrow back.

Samuel held the staff up with both hands at an angle, ensuring his spell would have a downward trajectory when finally cast. Unfortunately, he didn't have enough time to explain the plan. Instead, he had to trust her reflexes and ability to follow simple instructions under pressure.

Both of them fell dead silent, having only the benefit of sound to mark the creature's approach. Regardless, his eyes shifted wildly around them to observe the tall grass along the side of the road to ensure that it was not attempting to flank them. Though the creature was invisible, its interactions with its surroundings could still be observed.

Ahead of them on the road, the low sound of dirt and gravel shifting alerted Samuel to the creature's approach, though he'd almost missed it. It was coming at them from exactly the direction he had predicted based on the varo's reaction. It only served to confirm the fact as it shifted again uncomfortably. Samuel held his breath as an added precaution not to miss a sound the creature made.

The moment he heard something brush against the side of the broken wagon, Samuel let the spell fly. “Watuma!” Samuel bellowed.

Usually, the spell was reserved for filling containers with fresh, clean water. Aurora used it regularly to fill the bathtub at the guild hall. Its variable capacity made it usefully versatile, but without a container to fill, it typically produced enough water to fill a small bucket before fizzling. The rune he'd inscribed was the key. As the water formed at the point where he'd drawn it, the rune glowed as it reacted before violently exploding.

Instead of a small amount of water, a massive sphere of water sprung to life, expanding in all directions. After several feet, it lost cohesion and became a chaotic splashing spray that drenched everything for another dozen or so feet. Though the pair was far enough back that the splashing was relatively

superficial, the creature was much closer. Not only was its general shape revealed by the water drenching it, but the force of the sudden burst had thrown it against the side of the ruined wagon.

Without a moment's hesitation, Billie loosed her arrow at the creature. Halfway between its destination and point of origin, the arrow flashed brightly as it became infused with magical lightning. The young hunter's aim was true as the lightning-infused arrow found a home in the broad side of the invisible beast. Sparks of electricity licked across its frame and down to the ground as it cried out in pain. Slowly, the nature of the beast revealed itself.

On all fours, it was taller than a varo at its shoulder and twice as long from end to end. Large, dark, and vaguely feline in shape, the dark eyes of the shadowcat flared with malice and murderous intent.

Shadowcats were semi-intelligent and possessed the ability to conceal themselves in darkness. The mechanism that allowed them to do so wasn't fully understood. Still, it was discovered long ago that the creatures required focus to maintain their highly specialized invisibility. If lost, even for a moment, they became visible again. Though, even without its ability in play, the jet-black fur of the beast still made it difficult to track under cover of night. Wet fur, however, was much easier to see by the full moon's light.

The thrill Samuel usually got from a well-executed plan or correct prediction of an outcome withered away quickly. He had been right about it being a shadowcat, but unfortunately... it was a shadowcat. Easily one of the most dangerous large-cat monsters in the world that were definitely not native to the area was mere feet from him, and it was angry.

"Yeah, you're going to want to keep going with that," Samuel said sideways to Billie as the monster scrambled to regain its balance. Billie didn't need to be told twice, drawing and knocking another arrow in a single fluid motion before letting it fly. The speed and agility of the shadowcat were so



impressive it was able to roll its shoulders precisely to one side to avoid the worst of the lightning arrow as it sailed past it. Little sparks of electricity licked across its hide as it came within half an inch of the monster, continuing into the dark before vanishing.

Samuel pointed his staff at the ground between them as the beast's weight shifted to move for a pounce. "Flafre!"

Every last bit of moisture on the ground and in the air occupying the space between them was converted instantly into ice and frost. The moisture in the air became frozen fog and snow, while the muddy road became treacherous and slick. The shadowcat slipped in an almost comical fashion, not expecting the sudden change in terrain.

"Press the attack!" Samuel commanded as the large cat slipped about, trying to regain its footing. Billie complied, loosing two more arrows of lightning into the shadowcat in rapid succession. Samuel noted the impressive grouping and wondered how the girl had struggled to make a name for herself this whole time.

Samuel broke from her side, moving off the road slightly and toward the grass. "Crydat!" he cried, blasting the flank of the shadowcat with a magical dart of pure cold. The lightning of the arrows and the cold of the spells made it difficult for the beast to focus, but not impossible. Being more intelligent than the average housecat, the creature identified which of the two it needed to neutralize first: Samuel. It lunged, swiping with one of its massive front claws, forcing Samuel to fall backwards to keep his face firmly on his head.

The shadowcat was the one to press the attack, shifting its weight to leap down on Samuel, who barely managed to roll forward under it. The beast passed over him like a dark wind, coming about for another attack just as Samuel struggled to his feet.

Another arrow streaked through the night, finding a home in the powerful muscle of the shadowcat's neck. Though not enough to force the beast to break off its attack, it was enough

to make it flinch. Mounting the staff onto his shoulder, Samuel took aim and closed his hand around a rune he had painted on the weapon shaft for situations where power was the only answer to a problem.

“RU!” Samuel roared, hurling a spell of pure entropy at the ground before the monster. Without the amplifications of his implement and the rune he’d drawn on it, the spell would have merely degraded the physical structure of its target. But overtuned as it now was, the spell caused the earth to erupt in a blast of chaotic destruction, showering the beast in high-speed debris.

The destruction wasn’t the point. The material it produced was. As the large cat barreled forward through the pain, Samuel brought the staff around in a tight twirling motion. Then, with his will and intent focused to a fine point, he imagined what the staff looked like in its true form as a spear. The flying debris snapped together in mid-air to form the shape of that spear and hurled down into the back of the shadowcat’s skull, arresting its moment a mere foot from Samuel.

The beast’s body shuddered as its eyes rolled back into its head. Another arrow sank into its skull a second later, causing Samuel to look back over his shoulder at Billie, who was knocking yet another arrow.

“It’s dead, Billie,” Samuel assured her. “We got it.”

“You’re sure?” She quivered nervously. It was good to see that even though she was shaken, it had not prevented her from acting.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he replied as he shuffled back onto the road with a groan. His whole body was already beginning to ache with the combination of physical exertion and the channeling of powerful magic. “My wife was right,” Samuel laughed.

“About what?” Billie asked, her eyes still fixed on the shadowcat as if she expected it to spring back to life and lunge

at them.

“I need to get more exercise.”

# CHAPTER 4



ou smell like a wet cat,” Aurora grumbled when Samuel returned home that night and slid into bed. He probably should have bathed again, but his muscles ached with the exertion of the battle. People who weren’t magic users thought magic was something that just manifested from nowhere and that mages of all stripes had simply learned the tricks of how to coax it into being. The truth was more complex, as was often the way of things.

Magic could be found throughout the natural world, but the bulk of it was pulled from the Outer Spheres, a complex array of alternate planes of existence with a variety of contradicting natural laws. Typically, magic users aligned themselves with one of the Spheres that held the power they wished to make use of. From there, they borrowed that sphere’s natural laws to create effects through structured spells in the physical world. This was done by ushering the energy in through the mind and body of the wielder.

Summoners like Samuel circumvented much of this stress by bringing entities collectively called Outsiders into the physical world. The outsider came with a suite of abilities and magic all its own, and as such the Summoner experienced only a fraction of the fatigue that slinging spells would otherwise impose upon the people of Midgardia. But without the option to summon, Samuel had taken the burden onto himself and felt it every time he went out on some new errand for the Mysterium. It wasn’t as bad as it used to be, of course. Implements helped, and he finally had one he could use, even if it had to be disguised. Runes also eased the burden, but he had to be careful about which he utilized to avoid being discovered.

“A wet cat, huh?” Samuel replied, grunting as his head hit the pillow. “You’re surprisingly spot-on.” He’d already decided to wash up in the morning before giving a detailed report to Ketan. He’d already let the older elf know the situation had been resolved just to set his mind at ease.

Over the next two weeks, Samuel found himself going to bed in much the same condition. Something always kept him from having a full day of rest to recover his strength. He existed in a perpetual state of pain and fatigue from the exertion but did his best never to complain.

After all, it wasn’t like he was laboring in the fields for someone else’s profit. On the contrary, he was making a difference in people’s lives, which was why he wanted to be a Summoner to begin with. He and Aurora were sent out as a pair as often as it made sense, but there were numerous times when they had to go separate ways to complete very different jobs from one another.

At last, he had a reprieve from the grind when he was informed by Ketan that his new teacher would be arriving any day and that he was to remain on hand for whenever she showed up. She would be coming via the train into Wolfwater, which got him thinking one afternoon about the nature of such things.

Samuel’s father had strong opinions on trains, as he recalled. He believed that they were for cargo, not for passengers. His distrust of them for the latter purpose was so great that it had instilled some of it in Samuel as well, forcing him to consciously push back against the idea every time he felt it bubbling up inside of him.

The so-called teacher arrived early the next day—without incident, of course. Samuel had expected to head to Wolfwater to meet her but found the woman sitting in the common room sipping some tea as he and Aurora came down the stairs.

“Deckard,” Ketan said as he rose from his chair across from their guest. “This is Ylvesnia Hithercome. She will be training you in the advanced forms you inquired about.”

The elven woman had risen with Ketan when he stood, turning to face Samuel as the two of them were introduced. Ylvesnia had a cool, stern exterior that Samuel typically expected from elves. It was one of the things that made Ketan such an anomaly to him at times. She was tall, even by elven standards, and built in a feminine way but with a carefully trained physique. Her clothes, which seemed more masculine than feminine, much in contrast to her figure, were unconventional but well-made. The short sleeves of her shirt revealed tattoos of intricate elven knotwork that ran down her arms to the wrist. He recognized the subtle shapes of runes hidden among them.

Samuel took a few steps forward, extending his hand to meet her. To his surprise, she snapped up his hand in a firm handshake to give it a few pumps. The bangle on her wrist hummed with magical power as it shifted slightly with the greeting. Samuel got the sense it was likely the same implement she had been using for years, given how much power he sensed emanating from it.

“Mornin’,” Ylvesnia greeted him, her elven accent immediately taking him by surprise. He’d never heard one so pronounced. Most elves living in Terth had only the faintest hint of it if they had one at all. “D’ye always sleep in, or were ye out late last night?”

“The sun has barely been up for an hour,” Aurora laughed. The elven Summoner’s gaze shifted slightly to regard her impassively. The remark had not been intended as a joke. Her fiery-red hair, cut into a short bob, had a distinct way of framing her face to focus her gaze and make her pointed ears appear slightly longer than usual. Her eyes, an intense bright blue, remained on Aurora for a few seconds longer than the blonde woman found comfortable before the elf turned her attention back to Samuel.

“With our trainin’, we’ll be up before sunrise each day,” Ylvesnia stated matter-of-factly. “Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Samuel said as he stepped back. It was the first time he’d felt nervous with another Summoner in quite a while. “Whatever it takes.”

The elven woman lifted her chin as her eyes glimmered with a hint of approval at his response. Had he not had experience with elves while in school, he might have found her even more difficult to read. “We have plenty of rooms available here for you if—”

Ylvesnia waved a hand, “I’ll have time to sleep later. For now, we train.”

“O-Oh!” Samuel stammered, a little surprised. Her nonsense attitude and dismissal of formalities was something he’d have to get used to.

“We’ve allocated something a little more private for your lessons,” Ketan clarified with a glance between them. “The old cabin on the west end of the property is where you’ll be reporting to.”

Samuel knew of it, having passed it a few times in the last several months. He couldn’t recall what it had ever been used for, though. There were a few small buildings like that scattered around the land the Mysterium owned. Most were simply to store volatile materials or things that only saw seasonal use.

“Meet me there,” Ylvesnia said. “Bring yer mate as well.”

“Excuse me?” Samuel replied, taken off-guard by the remark.

Ylvesnia’s eyes darted between them before clarifying, “Ye two have been matin’, haven’t ye?”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Aurora answered with a forced politeness. “But it’s not the sort of thing we talk about in such a way in our culture.”

Ylvesnia’s expression shifted to impatience. “It matters not— ye’re to come along too. It’s a vital component of his

trainin’.”

“I am?” Aurora asked, genuinely surprised.

“Ye’re the one he’s fuckin’, so yes.” Ylvesnia nodded shortly before exiting the room at a brisk pace.

“Ah,” was all that Aurora could manage to say as her face turned a little pink.

Ketan’s lips pursed in amusement as he looked between them. “Good luck.”

It only took them twenty minutes or so to prepare and meet the new Summoner at the cabin, stopping only to grab food from the kitchen and eat it on the way. The elven woman was there waiting for them, standing patiently in a way that reminded Samuel of how soldiers stood at ease when in formation.

“It’s not much,” she remarked with a brief gesture toward the cabin. “But ye’ll hardly recognize it by the time I’m done with it.”

“So, where do we begin?” Samuel asked as he pulled his coat off and set it on an unused crate near the door.

“What do ye know of yer tradition, Samuel?” The use of his actual name caught him off-guard. Aurora had been the only one to use it like that in months.

Samuel glanced at the blonde woman before answering. “Not much. I only had a little explained to me before...”

Ylvesnia bowed her head solemnly, nodding once to let him know she understood.

“She was able to tell me that the whole tradition comes from succubi,” Samuel continued, trying not to get lost in the memory of the lost High Summoner. “That my kind were hunted down by the church and basically exterminated. Few have appeared since then.”

The elf nodded again, agreeing with the rudimentary assessment he had given her. “This is true, but before that, the



Lust Reapers were known as a subset of my line: The Mienkardi.”

Samuel’s head tilted to one side, his curiosity firmly seized. “Mienkardi?”

“Loosely translated, it means Wish Crafter,” Ylvesnia explained. “We specialize in desires and passion. Not just seein’ inside ye to know what ye want, but to even make ye want things ye never did before. It’s a flame that burns in all livin’ things, ye see. Manipulated and put to use like any fire.”

Aurora’s attention was also piqued now, as a Flame Sculptor herself. Much of her summoning had been flavored with the influence of her studies in the church, but it wasn’t how she had started at school.

“The church labeled us collectively as ‘Beguilers’ back then to foster distrust among their people,” the elven Summoner continued. “Eventually yer kind became known as ‘Seducers’ as the path became more distinct.”

“So the Lust Reapers were elven in origin?” Samuel asked.

“Not exactly,” Ylvesnia clarified, trying to think of how best to explain it. “Mienkardi use their power as a window into a person’s soul. In elven culture, denying one’s true self or repressing that which you desire is considered unhealthy. Similarly, having no desire or purpose at all is also unhealthy. To be duty-bound without passion or care is a sickness of the spirit. This could relate to any aspect of a person’s life. It could be yer vocation. It could be yer craft, who ye love, who ye wish dead, and so on.”

“So why did they call you Beguilers?” Samuel wondered.

“Makin’ people want things is something we can do, yes. But it’s hardly the focus of what we do. There aren’t many elves who lack direction in life. That’s more a human ailment,” Ylvesnia responded.

“And giving direction to the bereft is not something the Praetian Church likes to compete with people on,” Aurora

added.

“Correct,” the elf agreed. “So they demonized us. An oft-repeated tactic when ye wish to make a rival into ‘the other’ and villainize them. Doin’ so allows you to justify all manner of things in pursuit of yer goal.”

Samuel regarded both of the women silently. Both had been touched by the corruption of the Praetians in very different ways but had come to the same conclusion. They understood what was at play much better than Samuel would have had he not known Aurora.

“So the Seducers were just an off-shoot?” Samuel asked, bringing the focus back to the original line of inquiry.

“They were specialists,” Ylvesnia said. “They focused on sexuality, lust, physical desire. There were only half a dozen at the time, and they studied how those things linked with spiritual health. Their findings were recorded in detail and added to the archives in Imath’Alora. The first Lust Reapers were humans that acquired copies of this research to build from.”

“But what were they trying to achieve?” Aurora pressed as she stepped closer.

“The details are lost to the purges,” Ylvesnia responded. “Only theories exist, and most of them tainted by the bias of the church. What we know is the Lust Reapers succeeded in harnessin’ the power of lust and sexual desire as a way of empowerin’ their magic.”

“It makes their magic stronger?” Aurora laughed a little incredulously.

“Ye haven’t noticed an increase in yer mate’s power recently?” Ylvesnia tilted her head skeptically. “From what I’ve been told, he’s keepin’ up with all of ye while using only a portion of the tools available to him. Usin’ spells only, no summons.”

Aurora opened her mouth to respond, but nothing came out. After a moment of consideration, she realized Ylvesnia

was onto something. “Well, how about that,” she laughed, looking over at Samuel with an amused twinkle in her eye. Samuel thought she might have even looked a little proud, realizing she was the muse that made him so powerful.

“I suppose the difference will be more noticeable to me when I start using some of my normal magic,” Samuel speculated. He knew the elf had a point, but it was hard to see its scope in practice with everything he’d been doing. He wasn’t even using spells that aligned with the ideas of lust and sexual desire, now that he thought about it. What might he be capable of once he could properly focus his efforts?

“That would seem likely,” Ylvesnia confirmed as she motioned for him to move away from the crate and sit on the soft grass before her. “After the proving, ye were expected to fall into one of a few traditions based on aptitudes ye had shown in your training. The headmaster was surprised to see ye defy these expectations but to manifest as a possible Lost Tradition. So he had Shizira reach out to me discreetly.”

“You know Shizira?” Samuel looked surprised as he crossed his legs on the grass. Aurora sat beside him, recognition of the name lighting up in her eyes as well. Shizira had been one of their professors at Vulkswain’s, an elven Weald Watcher who had taken a particular interest in Samuel when he had been there. He wondered if she had been hoping he would become a Weald Watcher like her after what Ylvesnia had just said.

“We’re the same clan,” the elf explained with a brief gesture to the tattoos on her arms.

“I never saw any markings on her like that,” Samuel confessed.

“It would be highly inappropriate to expose them to a student considering where she has most of them,” Ylvesnia explained, earning a brief laugh from Aurora and a surprised face from Samuel.

“It was an excellent opportunity for me, so here I am.” The elven woman opened her hands. “Now, let us begin.”

What followed was a recap of the nature of the Outer Spheres, albeit from the perspective of the elven traditions of magic and summoning. The Outer Spheres were wholly different from the physical world, with parts informing aspects of Midgardia and what magic could naturally occur. Mapping of the Spheres had begun much earlier for the elves than it had for the humans of the Mysterium, so the teachings of the elves contained a more nuanced history for each of the Spheres.

Each primary element had a sphere, as did each secondary element. More could be found where the Spheres overlapped—esoteric Spheres believed to be much smaller in size with far less influence. In the center was Midgardia, a balanced confluence of the power of the Outer Spheres. But this was where elven teachings vastly differed. The Mysterium treated the Midgardian sphere as the center of all these things while the elves factored in the presence of the Inner Spheres, celestial bodies observed in the sky, as well. Not only that, but they accounted for additional Spheres not officially recognized by the Mysterium, what they called the Emotive Spheres.

As Ylvesnia explained it, the Emotive Spheres were those closest to physical reality, overlapping with it in ways that the Elemental Spheres did not. Rather than existing before the sum of creation had been formed, they had come into being after the propagation of mortal thought and emotion. The Emotive Spheres held the epitome of mortal emotion, with each of the most potent holding influence in Spheres entirely their own. The Mienkardi and Lust Reapers drew their influence from the Ardent Sphere, a place of pure passion and desire in all its forms. By forming a connection to this sphere through the power of lust, Samuel could strengthen his magic and hone his ability the way it was meant to be.

The concept wasn't entirely foreign to Samuel. Though not classified as Elemental or Emotive Spheres, there were others the Mysterium acknowledged in their teachings. Many, like Heaven and Hell, were expanded upon by the Praetians,

who emphasized their importance and influence over all others in how they shaped the world. In fact, the church taught that these Spheres went so far as to influence the formation of all creation, not just Midgardia. Of course, such claims couldn't be proven, but the Mysterium had done enough research to confirm actual contact with each, noting both of them to be equally dangerous.

“So, does this mean that succubi aren't native to Hell?” Aurora asked, cutting across his thoughts on the matter. It was a fair question. Succubi were classified as demons, the Outsiders native to the sphere of Hell. But what did that mean if the power of the Lust Reapers was drawn from the Ardent Sphere?

Ylvesnia didn't have an immediate response to this question. Instead, she heaved a sigh before speaking carefully, “Some of these answers I don't possess. However, my hope is that with yer training, Samuel, we might gain much-needed insight.”

Aurora didn't seem satisfied with the response. Samuel imagined his face looked much like hers, albeit with a more discouraged lean. Then, with a wave of her hand, Ylvesnia dismissed any further questions they might have.

“A practical demonstration,” she announced. “To show ye the sort of things yer meant to delve into.”

“Alright,” Samuel agreed, looking forward to something a little more tangible than theory and places he'd never see.

“Ye will embrace each other as lovers,” Ylvesnia instructed. “In doing so, Samuel, I want ye to focus on the feeling not just of physical contact but in yer mind and yer heart.”

Samuel glanced at Aurora bashfully before looking back at his instructor, “I'm sorry, you want us to *what?*”

“Kiss,” Ylvesnia clarified, motioning with both hands for them to move closer. “Ye know how, I assume?”

“Oh!” Samuel laughed uncomfortably. “I thought you meant we had to—”

“Fondle her breasts when you do,” Ylvesnia interjected flatly.

“Now, hold on!” Aurora yelled, covering her tits with both hands. “Is this some kind of elven voyeur shit you’re on right now!?”

Ylvesnia sighed, placing a hand over her face as she grumbled something in Elven. Samuel’s Elven wasn’t very good, but he caught enough of it to know she was becoming annoyed with human inhibitions. “Ye would prefer he fondle mine?”

Aurora’s expression became more serious at the idea of Samuel and the Mienkardi kissing and fondling each other. “Absolutely not.”

“To properly train him, we must establish a baseline understanding of his connection to lust, Aurora,” Ylvesnia explained calmly. “This is why ye are here.”

Aurora glanced at Samuel with a playful scowl, “Leave it to a filthy degenerate like you to find a way to make studying about boobs.”

Samuel laughed as he moved closer to Aurora. Reaching out to the side of her face, he gently pulled her close, capturing her warm petal-soft lips with his. He felt a jump inside of him that he’d grown accustomed to over the months of their blossoming relationship.

“Close yer eyes,” Ylvesnia instructed in a hushed tone. “Don’t let that feelin’ slip away from ye. Hold onto it. Let it dance on yer senses unabated. Let it fill yer mind.”

Samuel closed his eyes as instructed, though he found the directions given to him too poetic to be helpful. He preferred cold, hard facts to be presented and learned. What she described was more like an art form than any guidance he had trained with previously.

Just as quickly as he'd dismissed it, he felt it. It was like a crimson spark in his mind that shot briefly through the darkness. It reminded him of how his mind visualized the string that connected him to his familiar. As they bonded, it grew brighter and stronger. In the heat of a moment, whether battling or sex, it would be practically ablaze in his mind. Lifting his other hand, he let it rest on her chest before slowly massaging the soft flesh beneath the loose fabric. With a brief, pleasant moan into the kiss, Aurora signaled her approval of his touch despite her earlier objections. He felt her nipple harden with anticipation and excitement as the crimson spark shot again across his mind.

He didn't know how to hold onto it, but as he focused his attention on the sensitive nipple, it came again. He tried to direct it, anchor it, somehow. He imagined it as a rope with a hook, slung from his perception into the dark to find her. To his surprise, it found her on the first try, anchoring into something soft and warm in its intensity. It ignited the moment it found purchase in what he somehow understood to be her, and the two came apart with a surprised gasp. They stared at one another in disbelief, their hearts racing.

"Interesting," Ylvesnia commented. "It's as I suspected. Perfectly aligned desires with one another. How fortunate for ye. This'll make things much easier."

"What do you mean?" Samuel asked, confused.

"Many people, especially humans, stumble through the dark lookin' for the kind of connection ye two already have. It's uncommon to have acquired it without assistance or guidance, but ye have somehow." Ylvesnia stepped back to appraise the two of them. "It's a one in a hundred thousand type of occurrence, ye see. Not impossible, but improbable and less so among yer people with all their inhibitions."

Samuel's face scrunched skeptically as he glanced between the two women. "You got all that from a little over-the-shirt action?"

“The fact ye have not until now is slightly concernin’,” the elf admonished him with a withering scowl. His glance returned to Aurora, who wore a similar expression as if she hadn’t only just learned about this alongside him.

“What?” Samuel asked defensively as Aurora pulled away, lips pursed tightly in disapproval. “What did I do?”



## CHAPTER 5



**A**fter an hour more of discussing theory and smaller exercises to understand the power Samuel could draw from lust, Ylvesnia motioned back toward the cabin. “Aurora, I’d like ye to step inside for a moment.”

Aurora stood slowly, her expression suspicious now that she was being asked to step away. Ylvesnia waved a hand dismissively as if reading the woman’s thoughts. “A duel. I don’t want ye in the way,” she clarified. Samuel wondered if Ylvesnia could anticipate precisely what Aurora was feeling based on some magical reading of desires from her. Thinking about it, Samuel began to see the possibilities of what such a talent would grant a person in everyday discussions, not to mention social interactions with more importance.

With her mind at ease, Aurora did as she was asked and stepped into the cabin, interrupting what Samuel was about to say by tripping over clutter inside. The crashing noise of things falling made it sound much worse than it was. He stared for a few seconds as whatever pile of junk she had tripped over finally settled.

“I’m alright,” she called from inside, annoyed and embarrassed.

“Maybe you want to clean up a little while you’re in there,” Samuel suggested.

“Yeah, sure,” Aurora yelled back. “I’ll just take all this crap and shove it up your ass. How does that sound to you?”

Samuel’s lips pressed together in a thin line. He’d expected a little quip, but that one was slightly more perturbed than he had anticipated. He decided it was best to keep his mouth shut for a little bit until her mood improved. Ylvesnia

arched an impatient brow, waving him away from the cabin with one hand to take up position for the duel. Their exchange hadn't fazed her in the slightest.

"What are the rules?" Samuel asked as he spun his staff around, eager to perform some actual summonings for the first time in months.

"First, I want to assess some of the summonings ye have," Ylvesnia replied. "We'll decide after."

Samuel nodded in agreement and decided it was as good a time as any to check up on the Outsiders he had bound since acquiring his familiar. He started with Hecate, who was overjoyed to see him and show off a little for the other Summoner. But the moment Samuel explained to her that it was just a brief demonstration and that she had to go back into hiding for a while, the hellhound succubus threw a tantrum. The inside of her mouth glowed and smoked as she raged while the hellfire within her began glowing through her black, fur-covered skin.

"This is bullshit!" she spat angrily, waving her arms around like she wanted to hit something. "I'm bored! I'm starving! I need to stretch my legs!"

Despite her usually impassive demeanor, Ylvesnia looked visibly surprised by the creature's ability to articulate itself in such a way. She examined Hecate from a safe distance before speaking, "Quiet yerself, succubus."

Hecate whirled on the Summoner, her eyes narrowed. "How dare y—!"

Ylvesnia lifted her arm with the bangle as some of the runes concealed within the network of tattoos up her arm began to glow. "Do ye know who yer talkin' to?"

The succubus hesitated. Through the binding with Hecate, Samuel sensed that she was suddenly nervous, afraid even. She was still angry, but it was the first time he'd felt something like this from her. Samuel couldn't remember a

time when Hecate had been cowed into quieting down like this so easily.

“I’m hungry,” Hecate repeated less harshly.

“We’ll see to it yer fed,” Ylvesnia replied, lowering her arm as the glowing vanished. “Ye have my word, but now is not the time.”

Hecate squared her shoulders before looking back at Samuel with pursed lips. She said nothing. Instead, she pointed at him with two fingers, indicating that she had her eyes on him. With a word, Samuel dismissed Hecate and called forth the widows. They took more effort to summon than Hecate, but he immediately noticed how much less it was than the first few times he summoned them.

The widows were a trio of spider succubi with long slender legs, pale purplish skin, and shiny black chitin. Though each had its own name, they were seldom used. He’d only recently learned to tell Silke, Fang, and Vena apart from each other due to the link they shared, which often resulted in them speaking as one.

“Master,” they sighed, pressed against one another in such a way that Samuel’s mind couldn’t help but stray. The softness of their flesh crushed and squished against one another was nearly impossible not to notice as their lithe fingers moved across their skin.

Ylvesnia’s head tilted to one side as she took a few steps closer, examining the trio carefully. “They act as one?”

“Most of the time,” Samuel confirmed. “They can work on independent tasks, but they’re always linked to one another, aware of what the others are doing.”

“Fascinating,” Ylvesnia responded with a faint hint of approval sneaking into her voice. “They’re more refined and intricate than the other.”

Samuel suppressed a smile. “They’re my most recent summons. Maintaining my cover has made it impossible to do anything else.”

All three of the spider succubi turned their red eyes toward Ylvesnia, examining her as closely as she was them. Again, Samuel felt a tension in the link between him and the succubi. The widows felt more assured of themselves in the situation, as they often did. Strength in numbers was something they always felt they had, but even with this in mind, they remained wary. Calmer and more restrained than Hecate, they said nothing to reveal this fact to the other Summoner and made no hostile move against her.

“This is my new teacher,” Samuel said to the widows, hoping to dispel their trepidation. “Summoner Hithercome is a Mienkardi, and she’s here to help improve my skills as a Lust Reaper.”

“Ylvesnia is fine,” the elf corrected him. “Elves prefer their given names to be used when speakin’ non-elven tongues.”

“Ylvesnia,” Samuel repeated apologetically. His new teacher didn’t seem bothered by the slight lapse in protocol. Samuel’s link with the widows was stronger, designed from the ground up to link him into the one they shared with each other. The change in their attitude toward the other Summoner was instantaneous. The trio agreed that she was not a threat and might be a boon to them if their master learned the proper things from her.

“I’d like to see yer familiar now,” Ylvesnia said as she nodded a brief farewell to the widows. Samuel did as she asked, dismissing them with a word and calling Snowball. She was the easiest for him to call, being that she was the first of the succubi that had come to him. As his familiar, the bond with her was the strongest and, strangely enough, the one he understood the most despite her strange way of speaking.

In a brief flash of light, Snowball appeared on the grass wearing the understated clothing she’d last been in. Ylvesnia tilted her head, confused. Snowball bounced a few times before running to Samuel to throw her arms around him. The

bonnet she wore came free in all the movement, revealing the rabbit ears protruding from the top of her head.

“You disguise her?” Ylvesnia asked curiously.

“We have to,” Samuel explained as he set Snowball down. “She requires more space than the others and feeds more frequently, so I keep her around for extended periods in disguise. She’s learned a lot this way, come to think of it.”

“Am smart,” Snowball beamed. “Am helpful for errands.”

Hearing Snowball speak caused Ylvesnia’s expression to shift. It was so subtle and imperceptible that Samuel almost didn’t catch it. There was a distinct glimmer of recognition in her eyes when she heard it. “Has she always spoken this way?”

“It’s a little better now than when I first summoned her,” Samuel responded. “But for the most part, it’s remained the same. Why?”

“She’s not as eloquent as the others, and her accent is more distinct,” Ylvesnia observed. “But I sense that the bond between ye is the strongest.”

“I think the one with the widows might be—.”

“No,” Ylvesnia said, cutting him off. “The link is not the same as a bond. Ye know this. Moreover, you are lookin’ at it only from an analytical lens of magic. In order to increase the strength of yer bonded Outsiders, ye need to start lookin’ at them from the lens of a Lust Reaper. The expressions of which are lust. That is where yer power is, Samuel. Yer extended interactions with her, feeding her, has done this without ye knowin’ it, but ye’ve neglected the others. By no fault of yer own, of course.”

Snowball turned to look at Ylvesnia now with keen interest. She lacked the fear and apprehension of the others. Instead, she was picking something else up from the elven Summoner through scent and hearing that she couldn’t quite put her finger on for her master.

“How do you know this?” Samuel asked curiously, briefly letting Snowball know through their link that it was alright for her to dispose of her disguise for now.

“I have succubus blood in me as well,” Ylvesnia replied matter-of-factly. “I can draw my power from the same places as ye, but as a Mienkardi, I also have other options. As a Lust Reaper, it is the core of yer power and cannot be neglected.”

Samuel raised a hand abruptly, “Hold on. You have succubus blood? Who told you about mine?”

“Ye did,” Ylvesnia motioned vaguely toward where he had been calling the succubi. “I can sense it in ye when ye use magic. It’s likely because of my own lineage.”

“They haven’t been hunting you for it?” Samuel asked, astonished.

“They’d have to know that first,” Ylvesnia shrugged. “But even if they did, it is not the way of my people. For the Praetians to come for me would require a great deal of effort in a land more hostile to their beliefs. Best to leave it be.”

This must have been what the succubi were detecting when they looked at her and felt her work her magic. She had something in common not only with him but with them, and they had sensed it. Her time honing her abilities correctly had led to her having a much heavier magical footprint from their reckoning.

“It also helps that I remain in control of myself,” Ylvesnia continued. “I conduct myself in a way that does not accidentally invite the attention of crusaders lookin’ to make a name for themselves.”

It was only now that some of the pieces came together for Samuel. If she was related to Succubi, was properly trained in her magical ancestry, and had a great deal of experience under her belt, her power was likely to the point where she could arrest a man’s attention with as little as a glance. She wore a near-emotionless mask to keep herself from being drowned in swarming would-be suitors. Her power was only ever used

when she wished it and never by accident. The level of constant control it took to do so seemed incredible.

“So, your mother was a succubus?” Samuel pressed, wanting to know more about her now that he had such an incredibly rare thing in common with her.

“No,” she said flatly before taking a step back. “We will duel with the familiars, I think. I wish to see the bond you have with her in action.”

“Yes!” Snowball grinned as she pumped her arm. “Action!”

Before Samuel could repeat his earlier question about the rules, Ylvesnia held her hand out, the bangle around her wrist glowing as she called out to her familiar. “Sumafamus!”

In an explosion of flames, Ylvesnia’s familiar leaped into existence. Though composed almost entirely of living flame, the creature had the distinct size and shape of a large wolf. Its demeanor seemed agreeable enough and not overtly hostile, but the power contained within it caused both Samuel and Snowball to take a step back.

“This is Alistair,” Ylvesnia said as she ran her hand over the head of the beast, unharmed by his flames. “No ring-outs, no points. Victory by knockout.”

“Wait, that’s not a duel; that’s more like a battle—!” Samuel objected.

“Fight,” Ylvesnia commanded, causing Alistair’s demeanor to shift in the blink of an eye. He was a ferocious predator on a rabbit hunt.

“Shit!” Samuel spat as he brought his staff into position, urging Snowball wordlessly to evade. She obeyed without question, just in time to leap to one side as the wolf lunged at her with fangs at the ready. The wolf would have clamped down around her ankle if she had been a little slower. The way Alistair moved was astonishing. The movements had a canine familiarity but with more grace and commitment to

everything. Even as Snowball leapt and bounded backward, he kept pace with her.

“Up and over,” Samuel muttered as he drew quickly in the dirt at his feet with the end of his staff. His new teacher hadn’t afforded him a chance for preparation, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t find a way to make use of his strengths. So instead of a full dueling array, he scribbled a quick two-point array with a pair of circles. Snowball’s signature rune was in one, while he drew the rune for the Water Pump spell into the other. Quickly touching one and the other, Snowball’s entire body was instantly drenched before overflowing into a cascade of water from above Alistair.

Ylvesnia looked unbothered, standing in a refined dueling stance that made use of only one hand. Her arm moved swiftly but calmly, one of the runes along the arm gleaming in tandem with the bangle on her wrist. Alistair’s orange and yellow flames intensified in a fiery burst before turning blue. The rain Snowball had dropped from overhead was converted to steam before making contact with the elf’s familiar.

Landing gracefully, Snowball barely had a chance to face her opponent before he emerged from the cloud of steam, barreling at her with incredible force. He collided at the shoulder with Snowball, the space between them erupting into a small explosion of fire as it sent her hurling across the grass like a skipping stone. Alistair’s color shifted back to orange, having used up the stored energy of the spell his Summoner had granted him, but he did not relent. Before Snowball recovered and patted out the parts of her clothing that had ignited, he was in pursuit.

“You think you might take it easy a little bit?” Samuel called over to Ylvesnia. “This is just an assessment.”

“How I assess is at my discretion,” Ylvesnia replied coldly. “As a Lust Reaper, ye will seldom be given the benefit of a fair fight. I cannot afford to train ye as such.”

“Fair point,” Samuel agreed, pulling the cap off the spear as he pointed it toward her. “Crydat!”



With a gesture of her bangled wrist, Ylvesnia deflected the dart of cold energy he had hurled at her. “Protecka!”

A translucent disk-shaped shield of magic interposed itself between his spell and her with only an inch to spare. It stopped most of the spell, but not all of it, causing a slight bit of cold to run up her arm instead of the burst of solid ice the spell was capable of.

“Bold strategy,” Ylvesnia observed. “Attack the Summoner and bypass the familiar entirely. Though I’m afraid I’m more than yer match on this, Samuel.” It didn’t seem to have much effect on her, but Alistair’s charge on Snowball was interrupted as the creature sensed the attack on its master.

“You’re probably right,” Samuel agreed as he pressed the base of the spear to Snowball’s rune as he closed his hand down around the rune of Ruin inscribed on the shaft of the implement. “Which is why I wouldn’t try it.”

Ylvesnia realized only too late what Samuel had done as Snowball came at Alistair from behind with one leg high up in the air. The wolf turned only just enough to catch the ruinous axe kick to the top of the head that slammed it into the soft earth in an explosion of grass and dirt. The impact placed both combatants in a shallow bowl roughly a foot deep and five feet across. Snowball, expecting the displacement of the ground beneath her feet, kept her footing while Alistair struggled. She followed her attack with another, flipping forward and bringing her enhanced strike down on the wolf again to bury his face again in the dirt.

Ylvesnia smiled for the first time since Samuel had met her, making eye contact with him as she did. He was instantly fixated on her, noting in painstaking detail every curve of her body and the perfect shade of pink on her lips. Her eyes felt like they saw right down into his soul in its most naked state. Then, with a brief motion of her hand to move some of the hair from her face, he was captivated, drawn ever deeper into the immaculately crystal-clear pools of her blue eyes.

“Ylvesnia?” Samuel croaked as something distantly aware of what was happening in the back of his mind tried desperately to free him from her grasp. But it was no use. She had him with a look. Then, before he could act on it any further, Snowball collided with him, and the two tumbled to the ground in a heap.

Shaken from the effect his teacher had hit him with, Samuel looked down at Snowball, who had been knocked unconscious from an extended fight he hadn't even witnessed. The state of rapturous fascination that Ylvesnia had put him under had caused him to miss out on critical instruction to his familiar and the duel at large. Judging by the state Snowball was in, he'd missed a great deal.

“What the hell is wrong with you!?” Aurora yelled at him as she charged out of the cabin. She rushed over in a hurry, falling to her knees next to Snowball. “Why would you do that to her, you psycho?!”

“I—I didn't—” Samuel stammered, awestruck at how easy it had been for Ylvesnia to shut him down. Without his trickery, Snowball had been left alone to fend for herself. Aurora looked up at him as she prepared a healing spell before following his gaze over to Ylvesnia, who looked on impassively now.

“She did that?” Aurora whispered. Samuel only nodded, not taking his eyes off her for a moment.

“Ye did well,” Ylvesnia said as she joined them at Snowball's side. “As did she. But ye rely so much on what ye have here.” The elf tapped him gently on the forehead before poking him lightly in the chest. “But not enough from here.”

Samuel's mouth fell agape, not knowing how to formulate the question bubbling up in his mind. Ylvesnia looked down at Snowball, “Yer bond is strong, Samuel. But the bond with succubi is not one of the mind. So by leaning on yer exceptional intelligence, it becomes a simple matter to disarm ye of yer ability to guide her. By the time I'm done with ye,” she declared as she stood, “ye'll not only be able to

guide her with yer heart but draw upon the powers like the one I used on ye, turn them back on their source or empower yer own magic with it.”

Samuel looked down at Snowball as Aurora continued to heal her. He’d always thought that his intelligence was his strength, and perhaps it was, but he couldn’t afford to have it as the only trick in his bag when the cards were down. Peaceful as the last few months had been, there were people looking for him and Aurora that wanted to do them serious harm, possibly end them. Deep down, as his eyes fell upon the blonde healer, he knew that he would do anything to prevent that from happening.

“I’m going to get some food; ye should do the same,” Ylvesnia announced as she strode away. Samuel made a conscious effort not to watch her ass as she walked. Now that he knew what she was capable of, he had to be more in control of such things. He wondered briefly if his father had held such concerns with his mother. Had she seduced him? Had he been merely a thrall of her seductive power the entire time they had been together? Or had his mother set all that aside to seek something genuine for herself?

“Be back here in about an hour,” Ylvesnia called back to them as Snowball began to regain consciousness.

“Excuse me?” Samuel replied.

Ylvesnia turned, walking backward a few steps as Alistair trotted alongside her. “We got a lot more to do, my apprentice. We’ll be out here ‘til sundown, at the least.”

## CHAPTER 6



Samuel woke the next day in rougher condition than he had in months. The training with Ylvesnia had been grueling, lasting well into the evening. The events of the previous day bled together like a dreary haze as he slowly pulled himself out of bed. But the difference between the soreness he felt now and that which he'd been experiencing up to this point was the sense of fulfillment that he'd been lacking. There was personal growth in his abilities, a sense of discovery as to why everything had come crashing down around him since the Proving. It felt like progress again.

Glancing at Aurora, he couldn't help but feel a pang of regret. She had been at his side for nearly all the training, going through much of the same things he was. It wasn't her responsibility, nor was the training of any particular use to her. She had given up a great deal to come away with him already, and now she had to endure *this*? They lived in the sticks together as a fake married couple under assumed identities, and the focus now remained squarely on him. There didn't seem to be much for her here, yet she stayed and never complained.

He couldn't deny that it had been a grandly romantic gesture. There were likely ways she could have remained with the church and let him abscond into the night, parting ways with him on friendly terms. But instead, she had dropped everything, despite how angry she had been with him then. She had been so confused and conflicted yet trusted him implicitly not to mislead her or drive her down a road of ruin. It was like one of the old fairy tales, retold as a romance rather than a grim story to warn children away from the forest.

He brushed a bit of hair off her cheek as she continued to sleep soundly, her face mashed into the pillow. Snowball was

curled up beside her, similarly drained from the previous day's activities. Aurora would have been the last person he would have imagined looking at with such fondness just a year ago, yet here he was. Hopefully, she would get plenty of rest today. He had a job to attend to, so there wouldn't be any training until he returned. Unfortunately, there was no way of knowing how long that would be.

The job was a few villages over, essentially at the edge of the area that Holbeck Hall was capable of serving. Aurora and Samuel had both pushed the boundaries of what was possible in the area in that respect, but with so few of them in number, there was only so much that could be done.

Rising from the bed, he felt the ache intensify. It ebbed slightly once he got dressed and started moving but remained a constant reminder of the previous day with every step. Stepping into the front office, he waved briefly at Marl behind his desk.

"Job form is in your box," he said without looking up from the typewriter, his fingers hunting and pecking at the keys.

"Why do you keep using that thing?" Samuel asked as he pulled the forms from the mail cubby with his fake name scrawled along the bottom. "Wouldn't it be faster just to write the damn things?"

"Hands aren't what they used to be," Marl replied dryly. "Wrists either. This is much less strain and much more legible."

"Ah," Samuel grunted as his eyes scanned the form, confirming the address and the reported problem. Most of the time spent on the job was likely the journey itself. "We have to get you out of here and doing other things, then. The secretary gig is a bit beneath you."

Marl finally looked up, the expression on his wizened face conveying a silent agreement with his assertion. "You

find the extra bodies to do the work, and I would happily step aside.”

Samuel held the paper up as he exited the front office. “Maybe I’ll find some recruits out in Landow!”

“Not fucking likely,” Samuel heard the man grumble behind him as he stepped out into the morning air. He was right; the chances of them getting anyone else at Holbeck to assist them with some of the more mundane chores seemed unlikely. Summoners were in high demand, with the military holding a virtual monopoly on their time and resources in most of Terth. Samuel wondered briefly if they could use his cover story as a jumping-off point to solve that problem. If they reached out to some of the other magic guilds, they might be able to find a few willing to lend people to the Mysterium out in the country.

Hitching up the varo marked on the form as his for the day, he was on the road without difficulty in a matter of minutes. The ride was long, but it gave him plenty of time to take in the scenery again and ruminate on the things he’d been mulling over earlier that morning. There had to be something that he could do to show Aurora how much he appreciated everything she had sacrificed. It was long overdue, considering the woman had stopped praying altogether.

He wasn’t sure why that fact bothered him. Aurora had been essentially forced into church service by parents who saw no way to monetize their daughter or exploit her labor the way they had their sons. She’d rebelled all through school in any way she could and continued to do so once she’d been sent off to the convent. But somewhere along the line, she had found solace in contemplating the divine and acts of service to the public. She’d found a relationship with Praetia that was more personal, that defied the doctrine of the church while still compelling her to serve. She was still serving, but her relationship with her goddess had been lost.

Samuel had never been very religious. He’d been to services like all children are expected to attend alongside their

parents. His father had not emphasized church attendance growing up, but Samuel only recently had the proper context as to why. His mother being a succubus had greatly influenced the Duke's outlook on the clergy. He was sure of it. Even so, his father kept funding for the church and their outreach programs. He'd seen them as a valuable means to reach the people and ensure their needs were being met, but if they had suddenly stopped existing one day, it wouldn't have concerned him very much. He would have found another way to reach the commoners who he had been charged with protecting.

Samuel arrived in Landow around noon. The temperature had risen drastically, forcing him to strip a few layers off and stow them in the saddlebags on the way. The sun, unrelenting with its heat, had created a near-perpetual film of sweat on his brow that wouldn't go away. He turned onto the long drive leading up to the farmhouse, savoring the shade the row of trees on either side provided as the varo trotted along lazily. Taking the moment of respite to drink some of the cool water from his canteen, Samuel was beginning to feel much more like himself by the time he reached the end of the drive.

"Afternoon," a woman called from the porch of the farmhouse. She appeared to be in her late thirties or early forties, older than him but hardly showing it. Her skin was a little darker from the time she'd spent in the sun, but it nicely complemented the long brown hair she kept in a tight braid down her back. She wiped her hands on her apron as she examined him carefully. "You're with the Mysterium?"

"Yes, ma'am," Samuel replied, sliding off the back of the varo to display his medallion to her. "I'm Deckard Mason, Arcanist adjunct to the Mysterium."

"Adjunct," she repeated. "What's that?"

"Basically, it just means I'm a mage that's not a Summoner working with a bunch of Summoners," Samuel explained. "Are you Mrs. Bloom?"

"That's me," she confirmed with a smile. "You can call me Mary."

“Alright, Mary,” Samuel agreed. “The report says you have something tearing up your fields?”

“Damned if I know what,” she answered as she descended the steps. She motioned briefly out to the fields in question. “My husband is in town getting supplies. He’s hoping to mitigate the damage. Most of it’s out in that field there if you want to go ahead and have a look.”

“Where would you like me to stick this guy?” Samuel asked, motioning briefly to the varo.

“I’ll take care of him,” Mary replied, smiling warmly at the creature. “We have a few of our own. Poor thing is probably thirsty, hm?”

Samuel nodded his thanks as he took his pack off the back of the varo and shuffled off to the field she’d indicated. Once there, he could see the damage plain as day. Rows and rows of carrots that had only just started growing had been torn up and tossed into the sun, where they’d shriveled up and died. The soil, neatly tilled at the beginning of the season, looked as though something had churned it up roughly from below. Something had burrowed through the field—that much he could tell at a glance.

“Pest control,” he muttered to himself as he knelt in the dirt and pulled a book from his bag. He supposed he should be grateful, not having to exert himself much in yet another battle with some exotic creature. Instead, he just had to contend with oversized vermin and be on his way. It was the kind of novice job that apprentices usually got at the beginning of their training. It would make for an easy change of pace.

Flipping through the pages of the book quickly, he searched for the section detailing what he suspected was the culprit. Finally, he stopped on the Giant Shale Mole. Another monstrous species that wasn’t native to the area, which should have been carving up the mountains far along the horizon. It was rare for them to come down from the mountains and dig around in such soft soil in such flat areas. He carefully looked over the drawings of the creature and its bone structure, along



with the diagrams of some of the tunnels it constructed. Comparing them to what he saw in front of him, he had a fair idea of the problem.

“What’s that?” Mary asked from over his shoulder. “Looks ugly.”

“Giant Shale Mole,” Samuel muttered without turning to look at her. The creature had no eyes and no visible ears. However, the diagram of the skull revealed that it had much larger inner ear bones for detecting vibrations, along with an array of plating across its body that assisted in the task while simultaneously protecting it.

“Giant?” Mary gasped, looking out at the fields with concern.

“It’s a relative term,” Samuel clarified. “Most moles are tiny, so being a giant mole only gets you to about the size of a chubby housecat.”

“Well, what’s it doing in our fields?” Mary huffed indignantly.

“Looking for bugs, I suspect,” Samuel answered as he got to his feet, brushing his pants off. “They prefer to eat insects, occasionally smaller rodents or reptiles.”

“Is that why it’s not eating the carrots?” She asked as she looked over at him, shading her eyes from the sun with one hand.

“They’re just obstacles to it. It feels the vibrations of the insects moving around and gets thrown off by the roots and such. It normally nests in much rockier terrain up in the mountains. Which is also why it’s doing this.” He motioned to the weird nonsensical chaos breaking up the cleanly tilled rows of carrots. “It has no idea what it’s doing.”

“Why doesn’t it just go back home, then?” Mary wondered.

Samuel shrugged. “You got me there. We’ve been seeing a lot of non-native monstrous species in the area causing

problems. We're trying to figure out the cause."

"Is there anything you can do?" Mary sounded worried she would be stuck with this creature tearing up their fields.

"Oh!" Samuel laughed briefly, "Yes, of course, of course. I didn't mean to make it sound like there wasn't."

"Thank Praetia," Mary sighed in relief. "I suppose I'll leave you to it then."

"Actually," Samuel held a hand up to stop her for a moment. "You said you have other varo here. Do you happen to have a spare cage that they use for the young ones? A small vegetable crate would work too."

"I should have an old one somewhere in storage," Mary nodded. "You fixin' to catch the thing?"

"Yeah," Samuel confirmed as he looked back at the field. "We haven't encountered anything small enough to capture and study its behavior. It might give us a clue as to what it's doing this far from home."

Mary nodded in understanding. The logic apparently seemed sound to her, so she went off to fetch an old cage in which Samuel could trap the mole. While she searched, he considered how he would lure a nocturnal creature into a trap in the middle of the day.

After two hours of careful searching and planning, he was able to locate the molehill the creature was nestled into between the roots of a large tree at the edge of the property. He formed a perimeter around the tree by connecting low-level stun runes and then collapsed the molehill to force it into the open. When one of the runes flashed brightly from discharging its magic, he quickly dug the mole up and placed it in the cage before it regained its ability to move. It took another half hour for him to clean up the slight mess he'd made and collect the guild fee, making sure to credit Mary the amount for the cage in the process.

"You're sure?" She asked as he handed her back the change. "I don't mind you taking the cage, really."

“I’m sure,” Samuel said with a smile. “You can use the difference to pay for the extra supplies you had to pick up. This little guy will be a big help to us, I’m sure.”

“Alright,” Mary said, placing the coins back into her purse. “If you say so. Thank you.”

“It’s no problem at all,” Samuel replied warmly. It was the kind of thing that Aurora would have done had she accompanied him on the job. She never liked to overcharge and would undercharge any time she could find an excuse to do so. Guild rates, she’d said, were set with more populated areas in mind where the Mysterium spent much more for upkeep and resources. Out here, in the country, the rates just weren’t all that justified. Ketan had spoken with her on several occasions about making such decisions unilaterally but had since given up on it.

Realizing his thoughts had wandered back to the beautiful blonde, as it had countless times since arriving here, he held a hand up to get Mary’s attention again. “Just one more thing,” he began. “If I were in a position, let’s say, to want to express my gratitude to a woman who was very close to me, what might be the best way to go about it?”

Mary’s expression softened considerably, looking almost like a younger version of herself as she smiled. “Mr. Mason, most women just want to be heard. They will gladly tell you precisely what it is that will speak to their hearts, but first you have to be listening.”

Samuel nodded slowly as he mulled it over. “My apologies, I don’t have a lot of experience with something like this.”

“You’ll do fine,” the woman assured him. “So long as you listen to what she’s telling you, whether she knows it or not.”

“Thank you,” he said respectfully as he climbed onto his varo. “I’ll give that some thought.”

As he turned onto the road, Samuel thought about what it would mean to listen to her in order to speak to her heart. It was a thing easier said than done, he realized. Aurora wasn't the type of person to open up easily. If he could find a means for her to do so, that would be a start.



Aurora wished she had it in her to open up to Samuel more. She stared listlessly at the holy book on her nightstand as her mind wandered. She hadn't opened it in months and it was the first time she had even looked at it in weeks. With no jobs for the day, she had been forced to be alone with her thoughts and the memories of how she'd treated the man in the past.

Even as recently as yesterday, she had been perhaps a little too curt with him. As was always true, Samuel was trying his best and intended no malice. He hadn't purposely taken a shot at her emotionally since they had first left town after his Proving. He'd come along farther as an adult than she had, cloistered away as she had been for so long. Perhaps it was the guilt that prevented her from being more vulnerable with him during intimate or quiet moments. Was she just afraid that he was playing the long game, laying in wait to strike at her for all that she'd put him through during school? It felt unlikely.

Surely, he knew that she loved him and would not do such a thing. The words didn't come easily to her and she very much wanted to be able to speak them freely with him. Just the thought of saying them set her heart aflutter and filled her cheeks with a glowing warmth. Glancing at the mirror, it was plain to see. Behind her reflection, she could see Snowball lounging on the bed, watching her with a sly grin on her face.

"Ugh," Aurora grumbled as she glanced over at the familiar. "You need to stop doing that."

Snowball said nothing. She didn't have to. She had essentially identified the nature of her feelings from the very

start, and every act of passion shared between her master and the former nun only further vindicated her on the matter. Rolling her eyes, the blonde snatched up her things and left the room. She'd helped with a few of the chores around the guildhall earlier that day, so there wasn't much to be done, but she desperately needed to get out and get some air.

"Are ye busy with somethin' at the moment?" Ylvesnia asked as Aurora reached the bottom of the stairs.

"No, what's wrong?" Aurora asked.

"Nothin'," Ylvesnia replied. "But with Samuel gone, I thought it might be a good opportunity to start on yer trainin'."

"Ha," Aurora laughed blandly. "My training?"

"Mhm," Ylvesnia intoned lazily. "Ye didn't think he was the only one I'm here to train, did ye?"

"Uhm," Aurora grunted with a shrug. When the elf put it that way, she didn't want to admit that it was precisely what she'd thought. "I guess not?"

"Good," Ylvesnia responded with a nod. "With the light fadin', it's the perfect time for a little fire, hm?"

"Do Mienkardi know much about flame sculpting?" Aurora asked skeptically.

"Of course," Ylvesnia scoffed without missing a beat, "What are passion and desire if not the fire of one's soul?"

## CHAPTER 7



Samuel stared at Ylvesnia in disbelief. “What do you mean on my own?”

“Exactly what it sounds like, Samuel,” Ylvesnia responded absently as she gathered her things. “I’ll be accompanyin’ Aurora into town so yer to remain here and work on yer summoning out of sight.”

“You’re supposed to be teaching me,” he grunted incredulously. “I could do this any time.”

Ylvesnia turned to look at him pointedly, speaking in a way that brooked no argument. “And yet ye haven’t, have ye? I understand layin’ low, but you’ve let the poor things languish away with not a scrap of interaction. So now ye have to make up for lost time so that we can do proper work with them in the comin’ lessons.”

Samuel sighed, having to admit that she had a point. Though frowned upon, not making good on a promise to random summons was much more understandable than doing it to bonded summons. The succubi required attention, feeding through sexual interaction and withering in health and power if neglected. “Which ones would you like me to focus on?”

“What do ye mean?” Ylvesnia’s brow furrowed. “All of them, Samuel. I want ye to make it right with all of them. The hellhound succubus ye showed me, impressive as she is, was right to be as incensed as she was.”

“All of them,” Samuel repeated, realizing exactly the amount of effort that would entail. He looked around the cottage that Ylvesnia had been staying in. She’d done great work clearing it out and making it homey, but she’d left a lot

of open space. He realized that it was probably for something like this. “Here?”

“Mhm,” the elf intoned with a nod before stepping out the front door with her pack and closing the door behind her.

Standing alone in the cottage now, Samuel exhaled deeply as he pulled off his cloak and hung it up. He unfastened the buttons of his shirt cuff before rolling them up. Including Snowball, it would only be a total of three summoning circles, but one of those circles would produce the three widows. So, he would have five succubi sharing the room with him. All of them would be competing for his attention; he was sure of it.

Unable to put it off any longer, Samuel went to work on the circles. Each circle he drew on the floor would help contain and circulate the energy used in each summoning with as little waste as possible. He hadn't been allowed to use circles like this in quite some time, as it had been flagged as being one of his signature casting methods to identify him by. But, here, behind closed doors, he was free to use them again, and the experience alone had a certain catharsis to it he hadn't expected.

Each succubus had its unique array contained within the circles, which were made up of different combinations of runes and sigils tailored to their original summoning. Keeping them all straight was challenging, but he had written down their arrays long ago and committed them to memory. Even if he forgot, he had his journal to fall back on in a pinch.

By the time he was finished, all of the succubi had been summoned and regarded each other with varying measures of hostility. The most hostile among them was, of course, Hecate.

“Whatever it is you need me to do, you should dismiss them, or they'll just get in my way,” Hecate grumbled.

“Relax,” Samuel said, raising a hand gently. It was a gesture that disarmed her of her aggression long enough for him to continue. “There's no battle and no task. It's been a while since any of you have had the chance to properly feed. I

realize there's been relatively little bonding time, so here we are."

Hecate's ears perked up as she glanced between Snowball and the widows. "Really? Right now?"

Samuel chuckled at how quickly her demeanor had shifted. "Yes, right now."

"What a surprise," the widows hissed together, wicked grins spreading across their faces. "Can Master take us all at once?"

"I've been training," Samuel responded a little defensively as he unbuttoned his shirt. He wasn't as confident as he'd like, but he wouldn't get anywhere if he didn't try. There was a time that he remembered when even fucking one succubus was out of the question for him.

Snowball stepped forward to assist him with the removal of his clothing. Through the link between them, he understood that she was merely trying to keep the others from jumping him too quickly. Closing his eyes as she worked, he let himself experience the multiple links that ran between him and the succubi. It was the emotional equivalent of everyone talking in the room at once. It wasn't overwhelming, but it did take a fair effort to single out one of the links at a time. Unsurprisingly, the one he shared with Snowball was the clearest and the one that shone the brightest in his mind.

Hecate's link, once as fiery as the hellhound succubus herself, now existed at a low smolder. She had become resentful of him and the prolonged period she had been forbidden from running free. Hecate had always been the most difficult to please, but in this particular instance, she was in the right. The link with the widows took a little longer for him to analyze. Rather than being a one-to-one link that ran between him and each of them, there was a tangled web of links connecting each to the others. When they existed in Midgardia, he could be aware of everything they experienced at all times with minimal effort. The sisters' link with one another was even stronger and more open.



He opened his eyes to see Hecate on her knees before him, stroking at the cock she hungered for so desperately to get him to peak erectness. It only took a few seconds of attention for her to get what she was after, licking up the underside of his shaft before sucking the swollen head into her mouth. The warmth of Hecate's mouth was like no other. Being a hellhound succubus meant that she was capable of breathing fire, which came with the added benefit of keeping her mouth at an elevated temperature above that of the others. Thankfully, it wasn't too much for him to handle.

"Ohh," Samuel groaned as he ran a hand through her hair. "Quite hungry."

Hecate sank to the base, her open throat welcoming him inside as she did. Each motion of her head saw her rising almost to the very tip of his cock before she sank back down to the hilt. The widows fell to their knees as well, crawling across the floor to join the hellhound as they reached up to him, caressing any part of his exposed flesh that they could get their long, lithe fingers on. Behind Samuel, Snowball wrapped her arms around him, stroking his chest as her soft, warm breasts pressed against his naked back.

"Don't be greedy, hellhound," one of the sisters demanded as she pushed into lick along the side of his shaft. It was one of the few times he had heard one of the widows speak independently with an individual concern. Underneath her, he felt one of the other widows gently suckling at his balls.

"I'm not being greedy," Hecate snapped, creating an opening for Vena to pull the erection to her eagerly waiting mouth as she wrapped her plump lips around him.

"Take it easy. There will be enough for all of you," Samuel assured Hecate. The hellhound succubus calmed slightly, but it wouldn't last if she weren't fed soon.

Vena glanced briefly in Hecate's direction before slipping a hand between her legs. Then, in an effort to relieve some of

the tension, the spider succubus deftly maneuvered two fingers inside the hellhound before she realized what was happening.

“What are y—!” Hecate exclaimed in surprise.

“Hush, hellhound,” the other two widows said together as Vena continued to suck eagerly on Samuel, her tongue spinning in little circles around the shaft to add a unique signature to the experience. “We will not abandon you. It would displease the master.”

As benevolent as it sounded, Samuel saw it for what it was: an attempt to earn his favor. He had to admit it was working a little. Snowball’s lips on the back of his ear drew him away from his thoughts and back down into the moment as he felt himself fast approaching his first orgasm. He had thought he might have lasted a little longer but had severely underestimated the excitement of every succubus he was bound to fawning over him the way they were.

Hecate, oblivious to the ploy, ground her hips against the fingers fucking her as she leaned back in to join Vena in servicing their master. When he finally reached orgasm, Samuel was surprised at just how much there was. It felt as though he had been pent up for weeks, despite having had sex much more recently than that. Vena took the first thick rope of jizz for herself, swallowing it quickly before allowing her mouth to pop free of Samuel’s hard, hot flesh. Another intense spurt of cum shot from him, leaving a pearlescent glaze on the spider succubi’s face. Two more followed, much weaker than the first two but still more than he imagined possible. These were given to Hecate as Vena turned his erection slightly to ensure she got her share.

Rather than wiping the cum from their faces to consume, they moved toward one another to hungrily lick the thick sperm from one another’s faces. It didn’t seem to bother them in the least how they got it so long as it was him they were slurping down. His cock twitched at the sight of them swapping spit and cum with one another, each stealing glances his way to see his reaction.

“Now me, Master,” Fang pleaded eagerly as she bent over in front of him. She pulled the pale flesh of her soft round ass to one side to expose the drooling cunt that eagerly awaited him. “I need you to fuck me.”

Samuel stepped forward to align himself with her wet slit as if guided by an unseen hand before driving it deep into her. The succubus let out a cry of heated ecstasy, her back arching as her master’s erection blazed a path down inside her. “Yes!” she panted heavily, “Do it hard, Master! Don’t hold back!”

With a firm slap across her ass, Samuel obliged her desperate begging. His hips bucked wildly against her, plundering the depths of the spider succubus with a recklessness he seldom displayed. Every stroke of his cock was met with increasingly delighted cries and moans, her breasts swinging elegantly in time with his aggressive pacing. To his surprise, the succubus didn’t last long under his punishing assault. Her body quaked and shook as a crushing orgasm ran through her, causing a wave of euphoria to shake all three of the widows due to their connection just before he also came.

Not only did he feel the echoes of their orgasms through the link, but he noticed a strange sense of vigor now that he’d had some training in sensing the lust of others. The link with Fang likely made it easier to detect, but it was something he’d never noticed before. The succubi fed off the vital energy that was the most concentrated when he ejaculated, but it seemed as though they provided a burst of energy with their own as well. It was different, but it refreshed and renewed him, as though he hadn’t just basted two of the succubi already and pummeled a third into orgasmic bliss.

“Interesting,” he muttered to himself as the succubus slid slowly off of him, her pussy quivering with the last remnants of orgasm as she did.

Before he knew it, he had Silke on the couch—legs spread wide as he drove himself deep within her. She massaged, groped, and pulled at her breasts roughly, pinching

her nipples as he mercilessly worked inside her. He spared one hand to thumb at her clit in small circles, causing her multiple sets of eyes to roll back into her head as a bestial groan escaped her. Snowball climbed onto the couch, offering her slick slit up to her master, who accepted it gratefully with his mouth. When Silke's insides finally clenched down around him in orgasm, he felt that surge of vigor once more. He pulled himself from her hungry hole and fed his throbbing cock to the one just below it, violating her tight ass without a second thought.

He fucked her ass to completion as he slurped at the sweet nectar of his familiar and assaulted the sensitive clit of the succubus. As improbable as it seemed, he could have sworn that he had filled Silke with even more of his seed than he'd had for Vena and Hecate. The succubus shuddered with a second orgasm as the energy coursed through her body, filling her nearly to the brim with renewed sexual power.

One after another, the succubi rotated on and off his ever-present erection. Each time one of them climaxed, he was renewed for more, and each time he climaxed, they were given much heavier doses of energy to absorb than they had become accustomed to.

“Yes, Master! Fuck my ass!” a widow whispered.

“Deeper, Master,” Snowball sighed as he stroked long and slow.

“How's this, master?” Hecate pleaded as her hips rocked violently in his lap.

Samuel lost all sense of time as he moved from one to another, each succubus somehow more insatiable than the one before. More surprising was how he kept pace with them, never faltering and never slowing as sheets of sweat ran down his chest and back.



Aurora wiped the sweat from her face with a handkerchief she kept for rides like this. Today was unusually hot, but when it came down to it, the blonde preferred to be outdoors like this rather than cooped up in the cottage Ylvesnia had been staying at. She knew Samuel had to address the matter of neglect toward his succubi and would usually have preferred to be present, but today that just wasn't the case. She had finally received a job that didn't center around healing.

"If ye wore a little less, ye'd not overheat so quickly," Ylvesnia suggested, unprompted.

Aurora looked over at the elf, who she didn't recall inviting along, examining her attire briefly before grumbling. "Yeah, I'm sure you'd love seeing me in less clothing, huh?"

"What do ye mean by that, I wonder?" Ylvesnia said with a hint of a smirk, "Ye think it a ploy to get ye out of yer clothes?"

"Probably," Aurora sighed. "You seem very interested in seeing Sam and me... 'interact' after all."

"I explained that, didn't I?" Ylvesnia countered, "It's about the bond ye two share."

"Mhm," the blonde grunted skeptically. "And it doesn't do anything for you at all, hm?"

Ylvesnia shrugged, looking off into the distance. "Perhaps it's worth asking yerself why that would bother ye, considerin' who ye've chosen as yer mate."

Aurora's face blushed a deep crimson. "Mate? He's not my 'mate.' That's our cover!"

"Is it?" Ylvesnia asked flatly, glancing back at Aurora out of the corner of her eye. "Is that fib meant for me or yerself?"

Aurora stared back at her silently as she realized the futility of arguing the point with someone like Ylvesnia, who had the power and experience to recognize these sorts of

things at a glance. It was silly of her to expect mere words of denial to be enough. “Just don’t tell him, alright?”

“Tell him what?” Ylvesnia turned her full attention back to Aurora. “About how deeply ye’ve come to care for him? It’s not my place, but ye should consider doin’ it yerself, don’t ye think?”

“I will,” Aurora replied defensively. “But I don’t want to be the reason he can’t focus on his training.”

Ylvesnia nodded in agreement, accepting the explanation for now. It wasn’t entirely a lie but wasn’t wholly true either. Aurora was still working up the courage to bear her soul to him the way she often thought about in her quiet moments alone. But it hadn’t been lost on her that romance, regardless of intention, would complicate an already complicated situation.

Aurora’s irritation with Ylvesnia only grew throughout the course of the day, however. Shortly after arriving at their destination in one of the nearby villages, it was clear to the blonde Summoner that the people there were being raided by goblins during the night. Having dealt with goblins before and knowing roughly what to expect, she summoned her familiar Bigsby. Ylvesnia immediately questioned whether the glowing iridescent pig would be enough to handle the situation.

“As a flame sculptor, it’s a strange choice of familiar, isn’t it?” Ylvesnia asked as Bigsby followed the scent of the goblins out to the edge of the village that gave way to an expanse of fields. Somewhere amid the tall grass and rolling hills, the nasty little creatures had dug a den out for themselves.

“Why is it strange?” Aurora furrowed her brows defensively. “It’s not as on the nose as a flaming wolf, but I’ll have you know Bigsby packs a punch when he needs to.”

Aurora was surprised at just how close to the village the den was. Only a couple hundred feet into the field stood a mound that had once been for compost or general dumping a

long time ago. It had since been covered with soil and grass, with one side steeper than the rest where the creatures had dug into. It was much too small for Aurora to enter, but for Bigsby, it was precisely the kind of space he excelled in.

“Alright, boy,” Aurora chuckled at the pig, his nose twitching as he looked back up at her. “You know what to do from here. Give them hell.”

Bigsby trotted in a little circle, getting his footing, before suddenly charging down the hole, casting glowing prints in the dirt with each step. Aurora waited, drawing a rune at the den’s entrance as a commotion began to rise from underground.

“Ye’re not goin’ to supervise him?” Ylvesnia asked curiously as she scrutinized the rune from a distance.

Aurora heaved an irritable sigh. “He knows what he’s doing.”

The commotion grew louder as a procession of goblins came screaming up the tunnel to escape the furious, glowing pig that had raided their den. Though she was confident that, given time, Bigsby could handle the goblins entirely on his own, that wasn’t his job. Instead, her familiar only needed to drive them toward the surface where the first one out would step across her rune, triggering the explosion of flames contained within it. Even standing as far back as the two women were, the heat was nearly enough to singe the brows off their faces. Then, like a shot from a cannon, Bigsby emerged from the flames, glowing like a shooting star as he forced the remaining goblins through the heat. The small, squishy bodies of the goblins were hurled about like ragdolls as if kicked aside by a creature ten times Bigsby’s size.

Aurora glanced at Ylvesnia smugly before going to her familiar to shower him with praise and put out any remaining flames in that section of the field. She sent Bigsby back down to ensure they had got them all before returning to the village to inform them what had happened. Though the Mysterium noted a rise in monsters coming conspicuously further toward the country’s interior, Aurora was confident that this instance

was unrelated. Goblins were known for harassing settlements in the country and often delighted in camping out to conduct raids on livestock and food stores. It was a conclusion that Ylvesnia questioned once they were out of earshot and returning to the varo they'd rode in on.

The questions continued as they rode out of town and traveled the road back to the guildhall. From the choice of rune, to the nature of her familiar, to her conclusion about the goblins, her summoning technique, spell choices, connection to Samuel...it went on and on. Finally, Aurora reached a tipping point.

"Enough!" she yelled suddenly, cutting off a question that Ylvesnia had been in the middle of asking. "For all that is holy, enough with the nosy-ass questions already! If I knew you were going to nitpick me every step of the way on this mission, I would have told you to stay the fuck home!"

Ylvesnia stared at her impassively as the blonde continued.

"Things are hard enough for me right now without you looking over my shoulder, questioning my every move. I'm not some novice in need of constant assessment or guidance. I passed my tests, I served in the church, and I've helped pull Samuel out of trouble more times than I can count, and we're both still alive and healthy. All this before you decided to show up, by the way."

"Are ye done?" Ylvesnia asked calmly, catching Aurora slightly off guard by how unaffected she was by her outburst. "Yes?"

Aurora stared back at her, brows furrowed, as she tried to think of something else she could shout at the elf. Ylvesnia's calm demeanor made it difficult for her to press the verbal attack, though.

"I do not ask these questions to cast doubt," Ylvesnia explained. "Perhaps I am at fault for not recognizin' how they



might be perceived. Such ways are not the ways of elves. I seek to understand.”

Aurora’s temper cooled further as guilt began to set in. “Understand what?”

Ylvesnia’s head bobbed from side to side as she considered her phrasing a little more carefully in light of what had just happened, “The both of ye. Yer relationship to one another, yes. But also how ye operate independently, the differences and similarities in yer methods. It’s crucial so that I might train ye both up.”

“I don’t need training,” Aurora groaned. “Especially from you.”

“I disagree,” Ylvesnia retorted matter-of-factly. “Ye have skill, no question. But yer fallin’ behind every day. I say this not to upset ye but as an honest and true assessment of yer current abilities. I want to help.”

“I’m doing just fine,” Aurora protested weakly.

Ylvesnia dropped the reins for a moment to spread her hands, “A test then when we get back. It shouldn’t be difficult for ye if yer as powerful as ye think. We duel, and ye show me everythin’ you got, hm?”

“I’ve seen how you duel,” Aurora huffed with disapproval. She didn’t use standard dueling rules of any kind, and there were no points or boundaries. It was just a brawl between summons until one side dropped.

“That would seem to offer ye further advantage, wouldn’t it?” Ylvesnia responded.

Aurora waved an annoyed hand. “Fine! But don’t expect me to be as soft as Samuel was with you.”

## CHAPTER 8



**A**urora and Ylvesnia arrived back at the guildhall during the mid-afternoon. Though Aurora had spoken with a great deal of bravado about this test that the elf wished to put her through, the remaining time on the trip back had given her enough time to reconsider. The blonde girl felt less confident and slightly out of her depth but was simply too stubborn to back down. She bounced back and forth between silently scolding herself and talking herself up.

Ylvesnia looked over at her silently, getting her attention with a look alone before turning toward the cottage. Aurora followed, the silence of the walk weighing heavier on her with every passing moment. She ran through the Outsiders she had bound in her mind to distract herself and carefully considered their strengths and weaknesses. Aurora expected that Ylvesnia would come out with a strong counter to what she expected of Aurora. The key was to decide what the elf might expect Aurora to use, determine the possible counters, and instead produce the counter to that counter. It was enough to give her a headache trying to keep it all straight.

Finally arriving at the same place Ylvesnia had battled Samuel, the elven Summoner turned to face her. “Now then, let’s see what ye have for me.”

Something about the elf’s tone reignited her passion for slapping the smugness out of her. “Alright, just remember that you asked for this.”

Knowing that Ylvesnia was unlikely to give her a chance to draw a whole array on the ground the way she had with Samuel, Aurora decided to lean into the use of her implement and the language of the Outer Spheres. It was a significant

enough contrast from Samuel's style that it may even throw Ylvesnia off balance long enough to give her an advantage.

Brandishing the rosary in front of her, Aurora called out in a voice that echoed across the hills. "Sumaheshra!"

A hot wind rose, and from the far reaches of the Outer Spheres, a giant bird covered in flaming plumage burst into existence just overhead, landing heavily in the grass with a burst of intense heat in all directions. Aurora ran her hand down the burning feathers of the heat shrike's neck to greet her, completely unharmed by the flames. "Ready, Dawn?"

Dawn uttered a loud cry of acknowledgment, shaking itself out as the flames along his body shifted between orange and gold. Aurora gave the heat shrike a genuine smile, pleased to see her again after so long. She was probably Aurora's most powerful summon, depending on the situation, but was underutilized due to her size. As big as she was, her wingspan required even more room to be effective in a fight. Out here on the frontier was a perfect place for her to stretch out.

"A heat shrike!" Ylvesnia yelled over the cry of the immense bird. "Impressive and unexpected."

Ylvesnia grabbed her shirt's front, ripping it open in a stunning and aggressively sexy display. The tattoos and runes that ran up her arms continued across her chest, along her clavicle, and halfway down her breasts. Crossing her arms to make contact with runes opposite each hand, the bangle began to glow brightly. As she brought her hands back across her flesh, every rune she made contact with also began to glow.

Aurora would have thought the lewdness of this presentation unnecessary a year ago before learning about these esoteric summoning traditions. Now, it gave her some clue as to what she was in for.

Aurora felt a small swell of optimism, feeling as though she had correctly guessed the general idea of what Ylvesnia might use. But it was short-lived. A cloud of ashes resembling flower petals ruptured the ground between them, spewing forth

a humanoid figure wreathed in green flames. Aurora had expected something along the lines of a succubus to have attacks available that a fire-aligned outsider on Aurora's side wouldn't be immune to. Whatever this was, it lacked the signature attributes of succubi that she had observed in all of Samuel's bound Outsiders.

"Fuck her up," Aurora commanded her summon with a brief gesture of one hand. Flame to flame usually meant that the outsider with the size advantage and more potent physical attacks would be the victor, and Aurora intended to put the theory to the test.

Dawn pushed off the ground as if propelled by an explosion of flame, screaming over the short distance between them before snapping down at the nude female with her massive beak. The creature rolled forward to get under the heat shrike, only to be snatched up by her talons and carried off into the air.

Aurora watched intently as Dawn gained altitude, carrying the creature as high as she could before releasing her to plummet to the ground below. Gravity was just as effective a weapon as any in a fight like this. She glanced over at Ylvesnia and realized she wasn't watching the fight. Instead, the elf watched her in the same relaxed stance she'd had in the battle with Samuel. Aurora's eyes narrowed, realizing she didn't have the advantage she thought she had.

Signaling a warning through their link to be on her guard, Aurora had Dawn follow after her prey in a steep dive. Perhaps twenty feet before impact, there was a burst of fire as she arrested her momentum, revealing that she was capable of flight despite the lack of wings.

With a beat of *her* massive wings, Dawn stopped as well, buffeting the creature with wind so intense that it sent her slamming back down into the ground anyway.

Before Dawn could go in with her talons, the creature brought both her hands together, hurling a green fireball up into the heat shrike at point-blank range. With no means to

escape quickly, the fireball collided cleanly with Dawn's exposed chest. The ball erupted into a rapidly expanding explosion of bright green fire which collapsed forcefully in on itself after reaching a size of twenty feet across. To Aurora's surprise, the blast sent the heat shrike tumbling to the ground below.

"What did you do?" Aurora yelled, gesturing to the green flames that seemed to cling to the body of the giant bird. "What is that?"

"I thought ye weren't in need of instruction," Ylvesnia responded calmly. "Have ye changed yer mind?"

Aurora ignored the wisecrack, clapping her hands together as she encouraged Dawn back to her feet, "Come on, baby! You got this!"

The heat shrike's movements were more sluggish as she struggled to get back to her feet. It didn't make sense to Aurora how a fireball had done so much damage, regardless of its power. She reached into the link and felt weakness, nausea, and vertigo. Was it some kind of poison that she'd used?

"Finish it, Petra," Ylvesnia said calmly. The hovering creature shot forward to close the distance, a line of flames igniting the grass under her as she passed.

Aurora resisted the urge to panic, knowing that one way or another, the fight was about to be over. She ran two fingers over her bangle, temporarily amplifying her connection with Dawn to provide her with specific instructions through it. Turning to face the incoming attacker, the heat shrike let out a supernaturally deafening scream that rattled the earth beneath their feet. Instead of losing her equilibrium mid-flight, large portions of Petra's body peeled away as she disincorporated into an obscure mass of living flame.

Stunned, Aurora stood motionless. The idea that they had possibly just killed Petra filled her mind with dread but was quickly banished by the flaming female apparating back into

existence from the burning embers of the grass behind the heat shrike.

“Dawn—!” Aurora exclaimed, but it was far too late to communicate a proper warning. Petra unleashed a massive blast of green flames from both hands, completely engulfing the heat shrike from the chest up. Aurora stared in disbelief as the blast bathed everything in a baleful green light. When the fire subsided, it left a shower of emerald embers drifting through the air as the heat shrike collapsed. Her lustrous plumage dimmed considerably as she fell unconscious.

Aurora rushed over to Dawn, falling to her knees beside the giant bird in disbelief. None of the fight made sense to her. She looked up at the flaming green female as she drifted away from her, a look of self-satisfaction on her face at a job well done.

“Greenflame, darlin’,” Ylvesnia said as she walked up beside her. “Fire-aligned creatures experience exposure to it as poison and sickness.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” Aurora admitted weakly, tears beginning to well up as she gently caressed the unconscious heat shrike. “What did you summon?”

“Greenflame Nymph,” Ylvesnia answered quietly. “Native to the burning forests of the Inferno.”

With a small effort of Aurora’s will and a whispered word of dismissal, Dawn was returned to her own space to recover. All of the Outer Spheres had their own logic and rules that didn’t make much sense in Midgardia, but Aurora couldn’t recall having ever read about such forests in the Sphere of Fire.

“I was countin’ on ye not knowin’ about it. It’s the sort of thing ye learn from studies after graduation,” Ylvesnia explained. “Elves learn the intricate details of the Spheres they’re attuned to as part of their standard trainin’.”

Aurora’s face twisted into a sour frown. “Great. I’m so happy for them.”

“Ye should be pleased,” Ylvesnia protested. “I’ve every intention of sharin’ that knowledge with ye. If only ye’d stop to listen.”

The blonde hung her head in shame. Not only had she vastly overestimated her own abilities, but she had done so with all the swagger and buffoonery of a first-year student who’d just learned their first cantrips. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I let my temper get the best of me again.”

“Not unusual for flame sculptors,” Ylvesnia observed, unoffended by their exchange. “I’m confident ye will have it under control very soon. Ye had immense potential even before bonding with Samuel.”

Aurora’s brows furrowed, disliking the idea that somehow she needed some obscure bond with someone else to be worth anything. “What do you mean?”

“The bond to a lust reaper is a powerful one,” Ylvesnia said as she clasped her hands behind her back. “Such sexual parity goes both ways, though. As he gains power from ye, so too do ye gain power from him.”

“Really?” Aurora sounded skeptical. “That’s a thing?”

“It is,” Ylvesnia confirmed with a slight nod. “Incredibly rare, though, as I told ye both before. But even before that bond, yer potential was considerable if ye had a heat shrike at the ready like that.”

“All the good it did me,” Aurora scoffed. “One of the shortest fights I’ve ever been in.”

“Let’s hope it’s one of the last to be so.” Ylvesnia’s tone held a hint of encouragement in it. “I’ll be teaching ye about the nuances of the Inferno, with all its varying heat and flame.”

“It does sound interesting. I’ll admit,” Aurora sighed. “Greenflame seems incredibly useful.”

“It is, but it may not be the one for ye,” Ylvesnia said as she doused the small flickering green fires in the surrounding

grass. “There are others that may come to ye more naturally.”

Aurora’s feelings of shame and defeat were shunted to the side as her curiosity took hold, “Oh? Like what?”

“Well, I think perhaps—” Ylvesnia stopped as the front door to the cottage came open slowly, the hinges squeaking much longer than they needed to. Samuel, peering out from the darkness inside, squinted as though staring into the midday sun despite how low it was on the horizon now.

“Praetia’s mercy, Samuel!” Aurora exclaimed, failing to stifle a laugh. “Have you been in there this whole time?”

Samuel opened the door a little wider, trudging out in a loose-fit robe that Aurora couldn’t ever remember seeing him wear before. He held a hand up to shield his eyes from the light, squinting as he glanced around at the fresh scorch marks in the grass. “Uh. Hey. Yeah. What happened out here?”

“Ye didn’t see us out here battlin’?” Ylvesnia asked incredulously as Samuel failed to even notice her exposed breasts. “There were columns of flame, Samuel. Explosions, even.”

“Hm,” Samuel grunted with a casual nod, smacking his lips a few times. “Everybody having fun?”

Aurora and Ylvesnia exchanged glances, realizing they had perhaps misjudged the effect setting Samuel loose with all the succubi would have. He was disheveled and looked somehow like he had been asleep for the entire day and was still exhausted.

That morning, Aurora had set out for the village with Ylvesnia, and the two had been gone all day. Assuming he started to work at the same time as their departure, he had been at it much longer than she would have guessed any man capable of.

“Um, yeah,” Aurora answered hesitantly. “How about you? Everything... good with you?”



“Uh?” Samuel yawned. “Oh! Yeah, yeah. Great, just tired, you know? The succubi were all very hungry. Very enthusiastic about feeding.”

Ylvesnia looked thoughtful as she walked over to Samuel to examine him. What she was looking for, Aurora couldn't say, and the elf said nothing to hint as to what it might be. She looked him over, prodding at him a few times with her fingers and checking his eyes. The last part Aurora recognized as checking the dilation of his pupils.

Contact with a succubus could be immensely dangerous. Aurora had assumed it wouldn't be the case because they were *his* succubi, but perhaps she had been wrong. There had been five of them, after all, and he was expected to have more shortly. Satisfied with her examination, Ylvesnia stepped away from Samuel. “Well, ye seem fine, so get yer clothes back on and clean up yer mess.”

“Mess?” Samuel responded dreamily. “What do you mean?”

“I mean yer mess!” Ylvesnia pointed behind him into the cottage. “Ye trashed the whole damn thing. The least ye can do is pick up after yerself after havin' an orgy in my livin' space!”

Aurora stepped in after them to observe the chaos. What little furniture Ylvesnia had in the cottage had been knocked over in several places. Clothing, which Aurora realized couldn't possibly all be his, was strewn everywhere. Somehow the couch had been moved away from the wall at an oblique angle. Webbing, which obviously came from the widows, was stuck to several surfaces, including the ceiling. She didn't even know what practical use the webbing could have had.

“Samuel, this is a bit much, don't you think?” Aurora reprimanded. “How long have you been loafing around staring at this mess?”

“Uhm,” Samuel grumbled, clearing his throat before answering. “Twenty minutes, maybe?”

“Ye only just finished with them twenty minutes ago?” Ylvesnia looked stunned. “That’s fantastic.”

Aurora pursed her lips, feeling a pang of irritable jealousy in her chest, “Why is that fantastic?”

“Well, because it means he’s farther along than I thought,” Ylvesnia explained, an actual smile beginning to creep onto her face. “The only way he could have gone on for that long is by tappin’ into the metaphysical power in the lust the lot of them were producin’. I hoped for a little of that, but this exceeds expectations.”

“Oh,” Aurora muttered noncommittally. She supposed progress was progress, but getting supercharged by orgies was another strange fact of life that she would need to sit with for a while before she would be okay with it. What she had said to Ylvesnia earlier about keeping her feelings to herself seemed like the correct call now, but it felt at odds with what the elf had said about the connection between the two.

Setting him loose with a gaggle of sexy succubi, in theory, had been something she was alright with. But, seeing the results of it here felt different. She wondered why the time they spent together hadn’t resulted in some dramatic leap forward in his development like this had. It left her feeling a little cold and alone.

Before she could sink into a hole of doubt and self-pity, she reminded herself of Ylvesnia’s conviction about their bond. His power was her power, and her power was his power. Together, they were more formidable than they were apart. She repeated this, again and again, to numb the emotional sting as he and Ylvesnia moved about the cottage to tidy up. She told herself she could live with it and she would be fine with it.

Considering all she had lost in the last year, she had to be. She couldn’t allow herself to lose him too. Not now.

## CHAPTER 9



Samuel's legs protested as he sank into the desk chair. His back and neck joined in just to ensure he got the message that succubus orgies were off the table for the near future. It was a lesson learned not to neglect his bound summons or suffer the same consequences. He could hear Aurora in the tub behind the changing screen. With her help, he'd managed to get Ylvesnia's cottage cleaned up before they returned to the guildhall. He helped himself to a late cup of tea to give him a boost but found that it was no match for the exhaustion he suffered.

Sitting at the desk, Samuel stared into space for a few minutes, allowing his weight to settle and the aches and pains to fade into the background of his thoughts. When he finally found something to focus on, it was a book he'd not seen in some time: Aurora's copy of the Holy Book.

"I haven't seen this in a while," he commented, picking it up and turning it over in his hands a few times.

"Seen what?" Aurora asked from the tub.

He held the book up as if she could see it, only realizing a second later how silly the gesture was. "Your Holy Book."

"Oh," she responded, letting a silence settle in for just a little too long before continuing. "Yeah, I was moving some things around earlier. I didn't mean to leave it out. You can put it back in the drawer if you want."

Samuel opened the book, flipping through the pages that had never meant much of anything to him. He'd read parts of it here and there, as most people had. Growing up and attending church essentially guaranteed there was at least

some part of the book you knew. “That’s alright,” he said absently. “It doesn’t bother me.”

“What doesn’t bother you?” Aurora asked amid the sound of moving water in the tub.

“The book,” Samuel clarified. “It doesn’t bother me.”

Aurora’s voice became slightly more strained, “Why should it bother you?”

Turning his head to look back at the screen, Samuel took a moment to choose his words more carefully. “I mean, it’s not in the way. You can put it anywhere you want.”

Aurora said nothing, perhaps realizing she had moved to the defensive when it wasn’t needed. Samuel took a deep breath to calm himself as well, but he supposed conversations like this were bound to happen if he didn’t get around to addressing matters.

“Maybe I’ll read a bit of it myself,” Samuel suggested as he held the book open without looking at it.

Aurora laughed shortly. “I didn’t think you were the type.”

“I’m not,” he admitted. “Growing up, my father would bring me to church, but it never resonated with me. It was more about community and ties to the people for him. But it might be worth learning it on an academic level, to help better understand.”

“What could you possibly hope to learn from it if not faith?” Aurora interjected.

Samuel sighed and set the book on the desk, closing it slowly. “Well, about you, for one. It could tell me a lot about you, I think.”

“It’s scripture, Samuel,” Aurora argued. “Not a guide on women.”

Samuel rolled his eyes, thankful she couldn’t see him doing it from behind the screen. She despised when he rolled

his eyes at her. “That’s not what I meant. It’s important to you, so I want to, at the very least, become more familiar with it.”

“It’s not that important,” Aurora grumbled. “So you don’t need to bother.”

Samuel turned in the chair, causing a renewed chorus of pain to echo throughout his body. “Don’t do that, don’t brush this off. It’s still important because it’s part of you. You think I don’t notice that your implement is still the rosary?”

“I haven’t had time to—”

“Stop,” Samuel repeated in a more soothing tone. “You don’t need to put up a wall with me. Ever since we came out here, I haven’t seen you give the book so much as a second glance. It’s heartbreaking to see you not praying anymore, you know?”

Aurora didn’t respond immediately. Samuel could swear he felt her eyes on him even through the screen that separated them. “Why?”

“Faith is a strange thing,” Samuel hesitated. “Because it contradicts what we learn as academics in many ways. And yet, you could reconcile those things, taking the best of both into yourself. It’s part of what I admired so much about you. It was a core part of the Aurora I fell for.”

After another prolonged silence and complete stillness, Samuel began to wonder if perhaps he’d said too much or said it incorrectly. Then, after a brief snuffle, she finally spoke. “It’s funny you say that because when they first threw me in that damn convent, it didn’t mean a thing to me. It meant less than nothing because it represented my failures. For all my achievements in magic, my family still saw no use for me. They weren’t even content for me to find my own path somewhere away from them.”

Samuel felt a pang of guilt as he regretted going down this path of conversation. “What changed?” he croaked hesitantly.

“Me, I think?” Aurora guessed. “I was alone for a long time. The rest of the clergy knew I didn’t want to be there, and they didn’t want me there. But the creed dictates that they accept those who seek, so I made a show of it so I wasn’t put out on the street. I was worried what new, fresh hell my family could concoct if I failed to find a place in the church.

“So I picked up the book and got to reading,” Aurora continued. “It was the only skill I felt translated from all the hard work I’d done in school. So I read the book and found that it offered me a degree of peace. I felt like I could hear the words of Praetia in the scripture, even if I didn’t hear them in the halls. It felt more direct, more poignant, and more personal. There were times when I could swear she was there, just over my shoulder, speaking the words to me so that I would truly understand their meaning.”

Samuel stared at the changing screen as she related her story. Aurora had never gone into this amount of detail about her experience at the convent or the early days of her studies in the church. It hadn’t even occurred to him that how she’d found her faith had almost entirely been under her own power. She wasn’t converted or taught. She had come to it on her own in a time of need. It gave her solace and the means to walk the path set before her. She sounded like her old self again.

“And I have always prayed, even recently,” Aurora pressed as her voice cracked. “Just not the way that I used to.”

“What do you pray for?” Samuel wondered aloud without thinking.

“For us,” she admitted. “I prayed that Praetia would find a way for us to be happy...together. But I don’t hear her. I don’t feel her when I do it. I feel only silence, and I wonder if perhaps she’s turned her back on me for my sins.”

Samuel got to his feet and crossed the room, stepping around the screen to look at her. She was doing everything she could to hold herself back from sobbing as she sat in the tub, her arms hugging her knees to her chest. “Aurora...”

“I don’t know where I stand anymore with the goddess, Samuel. The church directed me to kill you, and I knew in my heart that that was wrong. Even if you were some hellspawn, it’s not the way. It goes against scripture. Killing in self-defense? Alright, but this? This was murder. If you chase someone down to end their life, it’s murder.”

Samuel hadn’t thought of it that way, but it felt true. For just about everything else, there was a way to go about achieving justice. Bringing him to trial would have been the proper way to handle things, assuming they had actually believed him guilty of such heinous crimes. He knelt next to the tub, afraid that she might completely unravel at any moment.

“I just wish that Praetia’s words had found me then,” Aurora choked. “That she could tell me I was doing the right thing.”

Samuel shook his head gently. “Perhaps she doesn’t need to.”

Aurora’s eyes drifted over to him as he explained his point.

“If you found guidance in the book and took your direction from it, why should she need to reiterate what’s already written? If we’re assuming that the scripture is her words, which you feel is true, then it would seem to me that she has already told you everything you need to know. Right?”

Her eyes glistened with restrained tears. “Oh, Sammy...”

“I can’t speak from experience about faith,” Samuel admitted. “But I think anything this important to you is worth holding on to, no matter what some cocksnooch in a robe says.”

The look of sorrow on Aurora’s face was broken by a smile accompanied by a short laugh. She remembered, just as he had, what she had referred to the bishop as when she’d read his comments in the papers.

“You’re so stupid,” Aurora laughed bashfully, leaning toward him over the edge of the tub. As their lips met, he could feel the tension draining out of her. The weight she had been carrying since she’d fled with him was finally easing. As he held her in the tub, Samuel hoped the relief she felt would be a lasting one.

The conversation stuck with him into the evening, well after they’d retired to bed. Samuel stared up into the darkness of their room for what felt like an hour. Eventually, he slipped out of bed in search of something to drink as he mulled through his thoughts.

“Evenin’, trouble sleepin’?” Ylvesnia asked as he entered the kitchen. She sat at a small table with a single cup of tea, a bowl of sugar, and a kettle.

“Yeah,” Samuel admitted. The elf motioned to the chair opposite her for him to sit.

Ylvesnia took a brief sip from her tea. “What’s troublin’ ye, Samuel?”

“A lot of things,” he sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I’ve been trying to avoid thinking about them for a while, but I can’t do that anymore.”

The elven woman nodded briefly before turning her attention to Ketan as he stepped in. The older elf seemed surprised to see the two of them in there. Likewise, Samuel was surprised to see how his fluffy bathrobe matched the pink bunny slippers he wore.

“Didn’t realize we were having a meeting,” Ketan muttered flatly as he retrieved a teacup from the cupboard. “Does that still have hot water in it?”

Ylvesnia nodded, and Ketan reached for a second cup as he turned his attention to Samuel. “Would you like one?”

“Please,” Samuel replied. He’d completely neglected to grab one when he’d entered. “Much appreciated.”



Ketan shuffled over to the table with both cups, setting them down before pulling up another chair. “So what’s got you two up so late?”

Ylvesnia shrugged, shaking her head. “Nothin’ in particular. Usually, I sit up late readin’ before bed, but I wasn’t in the mood tonight.”

Samuel watched as Ketan prepared the tea for the two of them, pouring the hot water in with the practiced grace of his advanced age. “Just had a lot on my mind, I guess. What about you?”

“Late-night courier came in from the Mysterium,” Ketan replied, adding sugar to his cup before tasting it and apparently deciding it needed just a little more. “They’re keeping an eye on things at the border, and the situation is deteriorating quickly.”

“Worse than a continent-spanning war?” Samuel asked incredulously, blowing gently at his tea before taking a sip. Just the smell of it was enough to relax him despite the distressing news. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Well, believe it,” Ketan grumbled. “Nordonica has voiced its opposition to the build-up of our troops at the border alongside Mystuval.”

Samuel set the cup on its saucer a little more roughly than he intended. “Are they allies now?”

Ketan pursed his lips and shrugged. “Nothing official has been signed, but I wouldn’t be surprised to see it happen in the next few days. They’ve both got it in their heads that we’re staging an invasion.”

“Nordonica sees any build-up of troops as a provocation,” Ylvesnia noted as she set her cup down gingerly. “They see too much of themselves in their enemies. It has always been their way.”

Samuel glanced between the two elves quickly. “What about Lemashara?”

Ketan lifted his cup to his lips and offered another shrug. “Don’t ask me. I haven’t been home in decades.”

“Lemashara is already at odds with Nordonia,” Ylvesnia stated. “So if they declare war with Terth, it’ll only serve to justify the section of our government eager to invade Nordonia’s western border.”

“You’d think Mystuval would have their hands full with Gruvora pushing through their backdoor,” Ketan sighed.

Samuel leaned back in his chair, drumming his fingers on the table. “Did the courier have anything about the monster incursions?” Samuel doubted anyone had time to follow up on the giant mole he’d captured for study, so any news about monster attacks was going to have to come from elsewhere.

The older elf adjusted his robe to close it up some more. “Just reports. Nothing as to the cause. The war is drawing more and more attention because of just how big it’s growing. It’s eclipsed damn near everything now.”

“Neutrality is no longer an option,” Ylvesnia commented somberly. “I’ve always felt that was true for yer people, but I’ve never been more sorry to be right about something, Samuel.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me,” Samuel chuckled. “You didn’t will the war into being. But, on the bright side, I guess the Church will be too busy to come looking for us, hm?”

Ketan scoffed, “No, not likely. Besides strongly worded letters, they’ve committed nothing to the defense of the realm.”

“If anythin’,” Ylvesnia explained, “It’ll embolden them. They’ll be able to move about with less scrutiny inside Terth’s borders. Fewer people will bother to question what they’re doin’.”

“Delightful,” Samuel grumbled, grabbing his cup again and drinking half its contents before returning it to its saucer. The brief calm he’d felt had been disrupted, and now his only

hope was getting as much of the soothing tea in him as possible.

“It’s out of yer control,” Ylvesnia consoled gently. “Ye can’t allow it to cloud yer mind. If there were somethin’ ye could do, perhaps it would be worth the time and effort. For now, all ye can do is work on yerself and obtain all the tools ye need for when trouble finds ye.”

“Classic elven wisdom there,” Ketan snorted as he poured himself another cup and added sugar.

“And that’s supposed to mean what exactly?” Ylvesnia asked a little defensively, turning in her chair to face Ketan more directly. It was the first time Samuel had seen her behave in such a way.

“Means not much has changed in Lemashara,” Ketan replied dryly. “Plenty of self-aggrandizing, not enough looking out for each other.”

Ylvesnia leaned forward on the table as both her brows shot up. “It’s not self-aggrandizin’! Ye know the consequences of meddlin’ as much as any of us, Ketan. You can’t be serious right now.”

“I am serious,” Ketan said, his gray eyes moving to meet her gaze. “Just because you fuck something up doesn’t mean you shouldn’t make another attempt.”

“We didn’t fuck up, Ketan!” Ylvesnia’s voice rose, causing a pit to form in Samuel’s stomach. “They weren’t ready! I’d argue they’re still not. These are all just consequences of the first time.”

Ketan set his cup down on the table, slowly pushing it away from him. “And it’s never going to get better if we don’t make an attempt to fix it. Why do you think I’m here, Ylvesnia? You could be doing the same while satisfying your curiosity, you know.”

Ylvesnia stared at him long and hard, her nostrils flaring as she considered pushing the argument. Her anger wasn’t something that Samuel ever thought he’d witness, but Ketan

had somehow pulled it out of her with ease without Samuel even knowing what it was about. Elves tried not to interfere with human societies or alter the natural course of their development. That was the most relevant thing Samuel could think of that the argument might be about. But why would it matter to either of them?

The older elf smacked his lips as he held Ylvesnia's gaze for a moment longer, then rose from his seat. "This was constructive," he said, tapping two fingers on the back of the chair absently. Samuel couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not. "Thanks for the tea."

Samuel watched as the elf in the bathrobe took his leave before the silence closed in on him and his teacher. She looked at him briefly before looking away in embarrassment. She regarded losing her composure in front of him as a personal failing, it seemed.

"Are you alright?" Samuel uttered hesitantly, unsure if he should even attempt to speak to her about it.

"Fine, Samuel," Ylvesnia muttered. "I apologize for the outburst. Ye didn't need to see that."

"What was that all about," Samuel wondered, vaguely gesturing where Ketan had been sitting just a moment before.

"It's nothin' to concern yerself with." Ylvesnia waved a hand dismissively as she finished the last few drops of tea in her cup and stood. "Old arguments among elves that were bein' had even before I was born."

As evasive as the answer was, it did support his theory about the doctrine of non-intervention among the elves. Samuel licked his lips before pressing further. "You said if Nordonia declared war on Terth, then Lemashara would get involved—that Terth would not be alone. Are you sure about that?"

"As sure as the day is long," Ylvesnia said confidently. It was all the reassurance he needed. If he was right about the elves' argument, it was good to know that they would still

come to their aid when it came to all-out war. “Get some sleep.” Ylvesnia smiled and put a hand on his head gently. “There’s no tellin’ what tomorrow will bring, but at the very least, there’s still much trainin’ to do. You did well today.”

“Thank you.” Samuel felt a slight blush of pride on his face and decided to conceal it behind the cup of tea as he finished it. “I’ll go to bed in a few.”

Ylvesnia nodded her approval, set her cup on the counter, and sauntered out of the kitchen, leaving Samuel alone in the night to think.

# CHAPTER 10



Arcanist Mason,

I hope that this letter finds you well. I would like to begin with my most heartfelt congratulations on your marriage. I regret that I was unable to make the ceremony, as my obligations have detained me elsewhere. However, I have sent along a gift in my stead in hopes that you will find it sufficient recompense for the delay in my writing you. I should also like to inform you that I have retained the services of a new Arcanist to fill your position until such a time as you wish to return. I remember what it was like to be a newlywed once and will make no effort to press you on the matter. Life changes unexpectedly once one has joined in matrimony with another.

Know that all things will remain as they are here and that we are happy and well. Despite the complications presented by the current political climate, things have continued apace with relatively little change, so you needn't worry. If and when you are able to return to duty, I should be happy to hear from you. Until then, please enjoy your new life as you settle in and take care of your new wife. I am told she is rather spirited but unfailingly loyal.

Wishing you the best in these uncertain times,

His Grace, the Duke of Salona

**S**amuel stared at the letter for a long time, reading and rereading the words in the distinct handwriting of his father. He had kept things formal to disguise his true message, but the meaning behind everything was clear. He had not disowned or abandoned him, and he was working on getting him home once things cooled off. It gave him a sense

of hope he hadn't felt in quite some time. Finally, after reading it again, he looked up at Ketan with a smile. "He mentioned some kind of gift?"

"I believe the courier has it now," the elf nodded from behind his desk as he looked over other documents.

"Where is the courier now?" Samuel asked a little anxiously. He couldn't do anything to conceal his emotional state after having finally heard from his father.

"Waiting at Ylvesnia's cottage, I believe," Ketan answered absently before pulling a folder from one of the drawers. "Once you finish with that, I have a job for you. It shouldn't be difficult but must be handled as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir." Samuel bowed his head, taking the folder and excusing himself as quickly as humanly possible. It felt like mere seconds that it took him to get to Ylvesnia's. As tired and sore as he had been the night before, a full night of sleep had seemingly worked wonders for him. He'd risen with the sun, ready to take on the day with a level of energy he hadn't felt in recent memory. The missive from his father was even more exciting. Samuel felt like he might jump out of his skin with how elated he was.

"There ye are," Ylvesnia said from the front porch as he approached. She was working on restoring it so she could spend less time sitting inside when the weather was fair. The elf used targeted applications of the mending spell in phases to repair and restore the wood before affixing it back into its proper place. Somewhere down the line she started using some spell he didn't know to put her own artistic flourish on things as well. The parts of the porch she had completed had a distinct elven flavor to them as a result.

"I was talking to Ketan, sorry." Samuel took a moment to catch his breath but found that he wasn't nearly as winded as expected. "He said there was a courier here for me?"

“You’re awfully sprightly this morning,” a familiar voice said as an older gentleman emerged from inside the cottage with a cup of coffee in hand. Samuel stood stunned as his former valet, Wilson, leaned on the door frame with an amused look in his eyes. “I thought you might be a bit longer, so I took the liberty of getting a cup of coffee while I waited.”

“Wilson!” Samuel exclaimed, throwing himself at the man heedless of the hot beverage he was holding. He held the man close for a time, unable to believe that he was actually here. It felt like he had shrunk since the last time he’d seen him. Either that or Samuel had grown. It seemed like it had been ages, in any case.

“I can’t believe you’re here!” Samuel said, finally pulling away just enough to look his old valet over. “I didn’t mean to keep you waiting—I had no idea. What are you even doing here?”

“Without the Earl of Cathil to look after, His Grace has seen fit to find odd jobs for me to perform to justify my further employment,” Wilson explained as he took a small sip of coffee from his mug. He had the same dry playfulness in his demeanor as Samuel remembered. “Delivering messages being among such duties.”

Samuel laughed like a child, glancing briefly at Ylvesnia before Wilson approached and clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s wonderful to see you in good health. Things were quite rough for a time when we first received the news.”

The smile on Samuel’s face faded a little. “Oh, I can’t imagine what it must have been like. I’m sorry to have put you all through that.”

“No need to apologize, my boy,” Wilson assured him. “It’s become increasingly clear over the last several months that you had little choice in all of this.”

“Thank you,” Samuel sighed. “It means a lot to me, and it’s a weight off my shoulders, besides.”



“Your father wishes he could be here but sends along his fond regards,” Wilson continued. “He felt that it was something I could communicate in a way that a letter could not.”

“Well, how long are you staying?” Samuel asked excitedly. “You need to get me caught up on everything.”

“Not long, I’m afraid,” Wilson replied, his eyes drifting toward Aurora as she approached from the guildhall. “Only a few days while I resupply, then I must be getting back.”

“What’s going on?” Aurora asked tentatively.

Samuel’s smile widened as he stepped aside. “You remember Wilson, right? From school?”

It took a moment for Aurora to make the connection, a spark of recognition entering her eyes. “Your valet? What’s he doing here of all places?”

“Delivering a message from the Duke, Sister Brandt,” Wilson answered respectfully. “Though I suppose I should address you now as Summoner Mason?”

Aurora’s cheeks turned a subtle shade of pink. “Yes, for the time being, anyway.”

“Of course,” Wilson bowed his head. She couldn’t tell that he was teasing her a little, but Samuel could. He was surprised, considering how aware Wilson had been of her cruel antics throughout their schooling. Such light-hearted ribbing was unexpected but welcome. It meant he didn’t have to explain how they had put the past behind them.

“What’s this?” Aurora asked, indicating the folder under Samuel’s arm with one hand.

“New job, nothing serious,” Samuel answered more dismissively than he meant to.

Wilson took another sip of his coffee before turning toward the cottage, “Just let me set this down, and we can be on our way.”

Samuel's face screwed up a little. "What? No, you don't have to do that. It shouldn't take long."

Wilson stopped to look back at him, "I'm sure, but I would like to see how far you've come since the Proving."

"I'll also be goin' with ye," Ylvesnia added as she set one of the boards for the porch aside. "I'll be evaluatin' you in the field after yesterday's trainin'."

"Well, then I suppose we'll all go," Aurora chirped with a brittle smile. Samuel looked between each of them quickly to offer protest but realized how much time such a discussion would take only to ultimately lose the argument. They would mostly be in the way more than anything, but if the job were as easy as Ketan said, it wouldn't be of any concern. It was only strange that Aurora would wish to come with them. She had the least reason to see him work, given that she was the most familiar with both their employment and Samuel's abilities.

The job site wasn't far, just on the other side of the village. The four took the main road through Mirfield on foot rather than wasting time packing up varo. The fact that it was still early and the sun had yet to get too high in the sky meant that the walk was a refreshingly cool one. Along the way, Wilson got Samuel caught up on the everyday happenings of his home and a little information about what his father had been up to. Everything was kept as vague as possible in the off-hand chance that one of the locals might overhear them.

"Arcanist Mason!" A man called from the front of the general store. Samuel recognized the older gentleman with the black push-broom mustache as the store owner, Vincent Malta.

Samuel extended his hand as the storeowner approached the group. "No need to be so formal, Vin. These are just some guests of Ketan's coming along to see how we operate up here."

After a couple of firm pumps of Vin's hand, he let the man have it back. Smoothing out his mustache, he gave a nod

of acknowledgment before continuing. “I just wanted to thank you for helping Billie out before. She said you didn’t want to take any of the credit but felt it was important that I know she didn’t do it alone.”

“Ah,” Samuel chuckled. “Well, I helped, but she handled herself well. She deserves recognition for that.”

“I reckoned that was the case,” Vin admitted. “I was a little cross with her when I first found out, but I think she’s made it clear she’s going to do what her heart desires, and I suppose being just like her stubborn old man is exactly that.”

“Well, it was my pleasure,” Samuel nodded. “I’m sure I’ll —”

“That’s not everything,” Vin said as he lowered his voice. He glanced between Samuel and the others with him. Seeing the man he believed to be Deckard Mason at ease around them, he apparently decided them trustworthy enough to continue. “You on your way to check out that business on the other side of town?”

Samuel nodded, wondering what would put someone as laid back as Vincent on edge like this. “Yeah, judging by the description of the damage, I figure it’s just more shale moles.”

Vin shook his head emphatically. “Ain’t no shale moles.”

Samuel furrowed his brow, tilting his head to one side. “What do you mean?”

“Billie was out that way earlier,” Vin explained. “She told me about the holes, too big for shale moles. Then there’s the smell.”

“The smell,” Samuel repeated as Wilson quietly stepped beside him. “What about the smell?”

“It’s a very distinct musk,” Vincent continued. “I reckon it’s a furosent.”

“Furosent,” Samuel said aloud, but it didn’t seem familiar to him at all. “I don’t know what that is.”

“About the size of a big dog and resembles a ferret,” Wilson clarified quietly. “We used to use them in the last war. We would train them to draw out predators and whatever nasty things the enemy had trained to fight.”

Vincent’s gaze shifted to Wilson, reassessing him for a moment. “Where’d you serve, sir?”

“Gruvora, 3rd infantry,” Wilson responded, “You?”

“1st rangers,” Vincent chuckled as the two shook hands. “We did a lot of the handling of the furosents for you guys.”

“Well, I’ll be,” Wilson laughed a little before refocusing on Samuel. “The musk he’s talking about attracts monsters and large predators. They burrow underground and typically only come out at night.”

“Bastards have incredible hearing and sight, too,” Vin added. “So sometimes you could post them up outside an encampment, and they’d work as an early warning system.”

“Praetia, the sound they would make,” Wilson groaned. “I remember I could feel it all through my body.”

“We trained a few to weaponize that, actually,” Vincent remarked as he fiddled with his mustache again. “Which is why you need to be careful. I’m surprised there are any left here.”

Samuel inclined his head curiously. “Why’s that?”

“They’re not native to the country,” Wilson explained. “All of the furosents we used during the war were from Mystuval. I don’t think you could obtain one here for roughly twenty years now. Maybe longer. You’d have to see when all those trade restrictions went into place and which one they were part of. But they only live to about nine to ten years.”

Samuel turned to look back at Ylvesnia as they exchanged concerned looks. They had just been talking about Mystuval and Gruvora the night before, and now they had some relic from the last war causing trouble here in the countryside. It strained credulity for Samuel not to believe

these things were related. “Alright, let’s get moving. There’s no time to waste.”

Before returning to the job, Samuel and Wilson each exchanged handshakes with Vincent one last time. “Thank you, Vin,” Samuel said gratefully.

“Furosests,” Aurora muttered suspiciously to Samuel once they had gotten underway again. “Creatures attracting other creatures?”

“Perhaps the culprit for the monsters pushing further in?” Samuel proposed. Aurora shrugged, but her expression said that she favored the theory heavily. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much time to theorize and speculate as the group picked up speed toward their destination. Though Wilson walked with a cane, Samuel was surprised to see the man light on his feet when the situation called for it.

Arriving where the file had indicated, they found some ruined rock walls and a rundown barn that looked like it had been abandoned for several years. Samuel held a hand up for everyone to stop, instructing them to remain at the wall while he proceeded.

“Careful,” Wilson cautioned, “you’ll smell it before you see it.”

Samuel took that information on board as he carefully picked his way across the property. The holes that the creature had been digging were readily apparent, though judging by their depth, some appeared to be for foraging while others were legitimate tunnels. The sour musk of the creature lingered behind in both cases but didn’t seem to indicate that it was anywhere in the immediate vicinity, so Samuel continued toward the barn.

Half of the barn’s roof had collapsed long enough ago that moss and other plant life had found their way into the loft as well as the ground floor. Large sections of the walls had fallen in, allowing Samuel to see clear through to the other side, depending on the angle. Holding his spear at the ready

and his senses keenly attuned, he stepped through the empty doorway to have a look inside.

Unlike many of the barns in the area that Samuel had been inside, this one had not had a packed dirt floor. Instead, the floor had been composed of rough-cut lumber. Much of it had rotted away, revealing a large hole that extended deep into the earth. This, he thought, was likely where the furosent had made its lair. The old wood offered extra protection from above and had a distinct sound when someone walked across it. Lingering just inside the doorway, Samuel couldn't be sure if he'd already alerted the creature. There was a good chance it was still sleeping if it was nocturnal.

Briefly considering his options, Samuel decided it would be best to lure it out using the same method it was using to detect threats from a distance. Leaning down, he quietly lifted a broken brick from next to the door and hurled it as best he could to the far side of the barn. He was surprised at how easy it had felt to skip the weight of the brick across the floor on the other side of the hole and through a section of the rotten wall beyond.

He didn't get a chance to think on it too much as the air began to fill with the potent sour smell of the furosent's musk. Samuel remained in a low crouch as the creature poked its head from the hole, looking in the direction of the sound. Not knowing how good the furosent's hearing was, he held his breath just to be on the safe side. The creature's head moved from side to side atop its long neck as it tried to get a better view of what could have made the noise. Then, slowly it crawled out of the hole on all fours to investigate.

When Wilson described it as looking like a ferret, Samuel realized he had been describing its posture and how it moved. It could be on its hind legs to get a better angle on something if needed, but its primary movement was on four clawed legs. Its long neck ended in a broad head with a snout that looked very capable of sniffing out food or predators. It was only by luck that Samuel was huddled downwind of it, having not considered that in his approach at all.

Samuel waited until the furosent was out of the hole entirely before positioning himself to strike. Even the tiny movement of his boot in the dirt was enough to get the creature's attention now that it was awake and alert. Its head whipped around to see him, forcing him to move before he was ready. As the furosent darted for its hole, Samuel leveled the head of the capped spear with the creature and called out. "Kinast!"

A powerful unseen burst of pure kinetic energy erupted from the implement and slammed into the furosent, sending it hurling through the air for several feet before it balled itself up on impact with the floor. It rolled for another few feet before getting its footing. Samuel rushed in to close the distance, leaping across the hole as he channeled another spell, this time through himself. "Lonjum!"

The distance he was normally capable of leaping multiplied as the magic coursed through the muscles in his legs, allowing him to clear the hole easily. Landing on the other side with more grace and dexterity than he had thought himself capable, he brandished the implement once more as the furosent pounced.

"Protecka!" Samuel cried, producing the protective shield of light between him and the leaping furosent. Not only was the creature's advance halted, but the unexpectedly empowered spell repelled the furosent with enough force to send it tumbling backward along the floor once again.

"Well, shit," Samuel gasped, glancing at the spear's haft briefly before advancing on the furosent, scrambling to its feet. The creature was incredibly agile for its size, and the claws it had looked capable of tearing right down to the bone if given a chance. If it could get its front claws in, Samuel was fairly certain it would kick and rake with the rear ones just like a cat.

Samuel channeled an intense burst of cold through the implement by whirling the spear onto his shoulder and leveling the end with the furosent. "Crydat!"

The cold blue blast that resulted was even more unexpected than the empowered protection spell he had used. The furosent was knocked backward, a thick layer of ice rapidly spreading across its neck, chest, and front legs. The force was sufficient enough to put the creature's body through the wall the brick had passed through and into the overgrown grass beyond. If the furosent was able to free itself from the layer of ice, it could vanish entirely into the grass. Samuel had to act quickly.

Breaking into a run, he closed the distance with the creature, doing his best to ignore the pungent, sour smell curling the hairs in his nose as he did. As it scrambled onto its hind legs, the furosent turned to face him with jaws waiting. Its temporary and partial immobility wouldn't prevent it from sinking its teeth into him if he got sloppy now. However, Samuel had the clear advantage of reach as he pressed the top of the capped spear into the ice on the furosent's chest.

"Ru!" He cried, this time intentionally adding the power of the run on the haft to empower the spell. The thick ice exploded out away from the point of contact, converting itself into a spray of frozen shrapnel as it passed easily through the foul-smelling furosent like a hot knife through butter. The remains of the creature's pulverized body fell to the ground in a heap, dead instantly.

Silence fell as Samuel stared down at the lifeless creature, awestruck at the quick work he'd made of it. Having used the spells he had in such quick succession, he should have been experiencing more fatigue than he was. While not wholly unaffected by the strain of the magic, he found he still had a great deal of energy. The power surging through him was as impressive as it was surprising.

"Good show!" Wilson exclaimed as Samuel stepped into the open. "Shockingly good show, really."

"Impressive indeed," Ylvesnia commented as she brushed past him to examine the furosent. Even she couldn't conceal the look of disgust as the smell of the creature hit her.



Aurora, the only one with the presence of mind to cover her nose as she joined them, looked between the dead creature and Samuel with an impressed look on her face. She'd seen him work several times, which meant that, like Samuel, she knew precisely just how drastic the improvement was.

"Little overkill, don't you think?" Aurora joked as Wilson and Ylvesnia spoke with one another over the creature's remains.

"I was just doing what I normally do," Samuel admitted quietly. "Everything I threw at it was just dialed up."

Aurora nodded a little as she spoke through her sleeve. "Ylvesnia mentioned something about our power feeding off of one another. When one improves, so does the other."

"I'm fairly certain that's the case with the succubi as well," Samuel agreed. "Which means I need to be a little more careful when the situation calls for restraint."

The blonde's brows knit together irritably, "Who would have known that you were just one gangbang away from being a halfway decent magic user, huh?"

Wilson's brows furrowed at this. "Hmm? What's this now?"

# CHAPTER 11



If I never smelled one of these things for the rest of my life, “It would have been too soon,” Vincent said as Samuel and Winston pushed the furosent heavily onto the table of the general store’s back room.

“I feel the same way,” Winston agreed as he stepped away.

Samuel knew he’d be scrubbing the creature’s stench off for hours, but having someone examine the creature was more important than his comfort. Leaving it out in the open was out of the question, and Vin’s was much closer than the guildhall.

“I’m sorry to do this to you, Vin,” Samuel apologized. “We can have someone come by and pick it up as soon as possible. It’s just too damn heavy to carry the whole way.”

“It’s alright,” Vin said, waving him off. “It’s no trouble. Besides, I can’t say I’m not a little curious about it. How did it even get here?”

“Do they migrate?” Aurora asked, though her question was meant to eliminate the possibility more than anything.

Vincent shook his head as he put his hands near the wounds of the furosent to examine them more closely. “Mineral deposits in the mountains prevent their passing.”

Ylvesnia raised a curious brow. “What sort of mineral deposits?”

“Kastil,” Winston answered as he leaned closer to Vincent to see what the man was looking for.

“I wouldn’t think there was enough to act as a barrier,” Ylvesnia mused skeptically.

Winston looked up briefly as Vincent prodded along the abdomen of the creature. “There isn’t, but even just a little of it thwarts their underground navigation methods. Renders them effectively blind even in small amounts.”

Samuel turned to look at Ylvesnia and Aurora, a concerned look in his eyes. “It seems increasingly likely that someone brought it here. We’ll have to have Ketan put out a few discreet inquiries to see if he can determine who.”

“You’re looking for more than one, that’s for sure,” Vincent piped up, grabbing their attention once again. Then, glancing at Winston, the man motioned for him to press his fingers against the abdomen as he had just done. “Feel that?”

Winston prodded at the abdomen momentarily with two fingers before sighing, “Unfortunate.”

Vincent brushed at his mustache as he shook his head, “Probably a full litter.”

Holding a hand up to interrupt, Samuel stepped closer to the table. “What are you telling me? This is a pregnant female?”

The two men nodded, looks of evident dismay on both their faces.

“So there is at least one male in the area,” Ylvesnia speculated. “At the minimum. Assumin’, of course, she didn’t have a previous litter. How many do they usually have?”

Vincent shrugged, continuing to brush his mustache absently with two fingers. “I’ve seen as many as seven, but most of the time, we’d see somewhere around three or four.”

Samuel’s train of thought was interrupted as Aurora swatted at his arm, catching him completely by surprise. Despite his look of confusion, begging for an explanation, Aurora failed to accommodate him. Instead, she swatted him several more times.

“Hey!” Samuel exclaimed as he stumbled back. “What’s your problem?”

“She. Had. Babies!” Each word was punctuated with another swat of Samuel’s arm. “You killed a mama with babies!”

“Oh, come on!” Samuel groaned. Had she not been listening to everything else they had been discussing? Indeed it was a little sad, but he didn’t regret doing what he had to, especially if the furosent were the cause of larger, more dangerous monsters pushing deeper into the country.

Ylvesnia looked strangely amused with Aurora’s outburst, letting her take a few more swings before placing a hand on her arm. “We should probably get back to report our findings, hm?”

Finally, Aurora called off her assault, turning her attention to Ylvesnia instead. “Yeah, I suppose. We’ll also have to put the word out to the rest of the Mysterium. If we can start rooting the creatures out, perhaps the monster attacks will go down.”

Samuel turned his attention back to the two men examining the furosent. “Vin, are you sure you’re alright with us leaving this here for a while?”

Vincent waved Samuel off absently as he turned the creature on the table over. Winston bid the man farewell before joining the trio on their trek back to the guildhall. There, they met with Ketan, sitting on one of the benches out front under the shade of a tree, munching on an apple as he read a letter he held in one hand. They gave their report, with Samuel urging Winston to speak on his experience as well. Something about the man’s lived experience from the war added a particular weight to matters.

“I’ll look into it,” Ketan acknowledged before holding up the letter. “But for now, I need you to pack your things for a long haul.”

Samuel’s brows furrowed. “With respect, I think we’re finally making some headway here, sir. Leaving now seems ill-advised.”

“Oh, I agree,” Ketan sighed. “But I’ve just received word that a seeker in the area will most likely be paying us a visit.”

“What!?” Aurora gasped. “You’re sure?”

Ketan waved the letter around before handing it to Aurora, whose eyes flew over the page in disbelief. Shaking his head, Samuel exchanged glances with Ylvesnia. The theory about the church having more room to operate with eyes on the war seemed to be holding up.

“How long until the seeker arrives?” Winston asked pointedly.

“Two? Three days?” Ketan guessed as he spread his hands. “They’re not taking a direct route, so it’s difficult to say.”

“Well, we ought to get going immediately, then,” Samuel begrudgingly admitted. Putting a hand on Aurora’s arm, he urged her to set the letter aside and come with him. They had discussed the possibility of what they would do if someone came looking for them, and it was time to follow through.

“Where will we go?” Aurora protested, her voice cracking as her glassy eyes darted between Samuel and Ketan. “Did someone tell them where we are?”

Ketan stood slowly, holding his hands up in an uncharacteristic gesture of empathy. “I don’t know, but I will find out. For now, I am sending you to a garrison at the border that’s just been hit by a monster attack. They’re in need of additional healers, so you need to think of this as another job. That’s all it is.” Ketan’s voice grew softer as he set his hands on her shoulders. “It’s just another job.”

Aurora nodded gently as she fought back her tears. The old elf gave her a final reassuring squeeze before releasing them to get their things. Samuel kept his eyes on Aurora quietly as they ventured up to their room. Seeing her in such a troubled state had created a pit in his stomach that he didn’t know how to contend with.

“It’ll be alright,” Samuel said as he closed their bedroom door behind him. Aurora had already busied herself with tossing their packs onto the bed and rifling through their clothes and other supplies.

“Will it?” Aurora grumbled. “Because this doesn’t feel alright to me. I don’t feel alright, Sammy!”

“Neither do I,” Samuel confessed, adjusting their packs on the bed and rolling up the clothes she tossed his way. “But we need to push how we feel about it aside and use our heads. Getting emotional will just throw us off—”

“Emotional?” Aurora whirled on him. “You think I’m being emotional?”

Samuel cringed, realizing suddenly how condescending the choice of words had been. He’d just thrown fuel on the fire.

“When someone loses a pet rabbit—that’s emotional,” Aurora pressed. “Not getting the promotion you wanted: that’s emotional. Sunsets are emotional. The miracle of life in the face of a newborn baby is emotional. This? This is not fucking emotional, Samuel! This is catastrophic despair as we run for our fucking lives to what might be the front lines of a fucking war in the next week! Who knows, maybe we’ll get to have some fun with that, too!”

Samuel raised both his hands in surrender. “I chose my words poorly, but I wasn’t just talking about you. I’m having a tough time dealing with this too.”

Aurora’s look of anger softened with his admission, realizing quickly that she had blown up at the wrong person for the wrong reasons. It wasn’t his fault—he hadn’t meant to offend her. “I’m sorry,” she muttered. “I shouldn’t be taking this out on you.”

“All I meant,” Samuel continued, “is that our best assets are our minds, and we can’t afford to let them get clouded by what is appropriately an emotionally difficult time.”

Aurora nodded in agreement as she tossed him another bundle of clothes before closing the drawers. “You’re right. I’ve just been getting used to this place. Being here with you has been very nice, all things considered. We didn’t choose it, but we have made the best of it, I think.”

“Yeah,” Samuel beamed. “I think we have. We’ll be back soon. We’re just doing what we always do, right? We’re going to help some people out, patch them up, and be on our way.”

“Right,” Aurora agreed with a shrug, laughing slightly. “Silly to get upset about it, really.”

It was a convincing lie for both of them. One that would get them through their preparations and onto the road without much difficulty. The reality of their situation could be addressed later, along with all of the possibilities they silently dreaded. There were many ways that the job could go wrong and several ways that the seeker might discover their presence at the guildhall while they were gone. Ketan would be sure to put things in order and conceal any sign of their true identities, Samuel was sure, but that didn’t mean it was guaranteed to work.

“You know, you don’t have to come with us,” Aurora commented to Ylvesnia, saddling up on the varo beside her. “They’re only looking for the two of us.”

“Ah, but then ye’d fall behind on yer trainin’,” Ylvesnia argued. “We can’t have that.”

Aurora rolled her eyes, discouraged by what she perceived as a babysitter accompanying them to the border garrison. Samuel knew what was going through her mind, but on this matter, Ylvesnia was correct. They could be on the road for weeks, putting them significantly behind on the training that Ylvesnia had traveled all this way to give them in the first place.

“Sir, a moment!” Winston called as he rushed up beside Samuel’s mount as best he could. He pulled an old worn

satchel from over his shoulder as he approached. "I've something for you before you depart."

Samuel quirked his head to one side, a little surprised. "What's this?"

"Books, mostly," Winston admitted as Samuel took the satchel and opened it. "You didn't think that the pleasure of my company was the gift that your father mentioned, did you?"

"I did," Samuel laughed sheepishly, pulling each book out one at a time to examine them. After identifying some of them as summoning books from home that had been too advanced for him as a youth, he stopped on one that was not clearly labeled. He didn't recognize it, but the cover and pages seemed worn and well-used.

Samuel's gaze shifted toward Winston inquisitively, but the man said nothing that hinted at the nature of the book. Instead, he simply watched him as he opened it to the first few pages. The handwriting on the pages, diagrams, and sketches were unmistakable.

"This was my mother's," Samuel whispered in disbelief. Very few of his mother's things had been kept long after her death. As a child, Samuel had always reasoned that his father found the things too painful to see every day. Now that he had learned more about his own blood, he realized that it had been more complicated than that. It had likely been a calculated move rather than an emotional one.

Even more fascinating was that the words on the pages were clearly not written in the Terthish. Yet he understood them as easily as if they had been. Flipping through the pages quickly, he could see that the same was true for every one of them.

"It's part journal, part grimoire," Samuel explained unprompted. Aurora sidled her varo up beside Samuel's, leaning over to have a look. But, as he suspected, she was unable to read it.



“Your father thought it might be time for you to have that,” Winston commented. “None of us can read it, anyway. She locked it to her bloodline when she started writing it.”

“Fascinatin’,” Ylvesnia commented, craning her neck in their direction. “An invaluable addition to yer’ trainin’, as well.”

Samuel nodded his agreement, noting a lewd illustration of a succubus on one of the pages that functioned as a detailed diagram not just of their anatomy but of their abilities as well. It went into depth on the nature of lust, the power gleaned from it, and how it could be wielded. It was very similar to what Ylvesnia had been explaining to him but with much more detail and focused on the perspective of a succubus.

“We need to get going,” Aurora urged him gently, hesitant to interrupt his moment. “You can read it on the way.”

Samuel nodded his agreement, eyes flying over the page’s text before finally closing it and placing it back in the satchel. “Were these other books hers as well, Winston?”

“I believe so,” the older man admitted with a slight shrug. “But your father didn’t say specifically if that was the case.”

“Thank you,” Samuel added with a grateful nod. “I can’t even begin to express how much this means to me.”

“No need, m’lord,” Winston responded, momentarily slipping on how he should be speaking to the young man. “Just see that it gets put to good use, hm?”

“Of course.” Samuel smiled, securing the satchel with his saddlebags and bringing the varo about. Despite how distraught he was with the seeker and the journey ahead, he couldn’t help but feel a surge of excitement at the prospect of what was contained within the pages of the books. Reading things from his mother’s perspective, in her own words, would be as emotional as it was educational.

They rode hard for the rest of the day, putting as much distance between them and Mirfield as possible. Samuel knew precious little about how seekers went about their

investigations. Aurora, despite formerly being a nun, was at a loss as well. Ylvesnia explained that this was likely by design. If too much was known about how they did their work, it would be much easier to formulate a strategy against it.

“Not sure how much good it would do to plan when they’re carrying kastil weapons,” Aurora scoffed. Unfortunately, Samuel agreed with her. Kastil was an incredibly rare material that’s sole purpose was to manage, mitigate, and contain magical energy. At least, that was what Samuel had thought before he’d learned the little bit of information about the furosents earlier. Kastil was difficult to mine, especially for anyone not part of the dwarven mining operations. It was also tricky to work with, requiring exceptional training to mold it into useful forms. Then, after it was forged, the kastil was finally utilized by the few magic users who could get their hands on it for hazardous advanced research.

Then there was the church, which had the influence and funds to secure larger supplies of kastil than most. With it, the weapons of the seekers were forged. Samuel had even read about full suits of armor made of the metal. The context of what he’d read had been discussing the lightweight nature of the armor and, thus, the increased maneuverability that came with it—the added benefits of magical protection were not lost on him. But, of course, the amount of kastil that would be needed would have run a fortune, so Samuel had considered it a ludicrously wasteful idea at the time. He’d dismissed it entirely. Now, it seemed increasingly likely that such suits of armor not only existed but might be employed in the attempt to capture him.

As they rode, Samuel tried to imagine a scenario where he was pitted against someone with a kastil sword. Any of the succubi would be vulnerable to the weapon. His spells would be similarly impotent. He had to consider more mundane ways of circumventing the advantages kastil offered in a fight. Perhaps it was time to invest in a rifle, Samuel thought with a small measure of amusement.

On a whim, Samuel reached into the satchel Winston had given him and opened his mother's grimoire. Kastil had been in use for quite some time, and being that she was one of the creatures it was most effective against, he reasoned that she must have spent some time thinking of her own ways to get around it. But as he sat there gazing at the pages, he found it very difficult to understand what had been written. If he focused, he could read the words, but he failed to make sense of them in the passive manner in which people often read. It was like being a child struggling through reading lessons all over again.

Later, when they made camp, it was much easier. Whatever magic his mother had worked into the grimoire prevented him from understanding its contents unless the whole of his focus was on the book itself. Any form of multitasking interrupted his ability to decipher more than a few words at a time. Furthermore, he found that after an extended period of reading, his eyes grew weary, and his head began to ache.

"What does it say?" Aurora whispered as she cozied up next to him by the fire. "Anything juicy?"

"Uh," Samuel's thoughts felt like they had to slog through the mud before finding their way out. "Well, here she talks about some foundational spells. You know how we learn some of the basic cantrips and summonings in school? It's the same idea but using the power of lust, which uh...is even more interesting because of what she says it is."

"What do you mean?" Aurora asked as she sipped some tea that Ylvesnia had made for them.

Samuel smiled, putting the pain of his headache out of his mind. "Well, all magic is pulled from the Outer Spheres, right? Lust is no exception. We produce it, as Ylvesnia said, but there's also a whole Outer Sphere that you can pull it from as well. Same as you would fire, water, or whatever."

"That's this here?" Aurora pointed at one of the diagrams his mother sketched onto the page. She couldn't read the

words, but the diagram was similar enough to those provided of other Spheres and Midgardia's interactions with them that she could still recognize it.

"Yeah," Samuel confirmed. "I had taken the idea that succubi were from Hell as a given, but according to this, they come from this sphere she calls Eros. It may be the one the Mienkardi think of as the Ardent Sphere, or merely one that's connected to it somehow."

"Eros," Aurora repeated. "We knew about Spheres related to emotional states, but I've never read anything about Eros."

Samuel shrugged, "Me either. She mentions a few others here that I haven't read about but doesn't state what they are. But all the stuff about hell comes from some schism that formed among the succubi eons ago. So a kind of civil war and exodus. So there are succubi that exist in hell, but they're not the only ones. Evidently, migrations like this have existed since the dawn of time, not just with the succubi. Some entities travel to other Spheres and within a generation or so manifest adaptations to that sphere."

Aurora lifted her head to stare into the night for a moment, processing the information before continuing. "So, the succubi you summon come from those other places. Hecate might have been from hell, but the others could be from any of the other Spheres where succubi have migrated over the years."

"That's my current theory, yes. Of course, this book might eventually spell it out for me more plainly, but what we have seems to point in that direction right now." Samuel closed the book slowly, the pounding in his head discouraging him from reading more for the day.

"Well, it's a promising start," Aurora said cheerfully, thankful for something else to ruminate on besides where they were going and why they had to go there. Samuel's thoughts had continued on to his mother's life in the sphere of Midgardia. How did the wanderlust of her people and their penchant for bonding to the Spheres they migrated factor into

her time in Terth with her father? She hadn't been the only succubus to do it either, which begged the question of what they hoped to find here.

## CHAPTER 12



Caution was still required while on the road, which made things challenging for Samuel when it came to training. For Aurora, little had changed. Of course, she had always needed to observe certain precautions, but she was less recognizable without her habit and didn't have a signature type of summon she was known for.

To add to this, Aurora was now looking into ways of shifting her magic further, pushing herself in ways similar to what Samuel was doing with his studies. His mother's grimoire gave him insight into how to make the most of the power in his blood, while instruction from Ylvesnia provided him with methods to apply it practically.

Aurora was present for much of the training due to their connection. But it was unexpected when he used a lust spell on her for the first time.

"Ah!" Aurora gasped, squeezing her legs together a little as she stared wide-eyed at the handsome Summoner masquerading as an Arcanist. "Was that you?"

She couldn't believe how effective the spell had been, how little resistance she seemed to have to it. Her body felt warm all over, almost tingly. But it was nothing compared to the wetness between her legs, converting her panties into a balmy summer night in seconds.

Nothing had even led up to it. He'd spoken a word, cast the spell, and suddenly her body seemed to have a mind of its own. Aurora's face flushed wildly as she glanced between Samuel and Ylvesnia. They had stopped for lunch and a little training when he'd asked to attempt the spell. In typical Samuel fashion, he'd nailed it on the first attempt.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Aurora grumbled toward Ylvesnia. Even the elf’s gaze began forcing her to wiggle her hips with sexual frustration. Something about being observed was lending a tangy edge to the arousal for some reason.

“Ye needn’t be shy,” Ylvesnia assured her. “Not with me, anyway.”

“Alright, but you two can’t expect me to walk around all day like this,” Aurora whined. “I’m going to slip right out of the saddle at this rate!”

Samuel broke into a loud sputtering laugh at the mental image she had crafted for him. It released the tension she was experiencing but did nothing for her physical arousal. For that, Samuel became more involved in a way she did not expect. Forcing her skirts up and tossing her onto her back, the young man went down on her there in the camp while Ylvesnia looked on.

Aurora covered her face initially, not wanting to resist him with the magical lust running like passionate fire through her skin, but unable to bring herself to see the eyes of their instructor upon them. Her shyness evaporated like morning fog in the sun as Samuel feasted upon her sex like a half-starved man. Of course, it wasn’t the first time he’d done it, but something about his technique had drastically improved. No part of her slick pussy was neglected as his hands worked in tandem with his tongue, sometimes wandering up under her clothing to fondle expertly at her breasts.

Once Aurora was in the swing of things, she writhed and moaned like a whore possessed. She wrapped her legs around him as if he might try to escape her before finishing what he had started, running her fingers through his short dark hair.

It didn’t matter that they were out in the open in the country, concealed only by a small stand of trees. It didn’t matter to her that the elf was eying them with keen interest as Samuel rolled her over the threshold of ecstasy and into the realm of blissful orgasm. Her back arched, and her mouth opened in a long silent scream for what felt like it could have

been the rest of the day before she came crashing back down again.

“I wouldn’t leave you hanging,” Samuel said with a smirk as she finished her mad scramble to get her clothing back into place.

“Let’s just keep it that way, then!” Aurora sputtered bashfully as she tried not to meet anyone’s gaze. Even the varo seemed to be looking on in judgment at her shameless display. “Shouldn’t we be going or something?!”

The experience stuck with her during their travel for the rest of the day and into the evening. The grimoire, exhausting as it was, had caused Samuel to fall asleep not long after their supper. Aurora reached over from her side of the tent, pulled the book from his hands, and set it aside as she put the blanket over him. He stirred slightly but didn’t wake.

Once settled back onto her side, she picked the grimoire up and flipped it open, knowing full well that she couldn’t read anything written within. Still, it was interesting to look over the sketches and diagrams that his mother had laid out. Whoever she was, she had been very thorough in putting the book together.

Samuel had told her a little of what was contained within it, and every time he found something new and exciting, he was sure to let her know. If she had been able to read it, she would have been right alongside him to devour the knowledge the grimoire offered. It was, according to her understanding, the only book physically written by an entity from the Outer Spheres. Praetia had dictated her desires and teachings to the first of the church, who copied them down into scrolls that were later bound into sacred tomes. But she didn’t know of anything in canon that Praetia had written herself.

Closing the grimoire and setting it aside, Aurora reached into her pack to retrieve her copy of the Holy Book. She flipped it open and began scanning the various passages, searching for anything indicating that Praetia herself may have transcribed her knowledge but found nothing. Instead, she



found the familiar comfort of the words she had found so many times before about aiding one another and spreading good health and good fortune to those in need. How had things drifted so far from such a clear and straightforward message as that?

For all the comfort she had found in the book's pages, there were no practical answers to be had. No denizens of Heaven had dwelled in Midgardia and transcribed their knowledge firsthand. They had only ever spoken to...

And that's when it hit her. As rare as speaking Outsiders were, the stories in the Holy Book about angels and archons of Heaven all involved having the word of Praetia delivered to them. They were spoken aloud.

Previously she had considered it metaphorical, as communion with Heaven and its denizens today usually involved impressions and feelings. The more skilled you became at interpreting these messages, the higher you rose within the ranks of the church. It took a great deal of training to glean meaning from the ephemeral impressions of the divine.

And yet, the Holy Book contained many stories of heavenly entities speaking directly to mortals without prior training in communion. They had been primitive mages, for the most part, who went on to codify procedures after. But it all started somewhere.

Aurora wondered if it was possible to summon such entities. Surely there had been those within the church who had already attempted it. But she couldn't recall any records of such a thing succeeding. Angels and other similar Outsiders had been summoned, but they hardly ever spoke. Those that did only spoke a few words and remained reserved and distant. It was one of the primary reasons why being one of the clergy was so challenging in the first place.

Still, having handled a grimoire penned by an outsider and having been in the company of those that spoke, Aurora wanted very much to try. Perhaps the supposed degrees of

mastery within the church was just another lie, another method of controlling people.

As excited as she was with the idea, she wasn't stupid. Trying to call down vast powers beyond one's skill was a surefire way to get one vaporized in a storm of hubris. Aurora spent the rest of the night reviewing the grimoire again, copying the relevant sketches into her notebook. A rudimentary diagram of where Eros was located in relation to Hell was particularly interesting, along with a few other Spheres that Samuel had pointed out to her. She went over passages in the Holy Book, listing which would be relevant to her research in the future.

Somewhere along the line, she had fallen asleep only to be awakened the next day by Samuel announcing that breakfast was ready. She sat up quickly, surprised at how easily slumber had taken her unawares. More surprising still was how strangely rested she felt. Sleeping on bedrolls on the road was hardly ever a restful experience. It was something to get you through to the next evening, and that was just about it.

She was preoccupied with her thoughts for the rest of the day. When she had an idea of value, she would jot it down in her notebook for later. Even if it wasn't the most well thought out, it went in the book.

"What are you working on?" Samuel asked over lunch as she scribbled in her book with one hand and ate lunch with the other. "I don't think I've seen you like this in a long time."

"Just some ideas," Aurora answered absently. "Things I'd like to really dig into the next time I have an archive available."

"Ye were up late last night with it, too," Ylvesnia commented as she took a bite of jerky. "Ye mumble a bit when ye get goin'."

Aurora looked up now that both of them were staring at her intently. They wanted to know what she was up to, but she didn't want to talk about it until she had something more solid

to present. Right now, it was all just scribbles; for all she knew, they may stay that way forever. So she snapped the book shut and finished her food without another word. Even when Samuel and Ylvesnia got into their post-lunch training, she didn't dare to open it and risk them becoming curious again.

The training itself was becoming a little problematic for Aurora as well. Ylvesnia had started to look upon Samuel differently as of late, in a way that she recognized all too well. The elf was good at masking her emotions most of the time. Aurora likely wouldn't have noticed if she had not spent so much time around her. But there was an obvious attraction on Ylvesnia's part, and Aurora didn't know what to do about it.

She felt a pang of jealousy when she thought about this, but it was somehow a distant and dull feeling compared to how she had experienced it in the past. She wanted his power to grow, and she wanted him to be happy. The fact he was a Lust Reaper seemed to have laid a path out for him in both respects. Aurora just didn't know how to walk it with him.

There was also the fact that Aurora had become incredibly excited by having the tutor watch Samuel go down on her once she got into it. She didn't know what that meant, but it was another thing to consider in a whirlwind of confusing and conflicting thoughts and emotions. Primitive as it was, perhaps Aurora had subconsciously considered it a display of dominance. A reminder to Ylvesnia just who sat at the top. Or maybe she had awakened an exhibitionist pervert within her that she had never known existed.

Signs began to appear on the road as they traveled, indicating that they were nearing their destination of Bredon. The closer they got, the fewer breaks they took and the less practical training they did lest they be discovered. Instead, they worked on the theory and took time to pore over their books and notes. Some of the other books that Wilson provided Samuel were useful for Aurora's purposes. They weren't bloodlocked and were intended for general use by Summoners of various traditions. One of the books provided

much more detailed information on the Outer Spheres that had been explored and mapped, allowing Aurora to fill out her own cosmological model more effectively.

“Good afternoon. How can we help you?” Samuel asked a small group of soldiers approaching them from the road, pulling Aurora’s attention from the books to look in their direction. Unfortunately, the sun was at just the right angle, so she had to shield her eyes with one hand to avoid blinding herself.

“Just on patrol,” the lead soldier said, looking the trio over. His eyes lingered on Ylvesnia for longer than they did the other two. “Where are you folks heading?”

“Bredon,” Aurora replied as she offered a smile. “We’re going to help with the relief efforts after the attack.”

A couple of the other soldiers in the small group exchanged glances with one another, but the lead soldier seemed unbothered. Though there were markings on their collars to indicate their rank, Aurora wasn’t sure what any of them meant. “You don’t look like you’re with the church,” the leader remarked.

“No, the Mysterium sent us,” Samuel corrected. “We came up from Mirfield.”

The leader chuckled. “I didn’t know they had anyone left out there that knew magic.”

“We just transferred in a few months ago,” Aurora responded, careful to maintain their cover even now. “It’s nice and out of the way, very quiet. Good place for a family, someday.”

“Can’t argue with that,” the leader agreed. “Do you folks happen to have any water? It seems as though we’re running a little low.”

Samuel furrowed his brows as he glanced over at Aurora. It took her just a second longer to realize that a patrol of soldiers without enough water to be on patrol seemed strange. She quickly reassessed each individual and could tell they had

been on the road for quite a while. Bredon was less than half a day from their location at this point. Why didn't they have horses? The packs that some of them had didn't match the military ones she had seen before. She and Samuel had encountered a large convoy on the road some time ago, and every soldier had been carrying the same ugly packs with far too many pockets. The packs they had looked more like the sort of thing you brought with you when you joined.

"I can fill your canteens for you," Aurora offered with a smile. "Just bring them here."

Each of the soldiers came over, producing their open canteens for Aurora. Each was bone dry and looked like it had been for some time. Aurora took a small bit of chalk from her pack and began inscribing a couple of runes on the side of the canteens.

"What's that for?" a brunette woman with short-cropped hair asked.

"This one lets me use the spell more easily," Aurora said, indicating the first one. "While this one allows one spell to be forked between multiple targets."

After finishing the last rune, Aurora placed a hand over the containers. "Watuma," she whispered, setting each of the runes aglow as water filled the canteens to the brim. A sound of appreciative awe went through the small group as they retrieved their canteens, taking several long gulps before putting the caps back on.

"Thank you very much," the leader said respectfully. "But I think we should be getting back to work now."

"You know," Samuel sighed. "I don't think we've seen any patrols down in Mirfield for the entire time we've been there. With the monster attacks on the rise and us up here, you might want to see if you can swing out that way and check in on everyone. You know, just to set everyone's mind at ease."

The leader's gaze locked with Samuel's for a moment as if he had somehow just been found out for something. Then,

after a long silence that passed between them, the soldier nodded in agreement. “Alright, we’ll look into it.”

“I appreciate that,” Samuel said as he pulled a few alchemical meal pouches from his pack and handed them over. “Give these a try when you have the chance. All you need is hot water for them.”

The soldier took them slowly and gave a grateful nod, his eyes slightly glassy as he appeared to hold back tears. Samuel clapped the soldier on the shoulder once, offering him another reassuring nod before letting the group continue on their way.

“What was that about?” Ylvesnia asked curiously.

“They’re probably deserters,” Aurora answered as she began to pack her things, placing them on her varo quickly before assisting Samuel with his.

“Standard patrols aren’t out long enough to have run out of water,” Samuel explained further. “Nor should they look as filthy as they did.”

“Their packs aren’t standard issue either,” Aurora pointed out as she secured the saddle bags. “You saw that, too, right?”

Samuel nodded as Ylvesnia regarded them both with a look of slight amusement on her face. Aurora wondered if Ylvesnia hadn’t picked up on it or if this was another test for them somehow. The elf didn’t say anything that might indicate one way or another. They saddled up and were on the road within minutes.

“It was very kind of you to point them to Mirfield,” Aurora commented. “But aren’t you worried they’ll run into the seeker along the way?”

“Well, I’m counting on the seeker not giving a random patrol much attention,” Samuel admitted. “If they have enough supplies, hopefully they won’t be tempted to stop and speak with her.”

Aurora returned to her thoughts as they rode, quietly going over the images and information in her mind as she

stared into the distance. With her varo being trained as well as it was, she barely had to do anything while it followed along with the one in front of her. Over the hills to the east, she could see a column of smoke that rose high into the air. It didn't strike her as strange until the color of the smoke grew darker, joined shortly after by a few more columns of the same. Distant, dull thumping could also be heard, growing louder the further along the road they went.

"What's going on?" Aurora asked, looking over at Samuel. His face had gone a little more pale now that he was taking notice of the smoke as well.

"Cannon fire," Samuel said, his eyes locked on the horizon.

Aurora was tempted to ask if it was some kind of training exercise but knew it wasn't. A lot of something was burning just over the hills, and more of it was catching. There was no reason that the test firing of cannons would have resulted in something like that. If it had, they sure as hell wouldn't still be firing them.

"No," Aurora whispered aloud as she tried to push what was becoming evident out of her mind. She wanted it to be something else. She wanted it to be some kind of misunderstanding. Samuel kicked his varo into a gallop to close the remaining distance between them and Bredon. Ylvesnia and Aurora followed close after.

Samuel left the road, which would have led them on a safe but winding track through the hills. Instead, he took the steep slopes of the hills head-on, relying on the highly maneuverable varo to adapt to the rough terrain. Aurora would have marveled at how easily all three steeds managed to handle it were her mind not struggling to come to terms with what she was about to see.

Cresting the largest of the hills and looking down onto the town and the garrison within it, there was no way to deny it. Flames devoured the buildings on the far side of the town as holes were punched through still more. Cannons positioned in

Bredon returned fire on their attackers as acrid smoke choked the air and the sound of rifle fire peppered her ears.

Bredon was under attack. Terth had been pulled into the war.



# CHAPTER 13



The thunder of cannon fire was more disorienting up close than Samuel could have ever imagined. The Bredon soldiers were returning fire as best they could but were struggling to position the artillery while being fired upon. The whooshing sound of ammunition coming in at them and the sudden explosion of earth threw men and women in all directions. As another volley came in, it struck a glimmering shield overhead, exploding against the magic of Aurora's protection spell as they advanced through the downtown area. Ylvesnia had already separated from them to begin setting up a flanking maneuver if possible.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Aurora asked nervously, weaving another protective shield into existence just in time to shunt more cannon fire aside from a small group of soldiers nearby.

"No," Samuel said honestly. "But it would cost them more not to fall for it, so we'll see how it goes."

Through the smoke of the street ahead, Samuel could see the infantry beginning to advance. The armor they wore beneath the long coats of their uniforms shined brightly in the fading light. The colors of Mystuval flew from a banner carried in the front line as the soldiers took aim with their rifles.

"Here goes nothing," Samuel muttered as he leveled his capped spear with the front line. "Kinast!"

A wall of pure kinetic energy erupted from the end of his implement as the soldiers opened fire. The ammunition collided with the mighty thrust of magical power and was turned back at random oblique angles that saw only a few Mystuval soldiers taking rounds. The burst of magic, though,

was more than enough to knock the first line back into the second, forcing them to scatter and break ranks almost immediately.

“Hey!” Samuel yelled over to the soldiers Aurora had rescued just a moment ago. “Is that thing ready?”

One of the soldiers nodded frantically, closing the part of the breach where the weapon was loaded. Samuel stepped over to help them turn the heavy piece of artillery on its wheels as he marked the barrel with a rune and gave it a charge of magic. “Liwepo,” he muttered as the cannon was leveled at the advancing infantry.

“Fire!” Aurora shouted with an edge of panic in her voice. Samuel jumped back to avoid the cannon’s muzzle as it erupted with literal thunder and lightning. Instead of orange, the muzzle of the gun flared a purple-blue as a bolt of powerful electricity was sent crashing through the ranks of the advancing Mystuval infantry. The shot cut a line right through the middle, zapping everyone and everything that stood within four feet of it before vanishing into the smoke. The smell of burnt ozone filled the air, mingling with the acrid gunpowder of the guns firing around them in seemingly random intervals.

“What the hell was that!?” A gruff man in an officer’s uniform emerged from just out of Samuel’s field of vision.

“Lightning weapon,” Samuel replied flatly. “Rune should hold for a while longer.”

The officer looked between him and Aurora in confusion before noticing the Summoner’s medallion that Aurora wore. “Did the Mysterium send you?”

Aurora shook her head, pushing some of her blonde hair back over one ear. “Yes, we came to help the wounded from the monster attack.”

“Well fuck me sideways,” the officer scoffed. “You lot got her quick, thank fucking Praetia.”

“What do you need us to do?” Samuel asked earnestly.

The officer extended a hand to each of them, “Apologies. I’m Captain Sullivan, and I could use a few more of those magic weapons if you can muster it. Also, if you have any critters that can lend us air support, that would be helpful too.”

Aurora and Samuel exchanged glances before taking cover behind a nearby building to form the array. Though Ylvesnia had warned them about using such a thing in a real-life situation, the two silently agreed that it was better to have it if time permitted. With both of them working on it, using the same obscure methodology they had bonded over months ago, it only took a few moments to complete the entire array.

“Do you think I need this one?” Aurora motioned to a rune Samuel had placed in one of the nodes. “Could probably use that slot for something else, don’t you think?”

“Better to have it and not need it...” Samuel cautioned as they charged the circle with a word of magic, and Aurora called forth Dawn, the heat shrike. She erupted from the smoke overhead with a cry that cut through the noise of the battle, gliding forward over the battlefield.

Closing her eyes, Aurora placed a hand on a sensory rune that allowed her to see through the eyes of the heat shrike as if she were the one sailing over the chaotic battlefield. Satisfied that she was safe where she was for the moment, Samuel stepped away to rejoin the fight. As the captain requested, he moved behind the artillery line first, drawing runes on the barrels of the guns to enhance their destructive capability. Instead of lightning, he enhanced them with kinetic force or ruinous energy, not wanting to risk friendly fire with too many lightning bolts hurling across the battlefield. It was best to save that for clearing large swaths of infantry whenever possible.

“Sully!” one of the soldiers yelled to the captain. “We got a squad pinned down by the cannery. They’re about to be overrun.”

“I can handle that,” Samuel volunteered. The captain glanced at his lieutenant before giving the order.

“Alright, what’s your name, kid?” the captain asked as he stepped closer to Samuel.

“Deckard Mason, sir,” Samuel responded respectfully. “Arcanist.”

“Alright, Mason,” the Captain confirmed as he turned to indicate the direction with one hand. “Cannery is yonder. I need you to open a corridor for them through the building there and provide cover. Should be about ten men, understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Samuel said as he sprung into action. After a second or two, he wondered if he should have saluted. Technically he didn’t have any rank or commission, and Arcanists didn’t have de facto ranks with the military the way Summoners typically did. He supposed if there was a problem, the captain could address it later.

Running through the broken streets between shattered buildings, Samuel couldn’t help but feel like he was in hell. He was satisfied with his ability to move and act after all he’d been through, but war was not a duel or even a battle between Summoners. It terrified him in a way he couldn’t describe. His only hope was to push it down long enough to free the squad of men pinned down.

It took him ten agonizing minutes to pick his way through the warzone, with resistance from scattered infantry delaying him every block or so. The kinetic thrust was the most reliable spell in those situations, deflecting small arms fire while laying out soldiers with a single blast. When he got to the building, the captain had pointed out, though, he had to switch tactics.

A larger gun, mounted on a stand behind sandbags, was firing at a rate Samuel had never seen before. It didn’t have to reload with every shot, spewing a hail of bullets as one soldier worked a crank on its side and another fed it a belt of ammunition.

“What the fuck is that?” Samuel muttered to himself as he huddled behind a concrete barricade. The soldiers hadn’t spotted him but were peppering a nearby group of Terthish soldiers. The cover they had dropped behind would likely be cut through at any minute. He thought a weapon with that kind of power wasn’t likely to be outdone with the kinetic thrust. So it was best not to risk it.

Pulling out his chalk, Samuel inscribed a rune for synergy on the barricade he was lying behind. Once finished, he pressed the tip of his capped spear to it and whispered, “Kinast!”

As if hoisted by a giant unseen hand, the barricade was plucked from the street and hurled toward the crank gun’s position. Rolling and tumbling across the concrete, the barricade barreled over the gun and the soldiers operating it.

“The gun’s down,” Samuel called to the soldiers, “come on!”

Samuel advanced as the soldiers moved position, using the kinetic thrust to bore a hole through the building that led to the cannery. If the building hadn’t had its top half taken off by cannon fire earlier, he would have felt bad for the mass destruction, but now it would serve as an escape tunnel for the pinned squad ahead.

Knocking down the last wall, Samuel could see through to the cannery. Judging by the damage, it had taken a great deal of fire only minutes before he’d shown. He couldn’t risk blasting without knowing exactly where the men were sitting inside. Instead, he took aim with his spear and used the ruin spell on the outer wall to weaken it just as the building took another round of shelling. In its weakened state, the section of the wall crumbled away, providing a convenient egress.

Inside, a young man not a day over eighteen peered out at him, wearing a helmet that didn’t quite fit. “Captain Sullivan sent me; let’s go,” Samuel called. The young soldier relayed the message as the building started to come down around

them. Then, gathering their wounded, the rest of the squad came shuffling across the street to his position.

“We brought a healer,” Samuel explained, noting the severe condition of the wounded they were carrying. “She’s back by the captain. Just go back this way. It should still be clear.”

As the last of the squad filed out, a hurricane-force wind collided with the building, peeling its structure away around him. Sliding along the floor for a couple of feet before tumbling backward, Samuel jammed the spear into the floor to prevent himself from being swept away entirely.

“Well, there he is!” A dark-haired woman in a Mystuvalan uniform said, pointing a wand toward him. “Cowering in the rubble!”

“We’ve been looking for you ever since we saw that lightning,” a male who could have been her twin said, holding a wand level with him. As the wind died down, Samuel slowly got to his feet. Mystuval wasn’t known for integrating magic users into its military as widely as Terth, but there were still a few sorcerers that could be found within their ranks.

“Looking for me?” Samuel laughed a bit, brushing some of the debris from his hair. “I’m flattered, I guess? But you really don’t—”

The male flicked his wand in Samuel’s direction impatiently. “Bolfla!” A bolt of flame leaped from the wand for Samuel.

“Crydat!” Samuel responded, bringing his spear around in a parrying motion before shouldering it, “Kinast!” The blast of kinetic force sent the sorcerers flying backward. Though surprised by his quick response, neither of them was surprised enough to be caught totally unaware. Both landed on their feet with magical assistance before taking a moment to reassess who they were dealing with as the battle continued to rage around them.

“Pretty quick for an Arcanist,” the sorceress remarked. “I didn’t think your kind dueled anymore.”

“Like I said,” Samuel said, planting the spear in front of him. “You really don’t know what you’re messing with. It’d be smarter to go back where you came from and maybe rethink a few of your life choices.”

The sorceress threw her head back, cackling, as the male sorcerer readied his wand again. She seemed awfully amused with him. “Get a load of this one! I guess Arcanists aren’t as smart as they say.”

“Seems not,” the sorcerer agreed. “You’d think they’d at least teach them how to count.”

“Two-on-one isn’t good enough odds for you to take the chance,” Samuel cautioned. He was doing his best not to sound arrogant about his skills, but he didn’t see how they had much of a chance with how easily he’d handled himself against everything he’d gone up against lately.

“Your advice is duly noted,” the sorcerer replied, hurling another bolt of flame in his direction. It didn’t occur to him that it was meant to bait out his counter again until he had already committed to it. The sorceress jabbed her wand in his direction halfway through his counter, striking him with a blast of wind that sent him hurling backward through a crumbling wall.

Jabbing the spear in the direction of the wall’s remains, Samuel sent a blast of debris in their direction using a kinetic thrust before slamming the implement down into the ground. “Higum!” he yelled, sending a surge of magical thrust through his legs for a vertical jump that sent him rocketing high into the air.

The two Summoners, producing barriers to protect themselves from the flying debris, overlooked Samuel at the new angle, pointing the spear at them. He decided taking the fire sorcerer down with a cryo dart would give him a better chance against the sorceress, but even as he began to work the

spell, a mass of feathers tackled him out of the sky and through the third-story window of a building across the street.

Samuel groaned, pulling himself to his feet in a daze, pain shooting through his sides and up his back. Not only had he been torn up by glass and splintered wood, but he was reasonably certain that he had a few cracked ribs. At the window, a muscular humanoid with dark skin and feathers folded a pair of wings behind his back.

“Clever,” the strix said in a deep voice, tilting his head in a distinctly bird-like fashion as he adjusted the thick goggles on his beakish nose. “You almost had them with that maneuver.”

Behind Samuel, a dozen women and children huddled fearfully in the corner. Judging by his surroundings, the building was all apartments, and they had been left behind when the men rushed to the town’s defense. The chances of survival bolting across open ground were slim, so their only hope had been to shelter in place and pray.

“How many of you are there in this little club of yours?” Samuel asked, wincing at the pain that came with talking. “I just want to know how many more places we have to set at the table.”

“Amusing,” the strix responded, though with how his face was shaped and all the feathers, Samuel genuinely couldn’t tell if he was smiling.

Samuel nodded as he struggled to take a breath. “Yeah, I’m a riot,” he sighed. “Look, these people haven’t done anything to you, so whatever you’ve got planned with the rest of the club, just leave them out of it, alright?”

“Better to die a quick death than to die long and slow in the rubble of their homes,” the strix replied as a metal sphere the size of a grapefruit engraved with arcane symbols began to hover over the palm of his taloned hand. “It is an honorable death.”



Somewhere below them on the ground floor, a blast shook the whole building, followed by a volley of cannon fire that blasted a structure a block over to pieces. Samuel swallowed his pain, raising a hand defensively. “I don’t know how your people do it, but I don’t see how children have much use for honor, do you?”

Screams of frightened people a floor down cut through the cacophony of gunfire outside as the other two sorcerers also made their way up to him. Behind him, the crying of the children became muffled as their mothers pulled them close to shield them from harm. Samuel’s bag of tricks as a fake Arcanist might have been enough to get him out of the situation with his life, but he saw no way to do that and protect these people at the same time.

“Fuck it,” Samuel grumbled, placing the butt of the spear into the rudimentary rune he’d made, dragging his foot through the dust and debris on the floor. “I tried.”

A column of webbing formed between Samuel and the strix, who furrowed his feathery brows in confusion. The column expanded and swelled until suddenly it exploded, casting a shower of tiny dark spiders and outward along with the widows. Taking a stunned step backward, the strix could hardly get out a word before the first spider succubi collided with him, tackling him out the window. The other two blasted the nearby door with thick globes of webbing from the spinnerets on the back of their palms.

“W-what?” one of the women stammered, unable to process the sudden turn of events that had been taken with the spider women.

“It’s alright,” Samuel assured them. “We’re going to get you out of here.”

With a nod of acknowledgment, Silke went for a separate window and began spinning a thick rope of web that would allow them to slide down to the ground level. A blast of flame collided with the door on the other side, burning away a large section of the web before a blast of wind knocked it open

entirely. Fang rushed the door, leaping forward as the epitome of power and grace as she drove a knee into the jaw of the sorcerer before tumbling with him back down the stairs.

The sorceress stared wide-eyed as the spider succubus shot past her with her companion before returning to Samuel. “You’re not an Arcanist!”

“Nope,” Samuel replied flatly, pointing the spear at her with one hand. “Kinast!”

Leaping to one side, the sorceress managed to avoid the worst of the blast as it tore through the wall. Samuel was aware of Fang still grappling with the sorcerer somewhere below while Vena sank her fangs into the strix. Venom coursed through his body as Silke grabbed person after person to put on the web line to slide to safety. He had a perfect sense of the battle unfolding in this building, mentally redirecting Vena to break off her fight with the feathered soldier to check the lower floors for people and get them out. The directive went through clear as a bell despite the effort it took to parry an incoming spell from the sorceress.

“Don’t think I can’t handle a Summoner!” The sorceress said, hurling blade after blade of deadly cutting wind at Samuel with fierce swings of her wand. “I was going easy on you before because I thought you were cute, but now I’m going to fuck you up!”

A strange sucking sound roared behind Samuel, pulling his legs out from under him. With a flick of her wand, his spear flew from his hand to clatter across the floor. His ribs screamed in protest as he fell down face first. The sorceress approached him, readying a spell at the tip of her wand to blast him at close range.

“You shouldn’t have told me that,” Samuel said as he looked up at her. “Disalok,” he whispered in a husky voice, halting her advance immediately. It wasn’t as strong as the version that Ylvesnia had used on him, but it was enough to give the sorceress pause as she met his gaze. The spell she

held at the ready vanished from the tip of her wand as the implement nearly fell from her grasp.

“W-what is this?” She gasped, struggling against the stunning effect he’d hit her with. Her body shook with the effort, but she was rooted in place.

“You like it?” Samuel asked as he slowly got to his feet, reaching out to touch the side of her face. He was sure to keep it tender so as not to break the spell she was under. “Usa.”

The sorceress inhaled sharply as her body lit up with fierce arousal. Though the spell might have worked on her regardless, the fact that she thought he was cute made the spell much more potent, much easier to inject into her. Now as her body shook, it wasn’t with the struggle to free herself but with the trembling of unchecked arousal. Yet she still could not bring herself to move.

“What the fuck?” she hissed as Samuel plucked the wand from her fingers gingerly, placing it neatly in his pocket. “You’re not a Summoner either?”

“I am,” Samuel said with a nod as he stepped to one side, lining up her trajectory with care. “Just not a kind you’ve ever heard of, I’m sure.”

“You’re one of the Lost?” the sorceress gasped, tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

“Lust Reaper,” Samuel said proudly, picking his spear up awkwardly as he held her gaze. It felt good to be able to say it aloud. There was no point in concealing it any longer, considering how many people had just seen him conjure a trio of succubi. Below, Silke and Vena had gotten the last of the civilians out of the building.

The sorceress stared at him in disbelief, her mouth quivering into the rough shape of a smile. “That’s hot,” she confessed in a horny whisper.

Samuel’s face scrunched up. “You know this is a battle, right? Like, we’re fighting right now. In a war. Where we’re trying to kill each other?”

“Could you do it by choking me?” the sorceress pleaded.

“Praetia, save me,” Samuel scoffed, hurling her out the window with a potent kinetic thrust from his spear. “Alright, widows,” he said aloud, “let’s get out of here before she comes back for more.”

Overhead, the heat shrike streaked by at astonishing speed as it laid down a curtain of flame to cover his retreat.

## CHAPTER 14



“It was a foolish thing to do, Samuel!” Ylvesnia scolded. “Ye’ve revealed yerself! We need to get ye out of here as soon as possible before anyone comes lookin’!”

Samuel sighed as he sipped the cup of watery soup next to the campfire. Fighting had gone well into the evening, but with Ylvesnia descending on them in a flanking maneuver, the Mystuvalan forces had no choice but to withdraw. Samuel and Aurora had been difficult to contend with, especially after Samuel had stopped holding back. Still, Ylvesnia had reminded him several times during the battle that she was on a whole other level than him.

“I know,” Samuel agreed. “But you should have seen these sorcerers—it was like nothing I’ve dealt with before. And they didn’t care about hurting civilians to bring me down. Innocent people were going to die if I didn’t do something, Ylvesnia.”

The elf stared back at him momentarily before her eyes lowered to look into the fire. “Of course. Ye couldn’t turn yer back on them.”

He understood why she was conflicted. It had been her job to keep him safe and hidden, in a way, and she’d failed in doing that. Now her chief concern was to get him out of harm’s way before someone from the Justicars or the Church came looking for him. Rumors were bound to spread after what soldiers and civilians alike had seen from him that day.

“We’ll leave around midnight,” Ylvesnia said. “That should minimize the number of people who know where we’re goin’.”

Samuel's brows furrowed as he finished the soup and set the cup aside. "No. I want you to help Aurora with the healing while I keep on locating the survivors."

Ylvesnia stared at him impassively, but he could tell she took issue not just with his objection but with the tone he'd spoken to her with. He tilted his head to one side, remembering the argument between her and Ketan. "You're my tutor, Ylvesnia. Not my mother, not my guardian, and not my bodyguard. We're in a war now, whether we like it or not, and some innocent people are going to die miserable and forgotten if we don't act. If you don't want any part of that and want to go home, I won't hold that against you. If you can't teach me while I'm here helping people, I understand. But I will not abandon these people to their fates because it may expose me to a little personal risk. Alright?"

"Yer desire to help is commendable, Samuel," Ylvesnia admitted, tone of forced calm in her voice. "But how much good will ye do for people if ye die at the hands of that seeker?"

"I don't know, Ves," Samuel replied with increased frustration. "I'd say about as much as running and hiding does."

The other people gathered around the campfire stared into it with intense focus, not wishing to get in the middle of the growing hostility between the Summoners. Ylvesnia frowned, unaccustomed to Samuel challenging her authority in such a way. "Yer young, so ye don't understand the bigger picture."

"I understand just fine," Samuel snapped, motioning to a few wounded just around the fire. More were in the medical tent, with even more arriving by the hour. "We came here to help, so that's what we're going to do, regardless of what Mystuval has to say about it."

Ylvesnia's voice grew strained as she struggled to hold back her anger. "I'm beginning to think yer letting yer desire to prove yerself to yer father is gettin' the best of ye here."

“And I’m beginning to think maybe Ketan was onto something about you,” Samuel countered, immediately halting her objections. He’d hurt her, perhaps in ways he didn’t fully understand. “We’re staying until our job is done. So get on board with it, or leave.”

The elf’s hands balled into fists as she stood a little straighter, her gaze locked with his silently as the fire crackling between them seemed to shift in color a little. Samuel didn’t back down, staring back at her with the full-bodied conviction of youth. Then, she suddenly turned from the campfire and left, vanishing into the night without another word.

As she left, Captain Sullivan approached, glancing over his shoulder at the elf. “What’s that all about?”

“Just a little disagreement,” one of the soldiers beside the fire said. Samuel recognized him as one of the wounded men pulled out of the cannery.

“Is it gonna be a problem?” the captain asked, taking a cup of soup one of the others handed him.

Samuel shook his head, “No, sir. We’ll stick around for a while longer to help with the wounded, but I’m afraid the Mysterium may recall us once they hear about what’s happened here.”

“A fat lot of good it’ll do ‘em,” Sullivan scoffed. “We weren’t the only ones that were hit. This was a coordinated offensive up and down the border. Mystuval’s probing us for weak points for entry into the country, and they’ve already found a few.”

“Praetia preserve us,” another of the soldiers groaned. “Don’t they have their hands full with Gruvora?”

“Opening another front is dumb as shit,” the first wounded soldier laughed.

Sullivan took a long drink of the soup, wiping his patchy mustache that looked as though it had formed only over the last few days. “Nah. Not if you’re advancing on a much

weaker enemy with immense resources while pulling back from an enemy that's stomping you into the mud."

Samuel's brows rose, "You think they're going to use us as a fallback position? I thought they were just mad about the forces we built up on the border."

"Nah," Sullivan dismissed. "It's a justification, sure. Nordonia handed that much to them on a silver platter. But they've been jockeying for us to bail them out for a while now, just like last time they went at it with Gruvora. They didn't like our answer, so... they're just going to take it."

"That's ridiculous," Samuel scoffed. "They're the biggest military power in Tregon, if not all of Midgardia. Why would they need us so badly?"

Sullivan shrugged, "Not sure. But I've heard it said that their magic isn't quite where ours is, so that would seem more your department than mine. Reports from the east have said Gruvora's made some advancements in that area that Mystuval can't match."

"Son of a bitch," Samuel muttered as the Lieutenant from earlier approached. Like Sullivan, he looked like he'd gone a few days without a shave, but the look suited him much better than it did the captain.

"Sully," the Lieutenant acknowledged before turning his attention to Samuel. "Your wife is asking for you, Mason."

"Ah, right," Samuel said, suppressing a bashful look as a few soldiers chuckled. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

Samuel excused himself with a nod before heading to the medical tent where he knew Aurora had spent the last few hours. The heat shrike she had summoned had been instrumental in giving the Terthish soldiers enough time to finally get organized, allowing her to focus her efforts on healing the wounded. Next, Samuel had the widows combing the city's ruins looking for survivors, reports of which had become far less common in the last hour.



“There you are,” Aurora said as he pushed the flap of the tent to one side and entered. “What’s the news?”

“Things are quiet at the moment, but me and Ylvesnia got into it a little bit just now,” Samuel reported, taking Aurora’s hand as he approached her. Cots had been set up in rows within the massive tent, with most of the wounded sleeping at this hour. Only a few of the lanterns were lit for those still needing observation.

“About what?” Aurora inquired, surprised that the two had argued at all.

“She wants to leave at midnight,” Samuel whispered. “Because I broke our cover.”

“Oh boo-fucking-hoo,” Aurora scoffed, gesturing with one hand to the sprawling rows of wounded before them. “I think we’ve got bigger problems on our hands now. Has she not seen the state of these guys?”

Samuel shook his head. “She’s just looking out for us. But I agree with you, which is what we fought about. I’m not ditching the people here until they can be moved.”

“Is that the plan then?” Aurora asked hopefully. “To move them out?”

Samuel shrugged a shoulder, “Sullivan thinks the order will come down at first light, based on dispatches from other areas that were hit.”

“How many?” Aurora’s face turned fearful. Again Samuel shrugged. He didn’t know and was a little afraid to ask. The fact that a coordinated attack had been carried out like this was enough to unsettle him already.

“Are you the only one here right now?” Samuel asked, changing the subject as he glanced up and down the rows of cots.

“Most of the staff here hadn’t slept in days,” Aurora answered. “So I let them get some sleep while things were a little slow. Would you be willing to get one of the nurses for

me, though? I need to finish up this paperwork, and she's overdue."

"Paperwork?" Samuel laughed briefly. "They have you doing paperwork already?"

Aurora motioned to the papers on the desk in front of her. "If it wasn't important, I wouldn't do it, but it's for medical records."

"Ah," Samuel nodded, understanding. "Yeah, I'll go get your nurse. Where is she?"

"Still sleeping in the staff tent," Aurora answered with a jerk of her thumb toward the next tent over. "Try not to make a lot of noise, though. Her name is Ivanna Elko."

Excusing himself, Samuel stepped out of the tent and headed to the next one over. There weren't many tents available due to the sudden nature of the attack. Many of those in the camp were sleeping under the stars or using parts of buildings deemed still sturdy enough not to fall in on them while they slept. Others had even decided to sleep in the unsafe buildings regardless of the risk, seeking a vague sense of comfort that came with a couple of walls and a roof.

Arriving at the staff tent for the nurses, Samuel poked his head in slowly. One of the nurses was just finishing getting dressed, not far from him. Looking at him surprised, she appeared poised to call him out as a pervert before he cut her off. "Are you Nurse Elko? I was sent to wake you."

Ivanna calmed herself, resuming the buttoning of her shirt. What had been open when he'd entered had offered a slight peek at the white lace of her bra beneath, struggling to hold back the generous swell of her breasts. "Yes, that's me. Sorry, I overslept a little bit."

"It's alright," he assured her. "Everything's under control right now."

Ivanna's uniform didn't look like it fit her very well, Samuel noted as she lifted both arms to tie her long white hair back, her large breasts once more straining at the fabric that

held them in check. Samuel averted his gaze while she finished up, putting on her boots and approaching him.

“You don’t recognize me?” the nurse asked curiously.

Furrowing his brows, Samuel looked her over once again. She had long legs to go along with her bountiful bust. Her hair shone like moonlight as she stepped out of the tent to speak with him in hushed whispers. With her hair up, she did look a little familiar, though.

“I’m from Cathil, my lord,” Ivanna said playfully. “I trained under Norma?”

Samuel stared at her for a long silent moment of disbelief. Of all the places and times for someone from back home to stumble upon him and recognize him. Ivanna smiled brightly, tilting her head to one side. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to tell anyone.”

“How did you recognize me?” Samuel whispered as he took her by the arm to pull her aside.

Ivanna looked at him incredulously, “It’s a good dye job, but it’s not that good, my lord.”

“Decker Mason or Arcanist Mason,” Samuel corrected. “The formalities aren’t necessary.”

“Because of the things in the paper?” the nurse asked. “None of that’s true, I’m sure. But even if it were, I’d still owe you for all the lives you saved today. Myself being one of them.”

“You?” Samuel wondered. “How’s that?”

Ivanna stepped away from him to get a better angle on the town before pointing. “The hospital was just over there. A couple of sorcerers were tearing it apart before they just up and left, allowing us to escape. I heard later it was because you were shooting some sort of lightning at the Mystuvalans.”

Samuel stifled a laugh. “Yeah, they weren’t fans of that.”

“Well, I think I might be,” Ivanna said, approaching him again with her gleaming green eyes looking him over appreciatively. “You really didn’t recognize me?”

“You seemed familiar,” Samuel confessed as he urged her to join him back toward the medical tent. “But you’re a long way from Cathil, so it didn’t occur to me that might be where I knew you from.”

“Ah, of course,” Ivanna agreed, offering him another bright smile. “Your secret is safe with me, though.”

Samuel waved a hand as he heaved a weary sigh. “Don’t worry about it too much. I basically revealed myself to the whole damn country when I summoned earlier today. It’s just a matter of time before it reaches the people looking for me.”

“Well, I hope that’s not the case. I’d like to see you again once my shift is over,” Ivanna said, moving a little closer to him. He felt a brief nudge in the back of his mind that felt familiar, not realizing what it was until the woman had stolen a kiss from him. Her lips were soft and warm, but not nearly as much as the rest of her body pressing against his as she pulled him close.

Samuel didn’t realize they were standing in front of the medical tent until the flap opened, and Aurora stepped out. Pulling away from the nurse abruptly, Samuel sputtered a few times as his mind fumbled with the words to explain what she’d just walked in on. Or out on. Walked into? “Um! I was just bringing Ivanna over.”

“Ivanna,” Aurora repeated flatly.

“Nurse Elko,” Samuel corrected himself. “Just bringing Nurse Elko over. Here she is.”

Ivanna glanced between them, her brows furrowed in confusion. Aurora sighed before turning her attention to the nurse. “You’re late. I have some patients I need you to check on.”

“It’s not what it looks like, I swear,” Samuel pressed. “I can explain everything.”

“No need,” Aurora responded coldly. “My main concern is helping these people. What you do with your time is your business.”

Ivanna stepped away and reluctantly approached Aurora, knowing she would have to slip past her to get inside the tent. However, Aurora didn’t make any immediate move to step aside.

“He’s right,” Ivanna said meekly. “I kissed him without asking.”

Samuel’s heart raced as the fiery blonde’s eyes shifted to look at Ivanna. The nurse pressed on, “We’re from the same town. He saved us. I just got a little caught up in that sense of familiarity, of feeling safe again, I guess.”

Aurora’s eyes softened as she realized what the nurse was trying to say to her. Ivanna placed a hand over her ample chest. “I swear, I didn’t know he was already with someone. But he had no part of it. I just lost my head for a moment.”

Reaching out and clasping the nurse’s hand with both of hers, Aurora offered a gentle squeeze of assurance. “I know. It’s been a long day for everyone, and things are only going to get worse for us, I’m afraid.”

Samuel’s heart had leaped into the back of his throat as they spoke. But Aurora had managed to see through her emotional state to find her empathy once more. How she managed to keep doing that, Samuel didn’t know. But, now that the moment of tension was beginning to pass, relief began to set in.

“If it’s of any use to you,” Ivanna began. “I could introduce you to some folks used to laying low. Once my shift’s over and we have someone to take over here, I can take you to them.”

Samuel took a step closer to her, searching her face for any hint of deception, and found none. He nodded gently before Aurora motioned for her to step inside and get to work.

Once the nurse was out of earshot, Aurora's hand suddenly snapped up to slap him in the chest.

"Agh!" Samuel exclaimed as he stumbled back. "What the hell? She told you what happened!"

"She doesn't know what you are, dipshit!" Aurora hissed, barely containing her frustration. "You need to get that shit under control, or this is going to keep happening!"

Samuel raised his hands defensively. "What are you talking about?"

"Lust Reaper shit," Aurora whispered as she approached him. "Even at a drip, it's potent magic to people who are vulnerable."

Samuel's face scrunched up a bit, both confused and impressed. "What brought you to that conclusion?"

"Well, smartass," Aurora smirked. "I happen to be one of the idiots that it works on. But also, Ylvesnia has explained a few times now that as our entwined powers grow, the more they will manifest in our auras."

Samuel frowned, recalling it being mentioned a few times. Usually, Summoners, or any magic users, didn't have to worry about the influence of their magical auras on their surroundings until they were much older and much further along in their training. But for the two of them, progress had been much faster. As each of them trained, it caused the pool of power between them to grow at an unprecedented rate.

"Feels sort of like getting old ahead of our time," Samuel confessed.

Aurora smirked and planted a light kiss on his lips. "I know. Just stay aware of it, and it shouldn't be a problem, alright?"

Samuel smiled warmly. He didn't want to let Aurora go, but he knew the importance of her work. He couldn't very well get into a fight with Ylvesnia about them staying and then try to keep her to himself for selfish reasons. It was hard to deny

the effect that his fake wife was having on him. “So what do you think of these people she mentioned?”

“Could be worth a shot,” Aurora admitted with a brief shrug. “I can ask her more about it when I have a chance. You should get some rest while you can, though. No use in both of us running short on sleep.”

Reluctant as Samuel was to admit it, she had a point. They couldn’t do anything about her losing sleep, but there was very little for him to do unless the widows summoned him for help with survivors. “Alright, but don’t hesitate to wake me if you need anything.”

Aurora nodded, offering him a warm smile before planting another kiss. It was a little longer than the previous one but still left him wanting more. As he turned to walk back to their tent, he glanced toward the campfire the soldiers were huddled around. He couldn’t help but hope the news to get everyone out would come with the next sunrise.

## CHAPTER 15



Samuel woke the next morning to the sound of soldiers rushing around the camp. Though he debated getting up, the sound of gunfire in the distance decided for him. He'd slept in his clothes for precisely this sort of thing, taking no time at all to report to Captain Sullivan.

"What's going on?" Samuel asked, confused as to why the widows hadn't reported anything.

"Nothing to worry yourself with," Sullivan said as he looked up from a map spread across the top of the counter in the post office—one of the few buildings that had survived the battle completely unharmed. It served now as Sullivan's command center. "Few more of the monsters scavenging the bodies from yesterday. We're clearing them out."

"We didn't recover all our casualties yet?" Samuel asked curiously.

Sullivan shook his head. "Not ours, the Mystuvalans. But I'll be damned if I let those soldiers become food."

Samuel nodded his approval. "That's rather compassionate of you."

"A soldier's service ends only when they're discharged, either by death or country," the Captain responded gruffly. "After that, they're required to give no more. I won't have their dignity taken from them."

The Lieutenant sat up in his chair in the corner of the room. "Besides, there's probably a lot of those soldiers out there that we served with in the past. Wouldn't be right to leave them."

"So what do you do with them?" Samuel wondered.



“We bag them, tag them, and send them home,” Sullivan answered with a shrug. “Usually with chaplains, priests, or nuns. During wartime, they have a special division for it, which I guess they’ll have to re-commission now.”

Samuel’s brow rose a little. Circumstances being different, he imagined Aurora serving in such a capacity. Bringing peace to the loved ones of those who had died in battle was precisely the sort of merciful work that she would have done as a nun. He frowned as he thought back on her wearing her habit, treating the injured on the side of the road as they had journeyed to meet with Ilmora.

“Do you have anyone for that right now?” Samuel pressed.

Sullivan nodded in the affirmative. “We have a few volunteers, yeah. A couple of priests and nuns were in town when the monsters first attacked.”

“Any word on withdrawal?” Samuel stepped closer, looking over the papers spread out near the map in hopes of finding an official correspondence there.

Rubbing at the stubble on his chin, Sullivan shook his head. “No. It looks like the lines of communication have been disrupted for the time being. Many of the attacks they launched on other points were more successful. So priority has been shifted there.”

It made sense to Samuel, but he didn’t have to like it. Without anything immediately pressing for him to attend to, he excused himself and decided to find Aurora. Arriving at the medical tent, he was surprised to see her absent. Ivanna greeted him instead when he entered. Though he still felt a little awkward from the previous night’s events, he put a cheerful smile on his face.

“Where is she?” Samuel asked politely.

“Resting,” Ivanna answered. “She said she didn’t want to disturb you, so I gave her my cot. Poor thing was exhausted.”

Samuel nodded, suspecting that Aurora's motivation was different. With things as bad as they were, she didn't want to be too far from the work that mattered most to her. Of course, not waking him likely factored into her decision, but he doubted she would have accepted the offer if that had been all there was to it.

"I'm off in fifteen," the nurse said, trying not to look as sexually inviting as she had the night before. Samuel likened it to throwing a shawl over a lamp; there wasn't much that could be done when she was built the way she was in the undersized clothes she wore. "We can go get Aurora, and I can make the introductions for you."

Samuel's eyes lit up. He'd completely forgotten her proposal before he'd retired the previous night. It seemed like the perfect time to look into it now. "Fantastic, thank you. I appreciate it."

Lingering around outside the medical tent rather than inside, Samuel had a little time to focus on the connection with the widows and get their reports.

Very little had transpired overnight. No additional survivors had been located, but the spider-succubi were monitoring the situation with the monsters from the shadows. Most had been small, thinking they were stealthy enough to get a quick meal before skulking back to wherever they'd come from. But the scouts and lookouts had been keen-eyed enough to notice what was happening immediately. They assured him that everything was under control so that he could get back to Aurora.

"Alright, let's go before I get roped into anything else," Ivanna announced as she emerged from inside. The two walked back to the staff tent in silence. Even though most of the staff was up, those working odd or late hours were still trying to get some sleep, including Aurora.

"Hey," Samuel whispered gently to the blonde passed out in Ivanna's cot. Despite being a standard military issue, someone had piled enough soft blankets onto the thing that it

now resembled a nest more than a bed. Her hair was splayed out around her head like a chaotic golden halo, while the rest of her body was just as haphazardly sprawled out across the nest of a bed. “Time to get up.”

“Eh?” Aurora grunted as she jerked awake. It took her a moment to survey her surroundings and remember where she was. “Oh, right.”

“Ivanna’s going to introduce us to those people she knows,” Samuel continued, hoping to contextualize waking her before she was ready to get up on her own. Aurora nodded, remembering more clearly than Samuel had, even in her half-asleep state. Like him, she’d fallen asleep in her clothes and did not need to dress. She rolled out of bed and stumbled around for a few of her personal effects before joining the two outside.

Brushing her hair out as they walked, Aurora let out a loud yawn before waving to Ylvesnia as she approached. “Have you slept yet?”

“A little,” the elf admitted, barely glancing at Samuel. “Where are ye two goin’?”

Though Ivanna looked hesitant to answer, Samuel waved a hand gently to signal that everything was fine and that the elf was in the know. Aurora jerked a thumb toward the nurse. “She says she knows some people accustomed to laying low who might be able to help us go back into hiding.”

“Ah, good. Makin’ some sense again,” Ylvesnia remarked with a subtle jab at Samuel. “Ye mind if I come with?”

Before Samuel could make an excuse, Aurora chimed in. “Of course! Ivanna, lead the way.”

The rest of the walk was made in silence. Samuel had nothing to say to Ylvesnia, and she had nothing to say to him. It was slightly comforting that she was still there with him, but he wondered how long it would last now that he had drawn a line in the sand.

Ivanna led them to a part of town that had seen heavy shelling, with only a handful of buildings having made it through with only light damage. Amid the destruction and rubble were the remains of an old bank. Most of the building had been torn away and burned down, but the fortified vault in the basement stood firm.

“Incredible,” Aurora marveled as they approached the large open door of the vault. The bank hadn’t been in use for quite some time, judging by the lack of furnishings and cash. “I wouldn’t have thought to use this for cover.”

“Well, I’ve been known to have a good idea now and then,” a praetian priest said as he approached with a hand out. Samuel and Ylvesnia exchanged glances for the first time in a while, apprehensive of speaking directly with any clergy member.

“Nyles Mistelle, these are friends of mine,” Ivanna began, gesturing to the group accompanying her. Aurora took the priest’s hand and shook it politely. “They’ve been operating under assumed identities that the battle has jeopardized.”

“Ah,” the priest said with a smirk. “You must be Summoner Eamon then.”

Samuel’s brows furrowed as he regarded the man coldly for a moment. Despite being a priest, he seemed relatively young. Priests, unlike Monks, were not Summoners serving as clergy. To Samuel’s knowledge, they had no magic beyond some basic healing spells. Even that was relatively rare. As a result, Priests skewed toward being older due to how long they took to rise in the ranks alongside their Summoner counterparts. “And you seem rather young to be a priest.”

Nyles laughed the comment off as another priest and a few nuns from inside the vault took notice. Then, rubbing at his chin, the priest shrugged. “That’s very kind of you to say.”

“You’re not a priest,” Aurora said flatly, pulling the holy symbol around his neck from under his robes. Though similar to the symbol of Praetia, it was much more understated and

rudimentary. The eye of Praetia was also absent from the symbol. “You’re heretics.”

“Well, that’s a tad harsh, I’d say.” Nyles raised both his hands defensively. “Remember, Ms. Brandt, you’re also a heretic by Praetian law.”

Samuel took a step forward instinctively in defense of Aurora, “You seem to know an awful lot about us.”

One of the nuns behind the fake priest adjusted her robes discreetly, though Samuel still noticed. She was concealing a weapon or an implement of some kind on herself and was prepared to use it if things escalated. Behind him, Samuel could feel Ylvesnia similarly positioning herself for the same possibility.

“Of course,” Nyles admitted, spreading his hands. “Us heretics have to stick together, you know?”

“Funny,” Samuel grumbled with a gesture toward the nun. “I’m not really getting a sense of camaraderie here.”

“A precaution,” the fake priest assured him, gesturing for the nun to stand down. “We all just need to calm down. I was merely attempting to illustrate a point.”

“Which point is that?” Aurora challenged.

“Heresy is a matter of perspective,” Nyles explained. “And that it can be attached to anyone and everyone the church simply takes a dislike to.”

“A fair enough point,” Ylvesnia commented. “But hardly convincin’.”

“You’re Norvathians,” Aurora remarked coldly. “It’s a little different, I’d say.”

Samuel shook his head, “I don’t know what that means.”

“Ah, someone who hasn’t been paying attention in church,” Nyles laughed briefly before motioning for them to come into the vault. Bedrolls and other essential gear were

strewn out, turning the fortified interior into a space superficially resembling a home.

Samuel followed but noticed that Aurora was hesitant to do so. Then, frowning his brows in concern, he took her hand. “What’s wrong?”

“She paid a lot more attention in church than you,” Nyles said as he rummaged through a sack for some food. “Are you hungry?”

“No, thank you,” Samuel responded automatically, though he realized only then that he’d not had breakfast yet. “Does someone care to explain?”

“Norvath was an Elven follower of Praetia,” Ylvesnia responded calmly. Most elves didn’t follow the Praetian faith unless they lived abroad. Terth had a fair amount of Praetian elves in its population compared to other countries.

“Why is that remarkable?” Samuel asked.

“Because he was the first elf to follow Praetia,” Aurora said through her teeth. “He betrayed her, which is why Praetians and elves warred with one another in ancient times.”

“No,” the nun said flatly. “He didn’t.”

“That’s just how the Praetians tell it,” Nyles added. “But that’s not how it was.”

Aurora shook her head irritably, “I can’t listen to this. This is heretical drivel.”

“Sister Brandt,” the nun said calmly. “I remember you. When you first came to the church. You were quite the firebrand even then. What happened to the young woman who questioned authority and sought to understand the nuances of the faith?”

Caught off guard by this remark, Aurora took a moment to process the nun’s words. She didn’t seem to recognize her, but the nun remembered Aurora quite well from what Samuel could see. Though Aurora hadn’t yet asked for the woman to identify herself, she reached up with both hands to pull the

habit back to reveal a thick mane of curly dark hair and two slightly pointed ears.

“You’re a half-elf?” Samuel wondered aloud. Were it not for the ears, he wouldn’t have known. Aurora stared, raising her hands to her mouth slowly as she finally remembered.

“Valentina!?” Aurora exclaimed, her posture and demeanor shifting instantly. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t recognize you. You never wear the habit!”

“Rather ironic, considering the circumstances,” the half-elf remarked with a warm smile. “Leaving the church finally got me to wear one regularly, but it’s just a disguise.”

“What? When?” Aurora looked shocked, her emotions visibly hitting highs and lows in rapid succession. “Did they excommunicate you?”

“Yes, essentially, that’s what happened, though the whole story is a bit longer than that,” Valentina explained.

“Those fuckers,” Aurora spat, earning a chuckle from the half-elf.

“I’m Norvathian now,” she said, spreading her hands. “I’d be happy to explain it to you.”

“I’d be interested in hearing this,” Samuel muttered. None of this made any sense to him, and it was essentially for the reason Nyles had pointed out. He should have paid more attention in church.

“You’re following this guy?” Aurora gestured toward Nyles with a look of skeptical disgust. “Really?”

Again, Valentina laughed as she shook her head. “No, child. That’s not really how it works with us. But if you were to say anyone is in charge here, it would be the reverend. Which is me.”

“Reverend? You?” Aurora repeated, staring back at the woman in disbelief. “Bullshit.”

Valentina gestured openly, representing herself. “It’s true. Reverend Valentina Valzirwyn, at your service.”

“Valzirwyn,” Ylvesnia repeated with surprise. “Any relation to Felaern Valzirwyn?”

“My grandfather,” Valentina smiled brightly. “You know him?”

“I should say so!” Ylvesnia laughed with astonishment. “Curator of the Archives and my mentor’s mentor. The man is a legend. Why are ye here in this—”

Samuel glared at Ylvesnia with a raised brow, prompting her to reconsider her incoming derogatory title for Terth.

“—in Terth. Why are ye here?” Ylvesnia finished, her tone more controlled.

Valentine motioned for them to sit. There wasn’t much space outside the bedrolls, but they were welcome to them. “I joined the church when I was very young. But, like Aurora, I had a penchant for asking questions. It was the whole point for me: to learn. The church offered answers that I couldn’t find in my other studies. At least I thought it did, but the more I tried to learn, the more resistance I encountered.”

“But why become a Norvathian?” Aurora pleaded, a slight hint of betrayal in her voice.

“Aurora,” Valentina sighed, losing some of her warm demeanor. “Norvath did not turn against Praetia. On the contrary, Norvath advocated for the word of Praetia to be made available to all people and criticized the priesthood as a class for withholding aspects of her teachings.”

Aurora opened her mouth to object but was cut off by the half-elf raising a finger. “Aurora. I know your first instinct is to defend your faith. But consider what has happened to you. I know that this story of you being seduced by a killer is rubbish, and I remember well how you questioned doctrine. But you were never cruel, never treacherous, and you would still be in service to the church had they not betrayed you. Just like me. There is a status quo they seek to maintain, and



anyone who gives them resistance is labeled as a traitor. It's an old tactic, one they have been using since the beginning."

After a brief silence, Valentina pressed on. "It's either that, or I have to believe that one of the most charitable kind-hearted nuns I have ever known suddenly decided to throw her lot in with a mass murdering noble."

To give Aurora a moment to recover, Samuel leaned in to ask a few questions of his own. "So this Norvath guy was against priests presiding over the doctrine? How is a reverend different than that?"

"Reverends and Pastors are different in that they are chosen by their congregation instead of the other way around," Valentina explained, obviously anticipating the question. "And it's merely as a guide, not an authority figure. That's what I meant when I said that we don't really do things that way. The most knowledgeable and dedicated person can guide a congregation on knowledge and practices but exerts little to no authority over them. So for Norvathians, the relationship to Praetia is personal rather than institutional."

Aurora's eyes gleamed with an old familiar curiosity. What Valentina had just explained was eerily relevant to what the young blonde had been going through recently. Her old habits kept her from jumping up with a barrage of questions, but Samuel could sense the tension of her restraint.

"So how is that different?" Samuel pressed again. "I mean, in practical terms, how does a personal relationship with guidance differ from instruction from an authority figure?"

Valentina smiled, seemingly pleased with Samuel's curiosity. He wondered if she also knew that much of his line of questioning was for Aurora as well. "At the time of Norvath's so-called betrayal, reading and writing were uncommon skills among humans. It was restricted to magical traditions and the clergy. This gave the latter the means to be the sole authority on what people knew from the Holy Book."

Samuel nodded. "Alright, so far I follow."

Valentina motioned to Ylvesnia, “Elves, however, did not have that problem. Even back then, every citizen of Lamashara was taught to read and write. Initially, Norvath respected the tradition, viewing the priests as valued interpreters for the word of Praetia. But over time, as he furthered his own studies in private, he began to notice discrepancies. Missing texts, parts of the book that were never mentioned in any sermon.”

“So he wanted to know why,” Samuel guessed.

Valentina nodded, “Yes. Simple curiosity from the mind of a student at first. But something took root in his mind then, and it grew.”

Samuel nodded slightly, lining up his next question when Aurora finally spoke. “He saw their corruption, but only because he possessed a skill that they kept exclusive to themselves and a few others for so long.”

“Yes,” Valentina said plainly. “For anyone with the means to see, it was easy to find.”

“Was there a strict ban on reading the Holy Book then?” Samuel queried genuinely—he didn’t remember learning anything to that effect.

“For anyone who was not clergy,” Valentina explained. “It was a sin to read the book. It was considered a perversion of the teachings for a person to attempt an interpretation of Praetia’s word without proper training.”

“Just like with summoning and conduits,” Aurora murmured. Again, Valentina nodded, though this time, her eyes had grown sadder. She seemed to understand something about what Aurora had said that had escaped Samuel.

Aurora’s face twisted into venomous distress. “So then what of the saints? Do they really join Praetia in the Outer Spheres, or does the Exarch have them disappear somewhere as soon as they hear something from the goddess that doesn’t gel with what doctrine says?”

Samuel’s brows shot up at the suggestion. Ylvesnia remained quiet, not wanting to fan the flames of the woman’s

anger. Valentina was similarly surprised but held up her hands defensively. “I would like to think that is a bridge too far. That the saints simply leave behind worldly concerns as we have been led to believe, but it’s hard not to question everything once you have uncovered the lies behind the things regarded as long-standing truths. It’s not unlike a loose thread as you continue to pull on it.”

“Well, luckily, our training as Summoners addresses that just fine,” Samuel suggested with a level tone. “Without evidence, we cannot assume anything. Theories must be tested in order to become verified.”

Aurora’s eyes met his for a few seconds before she began to calm herself. Samuel had no reason to advocate for the church, but he wasn’t about to jump to any conclusions. It was a bad habit to get into for anyone, but especially for those wielding the kind of power they did. It was a matter of personal responsibility to remain objective for Summoners. It was a process he wanted Aurora to trust as she always had.

“So that’s the short version of it,” Nyles interjected. “Like you, we’re on the church’s shit list. Ever since tensions began with our neighbors and now hostilities breaking out in full, you can be sure the church is about to clean house. So we have a lot in common with each other in that regard.”

“It would seem so,” Samuel agreed with a sigh. “So, on the matter of going into hiding, what would you recommend?”

“Honestly?” Nyles asked. “I’d leave. Even if you make amends with the crown and are brought back into good standing, you’ll just be shipped out to fight a war. You’d be better served going somewhere that isn’t embroiled in conflict.”

“And if we can’t?” Samuel rubbed the bridge of his nose in exasperation. The idea of simply flitting off to some country too far away to have been touched by the politics here was no simple task, even for those wielding magic.

“Well, if you stay here, under your current identity or a new one,” Nyles explained. “You’re still looking at being drafted, so long as you’re practicing magic. Terth’s army is not large, Mystuval is going to press the issue, and every able-bodied spell slinger is going to be called up to defend the country eventually.”

Samuel had a tough time arguing that fact. In order to push back an invasion, everyone would need to pitch in, or Terth would fall. Samuel frowned. “So, any new identity would have to be strictly non-magical in nature.”

“Otherwise, they’ll come looking for you,” Nyles confirmed. “Both of you.”

Samuel exchanged glances with Aurora and then with Ylvesnia. There was distinct concern and dread in their eyes, and suddenly, the little dispute he’d had with his teacher seemed entirely unimportant. Arguments of ethics and values aside, the world around them seemed to be making the decisions for them.

## CHAPTER 16



Samuel held back for the remainder of the conversation, watching as the passion for Praetia was reignited in Aurora. Finally, the ex-nun had found an avenue to retain her spiritual needs that squared with how she lived. She was free of the church's corruption and could pursue her studies in a way Samuel had wanted for her for quite some time. But, unfortunately, it brought her further into the territory of heresy rather than away from it. Though the throne seldom pursued charges of heresy, there was no mistake that even if they could earn a way back into civilized society, it would be a stain on her for quite some time.

This became Samuel's new fixation. Now that Aurora had someone to serve as a touchstone for her new spiritual path, it was up to him to ensure she was safe, protected, and returned to her rightful place, helping as many people as possible. Samuel's first thought on how to handle it was to find a way to return home where his authority as an earl would carry enough way to insulate her from most of the animosity that might be directed toward Norvathians until the truth of their faith could spread. But that only presented the obvious challenge of overcoming his own conflict with the law. As the son of a respected duke, he would be afforded a fair trial, but much of the court of public opinion had already been swayed against him.

"Samuel," Ylvesnia said quietly. "I've been with ye long enough to know what yer thinkin' right now."

Looking over at his elven instructor, Samuel sighed. "I don't want another argument with you. I don't think I could handle it right now."

“I’m not lookin’ to argue with ye,” Ylvesnia assured him. “But if yer thinkin’ of goin’ back home, I think it’s too soon.”

“Well, you heard what Nyles said,” Samuel mumbled. “It’s likely I would just be pressed into service in a few months, albeit under the name Mason until I was discovered.”

“That does seem likely,” Ylvesnia agreed.

“Don’t get me wrong, the idea of protecting my people is not what bothers me,” Samuel clarified, concerned about how his trepidation might sound. “I was set on serving under my father upon graduation. Nobility has a duty to protect those under their charge. But if I serve, I want to do it as Samuel Eamon, not Deckard Mason. That’s assuming, of course, I’m not discovered immediately and thrown into some hole to rot until enough resources are made available to put me on trial.”

“Ye think yer gettin’ a trial?” Ylvesnia asked, a little surprised. “Samuel, they’re not givin’ you a chance to give yer side of events. If they get you into custody, yer goin’ to die there.”

Samuel’s face screwed up at the idea. “Being a tad dramatic, don’t you think?”

Ylvesnia stared back at him gravely. “No, Samuel, I don’t. Ye need to remember that Justicars are not to be trifled with. Yer not goin’ to reason yer way out of anythin’ if they’ve decided yer more trouble than yer worth.”

“You’re talking about—”

“I know what I’m talkin’ about,” the elf said, cutting him off. “What I’m tryin’ to impress upon ye is how serious this is once you come out of the shadows.”

Samuel shook his head as he stepped out of the vault, not wanting their discussion to interrupt Aurora’s. “I think I’ve taken it pretty seriously by going into hiding for all this time.”

“I think havin’ the safety and security the Mysterium has offered ye has made ye complacent, Samuel,” Ylvesnia countered. “The time away has allowed ye to relax and lose

yer instincts on the matter. The Justicars are not after ye to put ye on trial; they're after ye to put ye in the ground."

Samuel felt a ring of truth in what she was saying. His problems had become somehow far away while he built a new life with Aurora out at the edge of the country. He realized that the quiet life he had found with her held great value, and he didn't want to give it up. So he'd simply allowed himself to coast, despite strengthening his abilities and growing his power. Unfortunately, his position as earl, which he had previously thought would ensure a trial for him, might serve as a liability by putting pressure on the clandestine group to take him out of the picture quickly and cleanly.

"Let's say you're right," Samuel relented. "What are you suggesting I do?"

"Ah, now he wants my opinion," Ylvesnia said sardonically. "What a turn of events."

Even though her tone had not significantly shifted, he could tell she was attempting a playful jab to lighten the mood. He smiled and shook his head, "Alright, point taken. What do you think we should do?"

"Hm," Ylvesnia grunted, releasing him from further jabs for now. "It may be a good start to help the people here before we leave."

"That's what we've been doing," Samuel responded incredulously. "We pushed back the Mystuvalans and—"

Ylvesnia held a hand up to silence him as her gaze remained on him, unflinching. "No, Samuel. It's time for them to get out."

"The order hasn't been given for them to pull out yet," Samuel pointed out. "If it had been, I would be doing everything I could to help."

"Yer an Earl, give the order," Ylvesnia stated plainly.

Samuel opened his mouth to argue the different ways things simply didn't work like that, but his mind had already

taken over how they might. Though he was wanted for the massacre he didn't commit, simply being so had not stripped him of his title. Indeed, only a conviction or a directive from the King could strip him of his title.

Despite technically retaining his power, he was well outside his area of authority. At least, under normal circumstances, he would be. As Samuel's mouth slowly closed, he recalled the reports from a day before that had found the earl here had been found dead. He was believed to be slain in the first twenty minutes of the attack before the army had been given a chance to respond.

There was a vacuum of power until an heir was established, but doing so was a process that no one present was equipped to address. In such events, emergencies allowed for the next highest-ranking noble present to temporarily take control to ensure the safety of the people. As far as Samuel knew, that was him. All it would require of him was to reveal his true identity openly.

"You scolded me for revealing myself," Samuel pointed out.

"That I did, but the bell can't be un-rung," Ylvesnia admitted with a shrug. "Now, the strategy must change. Oftentimes, the battle is won by he who is first to strike."

Though that hadn't been the case for Mystuval in the battle of Bredon, it had been for many other surprise battles up and down the border. Samuel nodded gently in agreement, glancing back into the vault to ensure Aurora was still occupied before he continued to speak. "So grab the reins, give the order to withdraw. Then what?"

"Then we deal with whatever the next battle is," Ylvesnia offered calmly. "But in order to do battle with shadows, our strongest ally will be the light."

Samuel stared at Ylvesnia in silence, simmering in the unexpected wisdom she had offered. "Is that an elf saying, by chance? It feels sort of elfy."



“Elven,” Ylvesnia corrected him humorously. “And yes, it is elven. Though I find it more inspiring in my own tongue.”

“What does that sound like?” Samuel wondered.

Ylvesnia shook her head, “I will share it with ye another time; I just thought it was relevant to our situation.”

Samuel nodded as he heaved a sigh. It was relevant, and he believed he understood the meaning. It would be more challenging for the Justicars to abscond with him into the night if he was constantly observed in the public eye. Of course, assassinations from a distance were possible, perhaps even to be blamed on Mystuval. Still, the plan was preferable to cowering in the dark, waiting to be found and forgotten.

“If I’m to take this kind of risk,” Samuel began, “I’ll have to bolster the Outsiders I have while adding to their ranks. I’ll need to make further summonings more specialized to this task. It won’t be just me in danger. Aurora will be too.”

“I will help,” Ylvesnia assured him. “Of that ye can be sure. What will yer new summons be?”

Samuel tapped his chin as he thought on it but only had a brief moment to do so before Aurora emerged from the vault.

“What’s going on?” she asked curiously, glancing between the two.

“Planning our next move,” Samuel confessed, furrowing his brow. “I didn’t want to interrupt your conversation, though.”

Aurora nodded, though the look on her face said she wasn’t fully satisfied with the answer. “So?”

“What?” Samuel asked.

“The next move,” Aurora pressed. “What is it?”

“Oh!” Samuel chuckled nervously. “We were thinking—that is to say—I was wondering perhaps if I should embrace my blown cover and take control of the soldiers here.”

Aurora's jaw nearly hit the floor. "You can't be serious! Can you even do that?"

Samuel shrugged as he gestured in circular motions with his hands. "Through a series of technicalities: yes. But the drawback is obviously going public."

"You're out of your mind," Aurora scoffed. "Do you hear yourself? That runs completely counter to what we've been doing for almost a year! Now you just want to throw caution to the wind?"

Samuel straightened up defensively, "It's harder for anyone to strike at me in secrecy if I'm out in the open, but more importantly, the people here are waiting on an order that may never come."

Aurora paused as she considered the second part of what he'd said. Another attack could come at any time, and they wouldn't know it until it was happening. Meanwhile, the surviving Mystuvalan forces had, no doubt, reported seeing Summoners on the field. This meant the next attack would take such opposition into account.

"Alright," Aurora grumbled. "But where do we take them?"

"Mirfield," Samuel answered confidently. "Plenty of space there, and the train lines could be an asset."

The blonde's head bobbed from side to side as she slowly warmed up to the idea. "What about Valentina and her people here?"

"Well, I don't know where they were going before, but I've no intention of just leaving them here to fend for themselves," Samuel explained. Despite the additional risk posed by bringing them along, it was the right thing to do. The religious differences of people were not an issue for him at the moment, only preventing more needless bloodshed. "They can come if they so wish."

Aurora smirked, pleased to see this side of him again after all this time. "I suppose we'll have to look like our old

selves again?”

Samuel chuckled. “Is there a problem with how I looked before?”

“No,” Aurora admitted. “But I’ve become accustomed to the appearance of my husband. I’ll be sad to see him go.”

Though intended as a joke, her words struck a chord with Samuel. Now that they were casting aside their assumed identities, the need to carry on as if they were married also disappeared. He did his best not to let it show, but the idea was almost enough for him to go back on the entire plan to start from scratch. He realized there was no scenario where he could go on the offense as Deckard Mason and keep the life he had built under the name.

“Let everyone know,” Samuel said with a somber nod toward the vault. “I’ll talk to Captain Sullivan. I want to get everyone out as soon as possible.”

Offering him another gentle smile, Aurora turned to do as he asked. Ylvesnia said nothing, but the look in her eyes told him she had some idea of the conflict within him. “Stay with her, just in case something happens.”

The elf agreed, and Samuel left to return to his tent. After packing his things up, he undertook the process of undoing the various magical alterations that he and Aurora had made to his appearance to maintain his cover. Nothing had been too drastic, but enough subtle changes here and there had been enough to make him difficult to recognize by anyone but those who had known him personally. By the time he was finished, Samuel saw his true face for the first time in almost a year. It would take a little while to get used to it again.

Setting his pack to the side, Samuel steeled himself for the difficult conversation ahead of him with the captain. He didn’t strike Samuel as the kind of man who would object to the situation’s legality but one who may take the deception regarding his identity personally. With his true face, his attire was the only thing to really identify him as the Arcanist they

had already met. Hopefully, wearing the last thing Deckard Mason had been seen in would help them get past the initial hurdles of the explanation.

He began mentally practicing a few different ways to open the conversation but couldn't find one that satisfied him. Ultimately, he would just have to come out and say it.

"Ah, there you are," the captain said, clapping Samuel on the shoulder. "I was looking for you."

Samuel turned to look at Captain Sullivan in shock, taken entirely by surprise. "Me? What for?"

Sullivan took a moment to look Samuel over, taking in the difference in appearance. "You changed your hair."

Tilting his head incredulously, Samuel offered a short laugh. "Sir?"

"Ah, you don't have to call me that," the captain said dismissively. "Pretty sure you outrank me."

"You know who I am?" It was an increasingly difficult situation for Samuel to wrap his head around.

Sullivan's lips pressed into a thin line as he offered a hesitant nod. "I'm pretty sure everyone in the camp knows at this point. Word spreads pretty fast in situations like this. Everyone has their ears to the ground for any scrap of information they can get."

Samuel shook his head in disbelief. "You didn't say anything."

"I try not to concern myself with wizard shit," Sullivan grumbled. "Never did me a lick of good."

"Wizard shit," Samuel repeated in a whisper. Did Sullivan not know that he wasn't a wizard? Samuel supposed that if he was applying the term the way he was, he probably didn't care one way or another. "Alright, well, what was it you needed?"

“Wanted to see if you and the other Summoners might have a way to shore up our defenses,” Sullivan answered, quickly switching conversational tracks. “Scouts reported that we might be getting hit again around sundown.”

Samuel placed a hand on the captain’s arm, stopping him mid-step as he moved to return to the command tent. “Actually, that was what I was coming to talk to you about. I don’t think we’ll be able to repel another attack.”

“Well, shit,” Sullivan groaned, rubbing at his chin. “I guess it was too good to last, hm? Right back where we started.”

“Not exactly,” Samuel corrected as he steeled himself, standing up a little straighter. “As earl, it’s within my authority to take temporary control of operations here in the event of an emergency and the loss of noble life.”

Surprised, the captain stared at Samuel in silence. The man wasn’t dumb, but he was having trouble deciding what kind of strange power play anyone could benefit from at a time like this. “Is that right?”

“It is,” Samuel confirmed. “However, I’m not inclined to wield such power without your consent. You’ve led the people here this far, and it would be foolish to take you out of that position now.”

Sullivan nodded slowly, still apprehensive. “Alright. So what is it you want me to consent to?”

“Well, above all else, I’d like to get everyone out of here.” Samuel motioned vaguely to the camp. “We’ve too many civilians and not enough men to defend them. Whatever surviving forces reported back to Mystuval have informed their command that there are Summoners present here. When they hit us again, it’ll be with whatever they deem necessary to overcome us.”

Tilting his head to one side, Sullivan crossed his arms. “That’s true.”

“So we need to go,” Samuel pressed. “We need to get everyone out of here so that when they launch another attack, all they’ll get is a foothold in the debris and nothing more. No more civilian lives lost, no more soldiers thrown into the furnace in the absence of an order to withdraw.”

“So let me get this straight,” the captain said, raising a hand to slow Samuel down. “You want to reveal yourself to assume command for the specific purpose of issuing the order to withdraw?”

“Yes sir,” Samuel answered respectfully, despite the captain having just informed him that such formality with him was not required.

Captain Sullivan clapped his hands together, “Well then, you have my consent. Let’s spread the word and get moving.”

Samuel beamed, feeling a strange sense of accomplishment and acceptance. But it was a feeling that was short-lived.

“Sully!” The Lieutenant called out as he jogged up to the two of them, struggling to catch his breath. “Sully, I told her to wait. But she won’t.”

The captain leaned over to listen more carefully to the rasping of the lieutenant as he hunched over with his hands on his knees. “What are you talking about?”

“She wouldn’t listen,” the Lieutenant gasped as he jerked his thumb behind him. Before he could explain further, Samuel followed the direction he’d indicated to see Seeker Joceline Lumis approaching. Members of the camp parted to either side as the bright armor of the holy warrior emblazoned with the symbol of the seekers drew her weapon. The ring of steel from the scabbard caught the attention of those who hadn’t been paying attention so that now all eyes were on her. The seeker’s impressive stature would have been commanding enough even without the armor and weapon. Her green eyes leveled on Samuel as she pointed her sword at him.

“Summoner Eamon!” The seeker’s voice rang loud and clear over the bustle of the camp, demanding silence so that all might hear her words. “Surrender sister Aurora Brandt to me, and I shall be merciful and leave your fate to the justicars!”

Stepping forward to meet the seeker, Samuel felt his knees grow weak as he approached her slowly. “And if I refuse?”

Seeker Lumis lifted her chin authoritatively as she squared her shoulders. “Then your life is forfeit.”

# CHAPTER 17



his really isn't a good time," Samuel quipped. "Do you think you can come back later? Perhaps tomorrow afternoon—"

"Silence," Lumis snapped as she took a step forward. As the soldiers grew tense, they began to reach for their weapons, hesitating only when the captain motioned for them to stand down with one hand. Even if he wanted to interfere, the seeker had jurisdiction here. "Do I look like I'm in the mood for clowning? You're lucky that it was not I who was tasked with your apprehension, murderer. I require only her."

"Now, hold on a minute!" Samuel felt the anger boiling up inside him with unexpected intensity.

"No!" The seeker's voice rose. "I'm not interested in anything you have to say, vile cretin! I don't care."

"Cretin?" Sullivan muttered behind Samuel. "Haven't heard that one in a while."

Samuel took a few steps closer to the seeker as he extended his will to the widows. One was to bring him his spear immediately, while the other two were to take up flanking positions around Lumis. Their ability to move as seemingly mundane spiders would ensure they were overlooked while he held the seeker's attention. "No, you listen to me. I didn't murder anyone."

"The families of your victims would disagree," Lumis sneered. "Your crimes have been well documented, and you will answer for them, believe me."

"Not if the justicars have anything to say about it," Samuel growled, doing his best to stand tall but finding that



the seeker was surprisingly as tall as him.

Lumis' grip on her sword tightened as her patience continued to unravel. "After what you did to their men, who could blame them? Turn yourself in, and you will receive a fair trial. Surrender Sister Brandt, and I shall even escort you as far as the church."

"So she can face the same treatment from your buddy Bishop Lyall?" Samuel scoffed. "I don't think so. I'd sooner throw her to the wolves than entrust her to you."

"Then you have made your choice," Seeker Lumis declared as she readied her weapon. "And I will do what I must."

"Pull back," Sullivan commanded his troops. They couldn't afford to get involved, but more importantly, he didn't want anyone caught in the crossfire.

Samuel's spear came flying through the air from over one of the nearby tents as two of the widows took their humanoid forms just behind the seeker, seizing each of her arms as they bound them in webbing. Then, holding the spear much like he would a rifle, Samuel took aim at the surprised seeker and let loose with a blast of cold. "Crydat!"

The spell's bright blue collided with the seeker's breastplate, parting around it like water before detonating around her and leaving her unharmed. Each of the widows holding her was covered with a thick layer of ice, causing the webbing to become brittle and weak. Lumis wrenched herself free from both, deftly bringing her blade around to carve deep wounds in the widows' torsos before advancing on Samuel.

"Oh, shit," Samuel gasped. The casual ease she moved with was astonishing, leaving two of his most powerful Outsiders with angry, glowing wounds. "Kastil."

How it had slipped his mind that she would be wielding the magic-nullifying material was beyond him. Perhaps his emotions had gotten the best of him in the moment, but even if he'd remained calm, he wouldn't have expected the armor to

be made of it as well. Fortunately, the seeker was not covered in it from head to toe. Lumis appeared to favor being lighter on her feet, eschewing the full plate the seekers were often known for.

As she closed the distance, Samuel aimed at her legs instead and focused on keeping the distance between them. “Kinast!” Samuel roared as the kinetic force of the spell was unleashed.

In a startlingly swift motion, the seeker swung her sword low, catching the spell in a parry and deflecting it back at him. He had a split second to process what had happened before the force collided with him, hurling him back through the air and crashing through a nearby tent.

“You think that seekers aren’t trained to contest with such trifles?” Lumis snorted.

Scrambling out of the tangle of the collapsed tent, Samuel’s mind began to work frantically for an alternative plan of attack. “Fang,” he said simply as he lifted the tent’s canvas with the tip of his spear and cast another kinetic thrust. As the canvas flew outward at the seeker, obscuring her view, the third widow lying in wait emerged from her hiding place to drive the heel of her foot into the seeker’s skull.

Lumis stumbled to one side but managed to keep her footing, moving to avoid Fang’s follow-up attack and parrying yet another. The spider succubus was the most skilled of the three in physical combat, with claw-like nails that added savagery to her assault. If she managed to get in close enough, her bite would be just as deadly. Lumis seemed aware of this, choosing her movements carefully as the tall, slender succubus pressed the attack.

As Samuel rushed to conjure Hecate, Lumis allowed a powerful kick to find its mark on her chest. Even the force of Fang’s strike was negated by the kastil breastplate, much to the widow’s surprise. Capitalizing on the moment, the seeker brutally drove the hilt of her sword down into Fang’s knee. The succubus cried in agony as her leg broke under the power

of the strike, followed by a second cry of pain as Lumis drove the blade through her shoulder with ruthless efficiency.

Flames and smoke exploded around Samuel as he stared in astonished horror at the quick work the seeker had made of Fang, who desperately tried to distance herself by crawling along the ground. Hecate burst into existence, throwing herself at Lumis with her typical recklessness, sparing the widow from a killing blow and allowing her the chance to hide. Like Fang, Hecate's focus was often on hand-to-hand combat, which would not serve her well in a fight against the seeker. Instead, Samuel had to push the hellhound succubus toward a different tactic.

Samuel wrenched the cap from the tip of his spear free and began drawing a simple array in the dirt. Remotely activating a rune in conjunction with Hecate's caused the fire the succubus was wreathed in to suddenly intensify and turn blue. Without full-body protection, there was only so much the seeker would be protected from the heat radiating from Hecate.

Lumis was forced onto the defense now, but Samuel knew it didn't make her less deadly. On the contrary, she could bait and lure her enemy into critical errors that would cost them. Closing his eyes briefly, he focused on the link between himself and Hecate, instructing her not to over-commit. The seeker would feign weakness and present false opportunities, all of which were traps. As the two shifted and moved through the camp, tents began to catch fire, and thick smoke filled the air. Samuel continued to scrawl in the dirt, expanding the array as quickly as possible to offer Hecate additional assistance. But before he could complete it, he felt intense pain from Hecate through the link they shared.

Through the smoke, Samuel caught a glimpse of the hellhound succubus staring in horror at one of her arms that had been frozen completely solid, extinguishing its flames in the process. Samuel realized only then that of all the summons he had, Hecate had likely been the worst choice. The seeker

had been sent to track down and detain a Flame Sculptor and had come prepared to deal with fire.

“Fuck!” Samuel spat as Lumis slammed the back of her gauntlet into Hecate’s face, knocking her and the block of ice that was her arm to the ground. It had been mere minutes, and the seeker had chewed through nearly every bound summon Samuel had. All except for Snowball. No, Samuel told himself. He couldn’t subject Snowball to this, not after the beating she had taken in the fight against Ylvesnia. It wouldn’t be right. But what other option did he have?

With a gesture, Samuel dismissed Hecate back to whence she came, sparing her a grisly death at the hands of the seeker. Lumis turned to face Samuel again as flames and smoke began to billow and swirl from tents on either side of her.

“Is this what you wanted?” Samuel shouted. “These people barely managed an attack from Mystuval. This is all they have left, and you’ve taken it from them!”

Lumis shook her head as she stalked toward him through the destruction. “This is the consequence of your actions, Summoner. I gave you a choice, and this is what you chose.”

Bringing the spear up, Samuel let another kinetic thrust loose. “Kinast!” Instead of targeting her directly, Samuel caught the burning debris of the camp’s tents, tables, and other assorted clutter and hurled it at her. Bringing her sword up to intercept it reflexively, Lumis realized too late that it wouldn’t be enough. Showered with hot debris and heavy clutter, the seeker was bowled backward through the dirt.

In a fit of rage, Samuel sprinted toward the seeker, propelling himself through the air with a jumping spell to drive the spear down at her. But, even in her brief moment of disorientation, the seeker knocked the weapon to one side, causing the deadly tip of the weapon to sink into the ground next to her.

“Ru!” Samuel spat, tapping the rune he had carved into the shaft of the weapon. The ground next to the seeker’s face

violently erupted under the power of the intensified ruin spell, throwing dirt and gravel in every direction at incredible speed.

“Agh!” Thin lines of crimson were torn out of the side of Lumis’s face and neck as she tried to roll away and shield herself from the worst of it. The small oblong crater she found herself in with Samuel made it impossible to get far.

“They killed Elantrica!” Samuel roared angrily, his legs on fire with the pain from the debris he’d caught from his own spell. “She wouldn’t give me to them. She died protecting me, then they had the audacity to pin her death on me! She was going to be my teacher!”

As Samuel brought the spear back up, Lumis’s boot shot out to kick his leg out from under him. Samuel managed to catch himself from falling with the spear as she swung her blade. Instead of taking his head off, the tip skimmed across his cheek, leaving a shallow but painful cut behind. Even in a wounded state, Lumis was too dangerous for him to be so close to.

Pushing off the ground with the implement, Samuel leaped backward and out of the crater by a dozen feet with magical assistance. Getting close to her had answered one question, though. The seeker hadn’t worked the ice magic herself—she had runes engraved in her gauntlets that allowed her limited magical effects when they were needed. As she matched his leap out of the crater to pursue, he realized there was probably some present in her boots as well.

“Crydat!” Samuel hissed, aiming quickly at the spot he had projected her landing to be. A thick layer of ice spread across the ground just before she made contact, causing her to slip and fall on her face, splitting her lip and busting her nose open due to the momentum behind her.

Seething with frustration, the seeker pushed herself up to her hands and knees. Samuel furrowed his brow, feeling a spark of something emanating from her as she did. It felt similar to lust, but it was different somehow. Ylvesnia had explained that her focus on passion granted her a secondary

connection to things like fire and lust. Was the same true for lust and wrath? Or was bloodlust more similar to lust than anyone knew? Either way, it was a question for later that had provided him with an idea.

If he could sense that sort of thing in her, faint as it was, it meant that it was something that could be reached through the protection of her armor. Whether or not he had the power to do so seemed doubtful, but it was a start. Standard combat spells were not going to best the seeker, and the more time Samuel spent trying to cleverly employ them, the more energy he wasted. Lumis was in much better physical condition than he was and would undoubtedly outlast him in a fight. The seeker carved a deep line in the patch of ice with her sword, dispelling the effect entirely, only punctuating the point for Samuel.

Making it fairly obvious what spell he was going to cast, Samuel leveled the spear with her as he intoned the word “Kinast,” prompting a swift parry from the seeker. At this range and angle, the spell did not simply rebound on him as it had previously. This time, Samuel was hurled into the air in a long arc across the tops of the tents. He’d misjudged the angle slightly but still landed atop the medical tent as intended, which supported his weight easily as he rolled off it to the grass on the other side. Quickly, he lifted the flap of the tent and rolled inside.

The tent was mostly vacant, with most of the patients having been discharged already or moved for evacuation. All that was left was a confused nurse staring toward the commotion he had just been hurled from.

“Psst!” Samuel whispered from his spot, hunkered behind one of the cots, getting the nurse’s attention. “You need to get out of here.”

Though the nurse hesitated, Samuel managed to coax her out with a few dramatic waves of his hand. Once she was gone, he flipped the cot and drew a circle in the dirt with his spear. He needed to be sure that the summoning would be

lasting and powerful—anything short of either would not be effective against someone like Seeker Lumis. Outside he could hear her calling out to him, demanding he show himself as she drew nearer. She couldn't know precisely where he was, but it wouldn't be difficult to extrapolate his position from when she'd last seen him.

“There's no point in this fight,” Lumis called from outside the tent. “There's nothing a Summoner of your level can do that I haven't seen before and can counter.”

“Doubt that,” Samuel muttered to himself as he rapidly filled out the nodes of the circle. He only had a few physical components available to him in the pouches and pockets of his clothing, with the rest being woefully out of reach in the pack he'd left with his tent.

As the tip of his spear scraped through the dirt, making the final adjustments, the seeker turned in his direction and threw open the flap to confront him. “Cowering? Rather unexpected of you.”

“With all due respect, lady,” Samuel scoffed as he pressed the spear to the edge of the array, infusing it with as much power as he could muster. “You don't know the first thing about me.”

The whole tent billowed out as a strong wind rose from within it. Cots and equipment were cast aside as a colorful storm of feathers whirled into existence from the circle. A long, luscious leg extended from the storm of color, followed by another as the succubus emerged. Samuel had summoned this succubus once before when Aurora had tested his techniques to determine if succubi were the only thing he could conjure. She was taller than any of the other succubi, with striking plumage, wide observant eyes, and powerful talons. But more importantly, Samuel remembered how the aura of lust she had been wrapped in had been too much even for him to shut out.

Nadirah, his newest succubus, ran her taloned fingers through her feathery hair. “Mmm, I wondered if we'd ever

meet again. You've chosen well to call on me." Her hand moved from her head down her chest, joined by the other, before pressing her huge, heavy breasts together in a breathtakingly lewd display.

The seeker's brows furrowed in confusion. Samuel realized that none of the other succubi he had called to battle with her had spoken, yet Nadirah was particularly articulate. The succubus took in her surroundings quickly before her gaze settled upon the seeker, "My, my, isn't she a strong one. I should like to see more of such an impressive physique."

Samuel felt the surge of power woven into the words as she spoke them. It felt a thousand times hotter in the tent than it had amid the flames of the camp outside as Nadirah rolled her shoulders and motioned briefly to the seeker. "Take off that armor, dear, and show me what a good girl you can be."

The seeker's hand quivered as she struggled to keep a firm grip on her sword. Blushing deeply, she could not avert her eyes from the creature beckoning her. "I—alright," she stammered.

"This," Nadirah explained with a motion to herself. "Is your lucky day, seeker, show me what you've got."

"Don't, uh, show *everything* you've got," Samuel muttered. He couldn't believe how much more effective weaving new runes into the summoning array had been. His studies of lustful magic had more than paid off in spades. As powerful as Nadirah had been the first time he had summoned her, she was even more so this time. She practically radiated sexual domination without having to say or do anything, but the longer someone remained in her presence, the harder she became to resist.

"I'm not..." Lumis murmured weakly as the sword slipped from her hand. The clatter of the weapon did nothing to jar her from her state of fascination as her hands moved of their own accord to undo the straps that held her armor on. "Why do I feel so hot?"



Struggling to keep herself under control, Lumis hesitated before stepping forward to approach the towering succubus. Nadirah smiled wickedly as she continued to beckon the seeker. “That’s it, my dear. Come to me.”

Lumis grabbed the bottom of her shirt and pulled it up over her head, revealing a tight-fitting binding around her chest. Her breasts, though not particularly large for her size, looked stunningly shapely under the tight garment. Nadirah glanced briefly back at Samuel before stepping forward, cradling the seeker’s hand in her talons. “More.”

“Y-yes,” Lumis stammered as she pulled her gauntlets off and scrambled out of her trousers. “O-of course.”

Confident that Lumis would not be breaking free of the hold that Nadirah had on her, Samuel finally approached. He was tempted to slide the spear in between her ribs and take her out of the picture, but doing so would only make him out to be the kind of fiend that the church had claimed. Instead, Samuel closed his eyes as he placed a hand on her chest, between her breasts. She shuddered at his touch as her breath hitched. Her heart beat faster as Samuel extended his will slowly inside her. He needed to know—

“Samuel?” Aurora inquired, breaking his concentration as she entered the tent. “What the hell is going on?!”

Opening his eyes slowly, he glanced over at Aurora. “Her armor was made of kastil.”

To anyone else, that might not have been enough. But Aurora had been with Samuel long enough and was smart enough to know precisely what he was getting at. She struggled not to look amused. “So you had her take it off?”

“She didn’t give me a choice,” Samuel chuckled, taking his hand back slowly and glancing at Nadirah. “I think she’s done now.”

With a flick of her feathered wrist, Nadirah released the seeker from her spell. Lumis blinked several times as if emerging from a dark hole into broad daylight. Then, suddenly

realizing her state of undress and what had just happened, the seeker struggled to cover her undergarments while reaching for her sword.

“Don’t you dare,” Aurora snapped, pointing an accusatory finger at the seeker. “The fight is over, Joceline!”

Using her first name seemed to get the seeker’s attention long enough for Samuel to kick her sword out of reach, gather up her armor, and offer it back to her. She struggled through a range of emotions she wasn’t sure how to process.

“He could have killed you just now,” Aurora clarified. “I could have too, but we didn’t. Does that seem like the actions of a murderer to you?”

“He turned you from your faith,” Lumis protested. “He corrupted you with his magic.”

Aurora shook her head, “No, Joceline. Lyall turned me from the church but not from my faith. He sent me to murder Samuel, to poison him. If Samuel was evil and could hold people under his spell like he just did, why would he free you? He could have let this creature have its way with you or taken you for himself. But here we are talking.”

Calmer than she had been before, the seeker began to go over this new information. “The bishop asked you to kill him?”

Aurora nodded. “Not turn him over to the authorities or bring him to justice, just to kill him. To do so in secret. The Massacre at Runerock was framed in such a way as to make him seem deserving of this fate, but it was the Justicars that provoked it. They attacked him and High Summoner Elantrica. They killed her, not him.”

Joceline looked unconvinced as she gathered her clothing, holding it close in a futile effort to retain a sense of modesty. “Why would I believe you?”

Aurora pursed her lips as she considered the question. “I think you already do.”

Joceline's eyes darted between them quickly before finally sighing. "You've spared my life, which says a lot. In exchange, I shall hear you out. But I make no promises."

Samuel wiped his brow. "*Finally*. That's all that we want."

Joceline stole a glance at the colorful succubus before averting her gaze, blushing again. Nadirah smirked smugly, knowing the effect she still had on the seeker.

"Would it be alright if I got dressed first?" Joceline asked in a raspy whisper.

## CHAPTER 18



ch!” Joceline hissed painfully, wincing as Aurora dabbed  
“**T**at the shallow wounds that peppered her face. “Can’t you  
just use a healing spell or something?”

Aurora frowned a little, not taking her eyes off her work. “I could, and I will, but first, I don’t want it to get infected.”

“You don’t have a spell to deal with infection?” Joceline asked incredulously. “What kind of—”

Aurora jabbed one of the small wounds with an alcohol swab more roughly than was needed, cutting the seeker off from finishing her criticism of the woman’s methods.

“You’re lucky to be getting anything at all,” Sullivan growled from one of the cots. He wasn’t injured, but after the rough day he’d managed to have all before noon, the man had earned a break. Sitting with his elbows on his knees, he looked to be carrying a tremendous load that only grew with time. “After the shit you just pulled, I ought to have you thrown in the brig. You’re lucky no one was injured besides you and Eamon.”

“You don’t have the authority to—” Joceline was once again cut off by a painful jab of one of her wounds.

“You can take your phony authority and shove it up your ass, seeker!” Sullivan spat. “These are my men, and you endangered all their lives with your petty bullshit.”

“I’m on official church business!” Joceline argued, gently pushing Aurora’s hand away to prevent her from being cut off again. “You should have assisted in taking them into custody.”

“I don’t work for the church or recognize its authority,” Sullivan replied, sitting up straighter. “And you ought to reconsider it too if this is what they’re sending people out to do. We have women and children in this camp, seeker!”

Finally, Joceline relented, the final vestiges of her imperious demeanor vanishing into the wind at the mention of innocent people. “You’re right. I didn’t know the severity of the situation here, but that’s no excuse. I will make amends.”

“Make amends, she says,” the captain grumbled, finally removing his helmet to set it beside him as he unscrewed the top of his canteen.

Samuel opened his eyes from the chair he’d been leaning back into and sat up. “Making amends is a good start, but how do you intend to do that?”

“Well, after what you’ve told me,” Joceline huffed. “I cannot in good conscience return to Lyall’s service.”

“So you believe us?” Samuel asked curiously, surprised that she had come around so quickly.

The seeker nodded as Aurora returned to treating the wounds on her face and neck. Samuel hadn’t thought them very serious during the fight, but the debris he’d scattered with the ruin spell had peppered them both at a much higher speed than he’d realized. The pain in Samuel’s legs was so intense he was finding it difficult to stand.

Joceline nodded. “Some of the details seem peculiar to me, but for the most part, I do. I knew the High Summoner personally, and everything you’ve said about your conversation with her is consistent. Under different circumstances, you and I may have become friends.”

Samuel smiled gently. “It’s not too late for that, now that everyone’s tempers have cooled.”

“Question remains though,” Ylvesnia pressed from over Samuel’s shoulder, her arms crossed over her chest. “What do ye intend to do?”

Joceline thought about it quietly but seemed to be at a loss for a satisfactory answer. "I'm not sure. I think I will help the people here first. You said you wanted to bring them to Mirfield?"

"Yeah," Samuel confirmed. "There's plenty of space there, and the High Summoner there is sympathetic to our situation. He'll have no problem getting everyone settled while the long-term plan is hammered out."

"I want you to go back," Aurora said abruptly, her focus moving to the seeker's neck specifically. "As if nothing has changed."

Joceline raised an apprehensive brow. "Excuse me?"

"We need someone inside telling us what's happening," Aurora explained. "Staying hidden isn't an option anymore. If we weren't at war, maybe it would be possible to vanish into the country indefinitely, but circumstances won't allow for it now."

Samuel nodded in agreement. "She's right. Knowledge is power, and we're desperately short on information."

"If you found us," Ylvesnia added. "Then the Justicars will not be far behind."

"Justicars shouldn't be involved at all," Sullivan scoffed. "Kid didn't even have time to accept a military commission. So they don't have a say."

"Ideally, that would be true," Joceline admitted. "But in recent years, I have noticed the Justicars taking certain liberties with their position and authority. I had assumed such policies had been adopted with the threat of war on our doorstep, but now..."

"How likely is it that they will be slowed down now that Mystuval has attacked?" Samuel asked.

Joceline shrugged her shoulders. "Difficult to say. I would assume the king would have everyone working on the

matter immediately, but it seems dangerous to make such assumptions now.”

“There’s no tellin’ what they might do with such a distraction available to them,” Ylvesnia scoffed.

“Well, that settles it,” Samuel concluded as he got to his feet, wincing as pain shot through both his legs. “We should get moving immediately.”

Sullivan looked up and nodded, “We’re almost ready to go. Once we’re out of here, they’ll pack all the medical stuff and load it into a truck.”

“You have trucks?” Samuel looked at the captain in surprise. “I haven’t seen any.”

“Only a few. I’d ordered all of them in for tune-ups the day after the monsters hit us,” Sullivan explained, getting to his feet as well. “Couple compact four-by-fours as well.”

“What does that mean?” Ylvesnia wondered, her face scrunched up. “Four of what?”

Sullivan chuckled, “I don’t know, they’re new. It’s just what they call them. But they handle the rougher terrain very well. Quick too.”

“That should help get things moving,” Aurora remarked, motioning to Samuel to come over to her. She’d already treated his legs, but there wasn’t anything she could do for the pain at that moment. Without the injuries being life-threatening, she was saving her energy for healing the wounded succubi. It was a controversial decision with those who weren’t Summoners, but the three present all understood the value of caring for their bound Outsiders. “How do they feel?”

“Like they’re on fire,” Samuel laughed. “But I should be alright to travel.”

“What was that succubus ye summoned?” Ylvesnia asked as they filed out of the tent. “Was it new?”

Aurora snorted a little, “Not quite. He’s summoned it before but hadn’t bound it.”

Ylvesnia placed a hand on Samuel’s arm. “Is this true? Ye recalled an unbound outsider?”

“Yes...?” Samuel answered hesitantly. “Is that a problem? I know it’s not typically possible, but I figure many things fall into that category until you achieve a certain level of mastery, right?”

“No,” Ylvesnia replied pointedly. “It’s not that kind of impossible. What ye’re talkin’ about is improbable or very rare. Outside of a handful of documented accidents, I have never heard of someone recallin’ an unbound summon on purpose.”

“It is not done,” Joceline added as she emerged from the tent, her face looking much worse in the sunlight. “All research I’ve seen indicates that the more one tries to do so, the more errors occur within the summoning.”

Samuel looked between the seeker and his tutor as he considered the possibility that they were messing with him. Neither of them wore expressions to indicate that this was a joke. “Alright, so what does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” Ylvesnia admitted. “But it would seem to be related to yer connection to Eros.”

Samuel motioned to the elf with one hand. “You have the same connection, though.”

“That doesn’t appear to be the case,” the elf remarked, her gaze growing distant as she tried to think of what she was missing.

“She seemed more powerful than last time,” Aurora noted to Samuel as the group walked back to where they had left their things.

“You didn’t seem so impressed by her before,” Samuel laughed. Aurora rolled her eyes as her cheeks flushed a little pink.



Ylvesnia pursed her lips before leaning closer. “Ye were there when he summoned her the first time?”

“She was testing my abilities when she was first assigned as my escort up north,” Samuel answered. “Everything I summoned after Snowball was a succubus. Nadirah was one of the succubi from then.”

“Fascinatin’,” Ylvesnia remarked. Though it clearly meant something to the elf judging by her expression, she seemed content to keep it to herself.

Gathering their things and fetching their varo, the trio joined the convoy heading toward Mirfield. Shortly after they set out, Joceline rode up beside them on a varo of her own. Aurora frowned as the seeker approached, uncomfortable with the idea of yet another woman accompanying them on the road. “I think you’re going the wrong way.”

“No,” Joceline answered, seemingly oblivious to the brusque tone Aurora had taken with her. “If I accompany you to Mirfield, I can then take the train to return much faster.”

“O-oh,” Aurora murmured. “Right, of course.”

Traveling with the convoy on the road and without fear of a seeker tracking them down made the trip back to Mirfield much faster than Samuel expected. It also meant that much more time was available for him and Aurora to study under Ylvesnia’s supervision. Though he inquired about his recalling of Nadirah, Ylvesnia insisted that she would need more time before coming to any conclusions. So instead, he set his mind to improving the arrays of his current summons and putting work into a few more.

“You don’t think you have enough already?” Aurora asked him from behind a book of her own during one of their breaks.

“It’s not quantity I’m worried about,” Samuel said as he sketched the array in his journal. “Battling Joceline put a few things into perspective, namely that the selection I have available to me lacks diversity and utility.”

Aurora shrugged as she turned the page. “I don’t know about that.”

“If I have to go up against Justicars any time soon, and they have even just a little information on my bound Outsiders, that alone would be enough to justify rotating a few more into the roster,” Samuel explained. Aurora looked up at him, considering his point before setting aside her book and taking up her journal. “What are you doing?”

“Working on a few of my own,” Aurora answered with a smirk. “I don’t want my man taking on any more life-and-death battles like that alone.”

Samuel had worked out a couple more Outsiders he wanted to try. First, he wanted something aligned with ice to complement Hecate. Second, he wanted to attempt another recall of another previous summoning that he had performed with Aurora. The water succubus he had called at the time currently felt redundant with the ice succubus he intended to call, so he decided that the white rose succubus would be the better choice. Once their arrays were sketched out, there was nothing left to do until they reached Mirfield, where he could acquire the materials he needed to ensure the summonings were performed perfectly.

“That looks like one of my runes,” Joceline observed from behind Samuel by the campfire one evening. Samuel reflexively pulled the journal closer to his chest, glaring up at the seeker. She showed her palms in apology, “Forgive me. It just jumped out at me.”

Turning her gauntlet, she showed him the rune she spoke of. “It’s very familiar to me, but I would not expect many others to know it.”

Samuel glanced at the rune, then took note of the others she had inscribed there as well. Now that he had the chance to examine them up close, he knew where he had seen them before. Joceline offered him a ghost of a smile. “Did she teach them to you?”

“Uh, no.” Samuel shook his head a little sadly. “She didn’t have the chance to, unfortunately. But I remember seeing her work. She and I both shared an interest in dwarven runes, it seems.”

“Shame,” Joceline sighed. “I think there would have been much you could have learned from her.”

Samuel nodded, pulling the book away from his chest to look down at the array he had sketched on the page. “Someday, I hope to go back to Runerock and go through her research. That way, maybe I can carry forward a little of her legacy.”

“She would like that,” Joceline agreed, gently placing a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll ensure they are kept safely in storage until then.”

Samuel threw himself back into his work to distance his thoughts from the late High Summoner. Somehow, knowing another person who had known her in life for some time made it both easier and harder to think about her. He knew in his head that her death was not his fault, but his heart seemed unwilling to absolve him.

They were given a warm welcome upon their arrival in Mirfield, though there was a great deal of concern about the town about whether they would be hit as well. The town wasn’t far enough from the border to write the possibility off entirely, but Ketan assured them that they would not be caught by surprise.

“Things are a little different now,” the older elf said as Samuel unhitched the varo and turned them over to the stablehand. “Now that we know to keep an eye out, they won’t get close enough to take us unaware. Not here.”

“Any word on the Justicars, by chance?” Samuel asked as he stretched his legs. Aurora had healed him and Joceline up that morning, but his skin still felt strangely tight.

“No, but I don’t suspect there will be,” Ketan admitted. “They’re not the types to go door-to-door asking for

information from locals. Though, investigations will be speeding up now that you've shed your disguises."

"True enough," Aurora agreed with a hint of dread in her voice.

Parting ways with Valentina, Aurora approached the two of them, relieving Samuel of some items to bring inside. Ketan glanced toward the small group in religious garb before turning his attention back to her. "Who're they?"

"It's sort of a long story," Aurora answered. "Maybe over some tea?"

"You read my mind," the elf said as he escorted Aurora inside. Samuel remained behind briefly to speak with the seeker before she departed.

"You don't want to stay a bit longer?" Samuel inquired.

Joceline shook her head as she secured some fresh supplies to her varo. "No, it would be suspicious. I am not good at deception as it is, so I must reduce the amount of time I'm forced to account for."

"Alright," Samuel acknowledged. "So when you have something to report, what can I expect? Do you have some sort of cipher I'll need for encryption?"

"Nothing so crude," Joceline laughed as she reached into one of her saddlebags. Then, flipping a small, metallic disk with her thumb to him, she explained. "All you need to do is place this in shallow water, and a connection will be established between it and the one I carry. We will be able to speak with one another that way."

"Incredible," Samuel remarked as he turned the disk over between his fingers. Despite being only a little larger than a standard coin, the small etchings on its surface were incredibly detailed. No doubt it was more of High Summoner Elantrica's work. "Sort of like the radios people have started using?"

"But with fewer wires and not as bulky," Joceline agreed. "When I try to reach you, the central rune will glow, but I

won't be able to speak to you unless it's placed in water."

Samuel nodded his acknowledgment as he continued to study the runes. "You just carry something like this around with you all the time to hand out like this?"

"No," Joceline admitted in a flat tone. "Ilmora left hers behind when we grew apart. I'd no intention of parting with it now that she's gone, but I feel as though you're precisely the person to have it."

Samuel looked up at Joceline, who had grown stone-faced as she mounted her varo. Then, tapping the disk apprehensively a couple of times before placing it in his pocket, Samuel offered her a smile. "Thank you. I didn't realize that you two had been close. It hadn't seemed like that before."

"There's a lot of history there, and perhaps another time, I will share the story with you," Joceline said with a brittle smile. "Take good care of it."

"I will," Samuel assured her. The seeker offered him a final wave and guided her varo back onto the road, where she continued toward the train station. Samuel watched her vanish around the bend before returning to the others as they settled in. The Mysterium would host them for a while until they could find other places to go but could not possibly house them all inside. There was too much sensitive material to allow people regular contact with for safety reasons. But those they could accommodate, and were most in need of it, were given spare rooms upstairs. The rest set their tents outside on the property.

When he finally returned inside, all he could think about was getting his boots off and crawling into a warm bed beside Aurora. But the sound of her crying as she ran up the stairs pulled him from his brief daydream. It was the first time he'd heard her sob so pained and so openly. Ketan stood at the bottom of the stairs, calling after her but to no avail.

“What the hell happened?” Samuel pleaded, unable to conceal his concern for his not-wife.

Ketan looked at Samuel, confused and uncertain, as he held up a newspaper in one hand. “I don’t know. She took a look at this and burst into tears.”

Resisting the urge to snatch the paper from the High Summoner, Samuel took it calmly to examine. It only took him a moment to find the black-and-white image of a young, bloodied female Summoner. The image had been captured as the woman had defended the city of Prylyn against Mystuvalan forces. Her efforts had been credited for saving the lives of hundreds of people, both soldiers and civilians, as they retreated.

“What is it?” Ketan asked, glancing at the image on the paper. “Do you know her?”

“Yeah,” Samuel croaked, his eyes scanning the text of the main article. “We both do.”

“Who is she?” Ketan inquired, squinting to read the text of the article. “I haven’t had a chance to read it yet.”

“A friend from the academy. Second Lieutenant Summoner Nadine Carpenter,” Samuel murmured, his voice beginning to break. “Killed in action.”

## CHAPTER 19



Samuel approached the door to their room with a great deal of trepidation. Though he had every right to simply open it up and step inside, he had decided to knock first. But he stopped short as he neared the door and heard the muffled sound of Aurora's sobs. He rested his head on the wood door, listening to the woman who had played the part of his wife for the better part of a year. Nadine had been her friend too, and she had often spoken about how much she wanted to go help her when they could clear their names. Now it would never happen.

Samuel recalled the last time they had seen Nadine. She had been riding on the back of a truck to her new post when she spotted them on the road. Her performance in school had earned her an impressive commission, and she was excited to begin work. She had also been quite pleased to see them together and getting along. It had surprised her initially, but Samuel and Aurora spent so many years butting heads in school, who could blame her? Still, she had been optimistic and happy. The memory of the warm smile on her face made Samuel's blood run cold.

Now the last image of her presence in the world would be the picture in the paper. It was impressive and admirable in its own way, considering the photographer had captured her in the midst of defending the lives of the people. She had always been a gifted Summoner, but reports spoke of how she had pulled out all the stops and pushed well past her limits in order to buy time for the fleeing civilians.

Samuel would have preferred to see her alive again over a blurry, black and white depiction of heroism any day. He raised his hand and knocked gently on the door. Inside, Aurora

scrambled to collect herself and steady her voice before answering. “Who is it?”

“It’s just me,” Samuel said into the door, making no move to open it until she permitted him. A silence hung in the air for some time before she finally decided to do so.

“Come in,” she sniffled. Samuel pushed the door open and realized immediately that her hesitation had not been because she didn’t want him to see her sobbing. It had been because she didn’t want him to see what she had done to her room in her furious despair. Things had been thrown around the room, smashed, and strewn about. Nothing of any real value looked damaged, but the mess was considerable.

Samuel pressed his lips together in a thin line, biting back any comment that might try to slip free. The situation didn’t call for jokes, nor did he have any desire to scold her about the mess. Instead, he picked his way across the room through the mess and sat beside her on the floor at the foot of the bed. She held crumpled tissue in both hands and stared into the middle distance at something past the wall.

The pair sat in silence for several minutes, not speaking a word to one another. Aurora simply sat in silence while Samuel remained patient for her to speak when she was ready.

“I can’t believe she’s gone,” the blonde finally muttered, choking back more sobs. “If I thought I would never see her again, I would’ve—.”

Samuel reached out and took one of her hands, giving it a gentle squeeze, hoping he could ground her. She had every right to be with her grief, but he didn’t want to risk her becoming lost in it. He didn’t know much about dealing with such emotional pain, but that struck him as an unhealthy way to go about it. He, too, would have to come to terms with his grief, but he was unwilling to abandon Aurora to do so.

Aurora glanced down at his hand before looking up at him. He offered her a weak smile and another gentle squeeze.



“Sorry about the mess,” she whispered, glancing around the room briefly. “I just lost it. I couldn’t stop myself. I’ll clean it up in a minute.”

“I’ll help,” Samuel responded, his smile growing slightly more brittle as he struggled to hold back his sorrow.

“You don’t have to,” Aurora said, shaking her head. “It’s my mess, and I should clean it up.”

“It’s alright,” he reassured her. “I don’t have anything else going on right now.”

Aurora snorted a short laugh before covering her nose with the tissue again and wiping away anything that might have come out. “It’s so stupid. Why would Mystuval do something like this? Why did Nadine even join the military? She could have gotten a job anywhere else without being right on the front line. And is Balun okay?! He was with her!”

“I don’t know,” Samuel answered. The response was appropriate to all the questions she had just asked. “She did what she felt she had to. You know how she was. Even if we were right there, there would have been no talking her out of it once her mind was made up.”

“Yeah,” Aurora agreed, tossing the used tissue into a small wastebasket. “Stubborn bitch.”

Samuel chuckled as he got to his feet and offered a hand to Aurora. “Yeah, she certainly could be. Of course, she was your friend.”

Aurora smacked him in the chest with a snort. “What’s that supposed to mean, dickhead?”

“Dickhead?” Samuel scoffed. “What are you, twelve?”

Aurora pouted as she shot him a glare. “I’m feeling nostalgic, alright? Maybe I should start bullying you again, too, hm?”

“You could try,” Samuel admitted. “But I don’t think it’ll go the same way as it did back then. I might like it.”

“Pervert,” Aurora grunted as she bent over at the waist to pick things up. It offered Samuel an excellent view of her backside, despite his mood souring any inclination he might have for anything sexual at the time. There was a certain comfort in hearing her spar with him like that, strangely enough. It felt like the fire in her had not gone out, and there was something hopeful about that fact.

They said little to each other as they tidied up the chaos of the room. When they did speak, it was directly related to the task at hand. It was hard not to think about Nadine, but Samuel kept finding his thoughts moving in that direction each time there was a lull in the activity. He remembered when he and Aurora had first set out on their journey to Eldruna, and Aurora had referred to her friend as a slut. He had to imagine that every similar memory Aurora had of saying something like that about Nadine was nagging at her now.

Samuel had been involved with Nadine once, not in a serious way, but in a youthful exploratory way. He had been tutoring her for a while, and some studying sessions went awry. He remembered vividly how her curls had captured the light of the fire, how her perky breasts splayed out delicately as she laid back against the pillow on the floor in their makeshift study nest. Every part of her had been so soft, but her breasts stood out in his memory due to their unexpected size and sensitivity.

A knock at the door pulled Samuel from his thoughts, causing a wave of guilt to wash over him briefly. The woman had been killed in action, and here he was, recalling the last sexual encounter he’d had with her. Would she have been insulted to know that was how he thought of her? He doubted it, considering her optimistic and forgiving demeanor. She had also been a passionate and caring person, not entirely unlike Aurora, albeit in a different way.

“Who is it?” Samuel asked, realizing Aurora wasn’t in the mood to speak to anyone else.

“It’s me,” Ketan said from the other side of the door. “Just got word from Vincent Malta. He wants to have a word with you down at the store when you have the chance. It’s about the furosent.”

Samuel didn’t reply immediately. He had totally forgotten about the furosent. Indeed, many things had been pushed out of his mind upon seeing the news of Nadine’s death. Now it was starting to come back, all at once, leaving him briefly tongue-tied.

“Thank you,” Aurora replied for him, seeing him frozen in place and at a loss for words. “He’ll be down in just a moment.”

“Alright,” Ketan responded before stepping away from the door and returning to whatever he’d been doing.

Samuel’s gaze shifted to meet Aurora’s. “I’m sure it can wait for a little bit.”

“No,” Aurora objected. “You should go. I’ll finish up here. I appreciate you coming to comfort me, but I have no intention of keeping you here to hold my hand like a child. I’ll be alright.”

Samuel stared at her silently, unsure about leaving her in this state. She spoke confidently enough, but he knew her as the type to bottle feelings up or hide them away so as not to burden others with them. “You’re sure? I don’t want to leave you twisting in the wind. You’re important to me.”

“It’s fine,” Aurora assured him. “Besides, we’re not pretending to be married anymore, so you don’t have to put yourself out.”

Samuel’s brows furrowed, taken entirely off guard by the comment. Did she think that she didn’t mean anything to him just because they didn’t have to maintain their cover? He supposed he hadn’t done a particularly good job of assuring her to the contrary. Frowning, he took a step forward to address the issue.

Aurora raised a hand to stop him, “Don’t. I didn’t mean that like it sounded. Not really. I just can’t have another thing hanging over us right now while I’m dealing with this, alright? We can talk about the other stuff later.”

Nodding, Samuel ceased his approach and let out a sigh. “Yeah, alright.”

He checked himself briefly in the mirror to be sure he was presentable and then excused himself from the room. Rushing down the hall and taking the stairs two at once, Samuel got the first varo in the stables to ride quickly into town. The less time he had to be away from Aurora, the better.

He made excellent time, arriving at the general store in a matter of minutes. Though it was early evening, Vincent had kept his lanterns lit in anticipation of Samuel’s arrival.

“So, Summoner Eamon, is it now?” Vincent said as he met Samuel at the door. “Lord Eamon? What am I to call you?”

“Samuel is fine,” he replied sheepishly. “Forgive me for not being honest with you before. It was imperative that I remain hidden at the time.”

“Mm, well, I suppose that all depends on if the rest of it was a lie too,” Vin mused, fiddling with his mustache as he regarded Samuel thoughtfully. “You still give a damn about all these folks out here?”

“Of course,” Samuel insisted. “I only had to hide my identity, not my values.”

“Good answer,” the man said, gesturing for Samuel to follow him to the back. “Deeds over words. The rest of it is immaterial.”

In the back of the store, the remains of the furosent had been cut up and preserved in jars. Billie sat at the table that had once held the creature’s carcass, having just finished cleaning it based on the bucket of soapy water and rags she had on hand. A drain in the floor caught everything that had dripped from its surface. The young woman looked much

more confident than the last time he had seen her. How she carried herself when she got to her feet and shook his hand was very different.

“Welcome back, Summoner,” Billie said with a slight verbal jab. It seemed that word of his deeds and his true identity had been spreading while they’d journeyed here and moved through the town like wildfire while he’d been at the guildhall.

“Thanks,” Samuel said with a frown, motioning to the table. “I thought this was about the furosent?”

“It is,” Vin said as he motioned to his daughter. The young woman turned, took a small jar off one of the shelves, and tossed it to Samuel. He caught it reflexively before looking down at it. Instead of containing a piece of the furosent’s body like many of the other jars, this one contained a strange strip of material with a seemingly random string of letters and numbers engraved in it.

“What’s this?” Samuel asked, turning it over a few times to see if there were any other details about it that he was somehow overlooking.

“It’s a tag,” Vincent replied gruffly. “We used them on all the furoSENTS that were bred and kept during the war. It corresponds to a record that holds all of the vital statistics of the creature. Things like how old it is, gender, how many times it’s been bred, how many missions it’s served, and what kind.”

Samuel nodded in understanding. “Alright, so it was bred in captivity, then?”

“Yeah,” Vincent replied shortly, exchanging glances with Billie.

“What?” Samuel pressed as he looked between them, confused. “We considered it a possibility that it came from Mystuval. We just didn’t know how.”

“It’s not from Mystuval,” Billie replied quietly.

Samuel's head tilted to one side as he looked between them. "So then, where did the tag come from?"

"During the war," Vincent explained, crossing his arms over his chest, "we maintained different systems for tagging between Mystuval and Terth to keep track of which assets were whose. Mystuval tags are ten characters long and only contain numbers. Terth tags are seven characters long and contain both letters and numbers."

Samuel glanced down at the jar again and the tag within. He didn't need to count the characters, considering the presence of the letters, but he did anyway. Seven characters long.

"They said seven characters that included letters and numbers were more secure than ten with just numbers," Vin continued. "But I think it was just to make it easier to identify as Terthish at a glance without having to go to the records."

"This tag is Terthish?" Samuel asked, knowing the question to be a stupid one. Vincent had just told him it was, but the man didn't get an attitude when he repeated himself.

"It is," he said flatly. "Only the small number of Terth-owned furosents we handled were all disposed of after the war."

"Disposed of," Samuel repeated. "They were killed?"

Vincent shook his head as he waved a hand, "Not all of them. Some were, but most were untagged and turned over to the Mystuvalans or set free."

"They were all untagged? You're sure?" Samuel's frown deepened.

"Yup." Vincent motioned to a spot behind his ear. "Easy to get at when you know where to look and keep them docile. Or if they're dead, of course."

"So then this furosent was ours. It was bred here," Samuel repeated in disbelief. He had been looking for answers this whole time, and it had been right under his nose. But why

would Terth want to breed such creatures? They knew what their abilities did and about the monster attacks that had been growing worse. What was the point of it? “Why?”

The old hunter shrugged his shoulders. “That, I don’t know. Having just a handful of these things running around is pretty fucking dangerous, though. If they saw fit to tag it, that tells me there’s much more to keep track of.”

“Is it possible that it simply escaped?” Samuel proposed, though the question was more about eliminating other explanations than anything else.

“Sure, it’s possible,” Vincent admitted as he ran his fingers over his mustache. “It’s also possible that I will inherit a fortune from a distant relative tomorrow, but it’s not probable. Nor is this.”

Billie took a step forward to get Samuel’s attention. “If it got out, it would mean two things. First, there was a breeding facility nearby for it to escape from, and Second, it got out, and absolutely no one has noticed or come looking for it.”

Something told Samuel that it was an unlikely scenario. A rare creature like this would have cost a small fortune to obtain, raise, and breed. If one had escaped from where it was being kept, for whatever imagined reason he could come up with, surely someone would have come looking for it. Indeed, he had to consider that there would have been effective ways of tracking down such a significant investment in just such an instance.

“So it’s Terthish, it’s from here, and it likely didn’t escape,” Samuel clarified aloud. The pair nodded silently in reply. The conclusion that could be drawn from these facts wasn’t clear, but the vague implication it presented was unsettling. “Is it alright if I hold onto this?”

“It’s all yours,” Vin motioned to the small container. “What are you planning to do with it?”

“I’m not sure,” Samuel admitted with a shrug, placing it carefully in a component pouch on his belt. “But there’s

something off about all of this, and I intend to look into it.”

“How the hell are you planning on doing that?” Billie laughed. “You’re kind of a wanted man right now. I don’t think you’ll be able to march up to a military archive and pull some records by asking nicely.”

Samuel smirked a little bit. “No, nothing like that. But it’s become obvious to me recently that I need to head back home and face everything head-on. The more I try to escape things, the more severe they become when they finally catch up to me.”

Vincent scratched his chin thoughtfully. “You sure that’s such a good idea? Justicars don’t fuck around.”

“No, it’s probably a terrible idea,” Samuel confessed. “But much of their power is built on the back of secrecy, so the more I try to hide, the more they can act against me with impunity. If I’m out in the open, their options become more limited.”

Billie waved her hands dramatically. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. They’ll drop you like a sack of potatoes no matter what.”

Samuel bounced his shoulders with a big shrug, a tacit admission that she might be right. “Possibly. But if it drags them into the light, it could be worth it. More importantly, if I can set things in motion to keep people safe back home, it *would* be worth it. There’s much more to consider than just preserving my own life. I have to take into account what I want to do with that life and what it will come to mean. More important things are at stake here, more lives besides my own.”

Billie stared at him in disbelief before letting out an incredulous scoff. She looked to her father, who didn’t seem moved one way or another. It was impossible to tell if he was in agreement with Samuel or if he had just resigned himself to the fact that his mind was made up. Either way, he didn’t object.



“This,” Samuel said, placing his hand over the pouch. “is incredibly dangerous stuff. As Duke, I’m confident my father can get to the bottom of it so long as I can get the evidence into his hands. That alone is worth going back for.”

Billie’s expression remained doubtful, but the desire to argue had left her. “Alright.”

“Anything we can do to help?” Vincent asked as he came away from the shelves on his side of the room. “Anything you need?”

“Just some supplies, if you don’t mind,” Samuel answered. “I’m going to get my people together, and we’re going to ride out at first light. If we ride hard, we should be able to make good time getting back.”

Vincent nodded as he extended a hand to Samuel. “Not a problem, Samuel. I’ll have them delivered before midnight. I wish you luck.”

Samuel said his goodbyes, knowing full well that it might be the last time he saw either of them again. He climbed onto the back of the varo he had borrowed and turned onto the road for the return trip. He didn’t rush the way he had when coming to town. He needed a little time to think. Reaching down to the pouch and pulling out the small jar with the tag in it, he turned it over several times as he pondered the meaning and implications. It didn’t make much sense to him, which meant he didn’t know where to begin explaining it to Aurora when he returned. But between this revelation, the recent death of their friend, and the attacks on the invasion from Mystuval, he had to do something. Anything, at this point, would be better than hiding. Even if it meant an end to his peaceful pastoral life with the woman he’d been calling his wife.

# CHAPTER 20



am familiar,” Snowball sniffed indignantly. “Not grunt.”

“I Aurora’s eyes moved from Samuel’s familiar to the Summoner himself, brows raised as she remained silent and neutral in their discussion. Snowball’s rabbit ears pressed down against the back of her head as she stamped her foot like a child.

“You should have summoned me for fight!” the succubus insisted, tossing some of Samuel and Aurora’s books onto the floor. Samuel had handed them to her to carry, but the irritable succubus was having none of it.

Samuel spread his hands in front of him in an attempt to calm his familiar down. “I had everything handled, alright? This isn’t the time to discuss it, nor is this the way to do it.”

“When!?” Snowball argued. “Hm? When is good time? Now as good as any time.”

Samuel wasn’t accustomed to this sort of behavior from his familiar, and it showed. He glanced at Aurora, his face contorted in a silent plea for help.

“Don’t look at me,” Aurora said dismissively, folding the rest of her clothes and placing them in her pack. “You’re the one who’s making all these decisions. I happen to agree with her.”

“What?” Samuel stared at her incredulously. “Why?”

Aurora sighed, stuffing a bundle of underwear into the pack before leveling her gaze on him. “Sammy, you are an incredibly gifted Summoner and very intelligent. Academically, I think you might end up being one of the

greatest that ever lived someday. But sometimes, when it comes to emotions, you can be dumber than a bag of bricks.”

The handsome Summoner rolled his eyes as he turned away from both of them, throwing his hands up in surrender. “Now I’m getting it from both of you!”

“What did you expect?” Aurora scoffed. “You come storming in, telling us to pack our shit so we can get on the road after you’ve moved the timetable up on everything without so much as floating the idea by me first. Then, after ignoring her for so long, you summon her up to help you pack!”

Aurora motioned to Snowball, who immediately squared her shoulders to look more dignified.

“She’s your familiar, and you’ve hardly said two words to her outside of telling her which of your shit to carry. What happened to the whole ‘Outsiders are people too’ Samuel from before?”

Samuel turned, glaring at her adept use of his own words against him. “I didn’t want her to get hurt. I was just trying to protect her, to keep her hidden!”

The blonde stood slowly from her spot on the bed. She understood the sentiment to a degree. Familiars were most often the ones that Summoners became the most fond of. Their connection was the deepest and most personal, their time spent together the longest, but he had swung to the opposite extreme on things without realizing it.

“Alright, I get that. But look at it from her point of view. She wants to protect you as well, except she cannot do that unless you ask her to. Hecate is the only one who can show up on a whim. If she’s not summoned, Snowball sits inactive on the sidelines while being aware of you getting your ass beat. How do you think she feels about that? She loves you, Sammy.”

“I didn’t get my ass beat,” Samuel objected. “I won that fight, if you recall.”

“Yes, with an entirely new summon on the spot instead of calling someone you’re supposed to be closely bonded to. Instead of your familiar. Tactically I’m sure it was a sound choice at the time, but I’m talking about her perspective. Her last battle didn’t go well, and then she’s stuck in timeout until you need someone to carry your stuff.” Aurora crossed her arms over her chest. “I’d feel like I was being punished too.”

“You punished me!” Snowball insisted. “Made me lonely.”

Samuel looked between the two of them. Outnumbered and outmatched, he finally relented. “Alright, alright,” he sighed. “I didn’t mean to make you feel that way. I honestly couldn’t bear the thought of throwing you into a dangerous situation so soon after the last one. It’s because I care about you—no other reason.”

“Rather foolish,” Ylvesnia commented, taking Aurora and Samuel both by surprise.

Aurora spun to look at the elf leaning against the wall near the door, her bag packed and sitting on the floor beside her. “How long have you been standing there?” Aurora exclaimed.

“Longer than ye think,” Ylvesnia replied dryly. “Ye were wrong to keep her out of things, Samuel. But not for why they say.”

Aurora’s lips pressed into a thin line, unsurprised that Ylvesnia would miraculously find a way to object to Samuel but not agree with her. “Why don’t you enlighten us.”

Ylvesnia came off of the wall and motioned to Snowball. “She’s a very powerful familiar, more so than ye realize. But she’s not goin’ to learn how to tap into that potential unless yer trainin’ her. Ye protectin’ her, her protectin’ ye.... Makes no difference if ye neglect yer trainin’ and studies.”

Aurora frowned as she offered a slight shrug. In this instance, she found herself in agreement with Ylvesnia after all. If Samuel wasn’t digging into the abilities of his bound

summons and just calling more as the situation required, it would come back to bite him sooner rather than later. “Alright, it’s a fair point.”

“Aw, come on,” Samuel groaned.

“No, Samuel,” Aurora pressed. “I’m serious. How do you expect to keep up with the needs of this many succubi when you haven’t mastered the relationship or power dynamics of your familiar? You can’t afford to keep dedicating days to orgies just to keep up with them all.”

Samuel sighed, resuming his packing without directly acknowledging her point, but she knew enough about him at this point to see that they’d gotten through to him. As Ylvesnia moved to speak further on the subject, Aurora signaled for her to stop with one hand. Drilling him further wouldn’t accomplish anything. They had planted the seed and given him something to think about. It was up to him to determine the course of action from here.

Besides, he had already said he was sorry and explained that nothing he’d done was out of malice or even doubt of Snowball’s abilities. It had been about his fears and reservations. It was all on the table now and just needed to air out.

“You finished packing?” Aurora asked the elf, changing the subject.

“I travel light,” Ylvesnia responded, nudging her pack with the back of her foot. “How about ye?”

“We’re almost done,” Aurora responded, motioning to their things. Though they had more to go through, Snowball had been a good help up until she’d decided not to be. “Everything else will have to remain behind for now—my familiar’s pocket dimension can only handle so much. We’ll send for the rest once we’re settled.”

Ylvesnia raised a brow toward Aurora, clearly noting how quickly Aurora had assumed certain aspects of how things would be once they returned to Cathil. It was the only

way that Aurora could focus. Otherwise, her thoughts would return to Nadine and the state of everything crumbling around them. Making plans, taking charge, and moving forward was the only way to avoid becoming mired in sorrow and despair.

“Have ye spoken to Ivanna?” Ylvesnia inquired, grabbing Aurora and Snowball’s attention immediately.

“What is Ivanna?” Snowball asked defensively.

Aurora’s brows knit together. “What would I need to speak with her about?”

Ylvesnia shrugged. “She seems to be under the impression she’s comin’ with us.”

“What!?” Aurora nearly shrieked, whirling around to stare daggers at Samuel. She’d just about had enough of his unilateral decision-making.

Samuel threw his hands up defensively. “Whoa, whoa! This is the first I’m hearing of it too!”

Aurora straightened herself up and held up one finger, indicating to everyone in the room to wait. Then, without another word, the blonde stormed from the room and went down the hallway. Though there wasn’t enough room to house everyone in the building, Ivanna had been granted a room to share with one of the other nurses. The idea was that while they weren’t on shift, they would have somewhere quiet to rest away from the bustle of the group as everything got sorted out. Aurora didn’t bother to knock, simply throwing the door open uninvited.

“What makes you think you can just—” Though fuming, Aurora was cut short by the sight of Ivanna in a state of undress. The tall platinum-blond woman stood with her hands on her hips, dressed in nothing more than a lacy white bra, panties, and garter belt connected to a pair of white stockings. The high cut of her stockings made her long legs look just a bit longer.

“Oh, do come in,” Ivanna commented with a sweep of her hand around the room. “Make yourself at home.”

“Er, uh,” Aurora stammered, quickly stepping into the room and closing the door behind her. She couldn’t help but notice the immense swell of Ivanna’s breasts and how the bra only seemed to enhance their incredibly soft, round shape. She resisted the urge to cross her arms over her chest to conceal her own breasts, despite being fully clothed.

“What do you want?” Ivanna asked impatiently, though she made no move to continue dressing. She saw Aurora’s discomfort with her in her underwear and seemed keen to hold onto that advantage.

“You can’t just invite yourself to come with us,” Aurora said abruptly.

“Cathil is my home,” Ivanna pointed out as she lifted one leg to prop onto the trunk at the end of the bed, adjusting her leggings and the strap that secured them to her garter belt. “I’m within my rights to go home, aren’t I?”

Aurora waved both of her hands in front of her. “Of course, but you’re not coming with us. We’re not babysitters!”

“I never claimed you were,” Ivanna said, maintaining the suggestive pose after finishing her minor adjustments. The bountiful curve of her ass caused Aurora a brief moment of self-consciousness about her own. “I’m capable of handling myself. I just thought the timing was convenient, and there is strength in numbers.”

“That’s true, but you can’t just invite yourself with us,” Aurora objected. “It’s rude.”

“Rude?” Ivanna asked incredulously, letting the irony of the moment settle as she gave Aurora a pointed stare. “Dear, you’re one of the rudest women I’ve ever met. I wouldn’t have thought you’d have an issue with such a thing.”

“Excuse me!?” Aurora exclaimed, raising her voice significantly. “Would you care to rephrase that?”

“No,” Ivanna said simply, finally reaching for some traveling clothes to dress in. “You are often quite rude, but it’s

a thing I like about you most of the time. When you're not kicking my door down to get a look at me in my underwear."

"I—" Aurora gawked at the sheer audacity of the woman as she pulled a skirt on, "I would never!"

"You haven't taken your eyes off me since you stepped in here," Ivanna teased. "And you're blushing."

Aurora's eyes went as wide as dinner plates as an intense heat spread from her cheeks, across her face, and up to her ears. "How can I not when you've got your tits popping out and your butt all pushed out like that! You're practically spreading your legs for me in here!"

Ivanna pointed at her with a smirk, evidently getting the exact reaction she'd hoped for. Aurora's jaw set as she spoke through her teeth. "I have absolutely no interest in women."

"Ah, I don't know about that," the nurse countered, grabbing a pair of long, stylish leather boots and pulling them on. "You might not dream about fondling breasts or eating pussy, but there's definitely something there for you."

"W-what?" Aurora gasped. "I am quite satisfied with—."

"The man traveling with a bunch of sexy succubi he summons exclusively?" Ivanna interjected as she laced the boots up. "Yes, I can see that. Which is exactly what I mean."

Temporarily forgetting the original reason she'd come to the room, Aurora lifted her chin, her curiosity getting the best of her. "Which is what, precisely?"

"I'm good at reading people. It's a gift of mine. You like being surrounded by beautiful women," Ivanna elaborated as she buttoned up her blouse, lingering on her breasts briefly to offer Aurora a final eyeful. "You like being in charge of them, managing them—a sassy little queen bee. You enjoy calling the shots. There's no shame in that. When you're surrounded by so much beauty and raw sexual power, I imagine it's intoxicating to know that you sit at the top of all of it."



Ivanna's insight hit Aurora like a rampaging kindleback. Was that what she had been doing this whole time? Even thinking back to her time in school, she had often been associated with desirable girls. Certainly, it was never a choice she had consciously made, but perhaps subconsciously, it was a way to secure a position in a social hierarchy where she had little else. Her parents and family had made their positions clear regarding her. Had she befriended the most attractive girls just to assert some kind of dominance over them and her environment?

"There's no shame in it," Ivanna repeated, stuffing a few things into her travel bag. It wasn't military issue like many of the others she'd seen around. Aurora had almost forgotten that Ivanna had been employed at the hospital and not by the military. A hospital that was completely gone in a town that had been destroyed. Going back home to start over made a lot of sense. "Women like us, who don't get things handed to us, use everything at our disposal to ensure we're not trampled underfoot or left behind."

"It's not like that," Aurora argued defensively.

"Isn't it?" Ivanna asked incredulously. "How many times have you seen someone with the skills and knowledge get passed over for someone with the right look or attitude? Recognizing that and adding it to your toolset isn't a bad thing, especially if your survival depends on it or you genuinely have something to offer people."

"Something to offer?" Aurora repeated.

"Like you," Ivanna said, closing her pack and grabbing a light jacket she'd left on her bed. "Or like me. We wanted to get out into the world and help people but knew we wouldn't have the chance handed to us. We had to really stand out to get where we needed to be to do the most good or get by—all without a safety net."

Aurora wasn't sure what to think of this philosophy. There was a lot of truth to it, but the cynical way Ivanna

approached it didn't taste right. "You think that's what I'm doing with Samuel?"

Ivanna nodded. "Of course. It's what I intend to do as well."

Aurora's mood darkened immediately. "What?"

The nurse's expression turned soft. "No offense, but you're not actually his wife, right? And even if you and he are a thing, you already share him with other women."

"That's an entirely different situation," Aurora argued, an edge creeping into her voice.

Ivanna slung the pack on, not missing a beat or taking no for an answer. "Because he summoned them? Because they're succubi? I think most women would find that even more damning, don't you think?"

Aurora opened her mouth to speak, but the words caught in her throat. She didn't have an excellent argument for that point. She had come to an understanding with Samuel about the succubi, but the exact details of it hadn't been fleshed out. What would they do when they returned to normal society, and he was still summoning sexy creatures from the Outer Spheres? What would people assume when she remained at his side? Would they be able to get more serious, settle down, and have a family someday with such things hanging over them?

Taking the line of thought further, Aurora wondered what would happen if or when one of them got pregnant. Samuel himself was half succubus on his mother's side, which meant their physiology was compatible. Not only was it possible, but it seemed likely considering what had to be done to sustain them. Aurora's thoughts drifted to Ylvesnia unexpectedly, recalling how the elf sometimes looked at Samuel when she thought neither he nor Aurora was looking. She was usually placid and unreadable, which made even the slightest shifts in her demeanor more noticeable.

"Whatever we have agreed upon or arranged between us is our business," Aurora said with forced calm. "It does not

mean we are open to anyone who wishes to invite themselves into our bed.”

Ivanna pursed her lips, regarding Aurora, for a moment in silence before nodding. “Alright, then I’ll wait for you to invite me.”

Aurora scoffed. “Praetia’s mercy, you are a bold one, aren’t you? What makes you think I would ever do such a thing?”

The taller woman approached Aurora slowly, setting a hand on her shoulder with a smirk. “Because you and I are alike.”

Aurora glanced at the hand on her shoulder, tempted to bite it like an animal. “We are nothing alike.”

“We might not be exactly the same,” Ivanna admitted. “But we’re more alike than we are different. We see ourselves in one another, for better or for worse. Having that kind of transparency is a good thing to have in a relationship, whatever it may be.”

“Oh, so we’re going to be friends now?” Aurora growled, brushing the hand off her shoulder. “I don’t think so.”

Ivanna spread her hands. “Then we’ll be rivals. But we won’t be enemies. I’m precisely the kind of woman you want around.”

“This ought to be good.” Aurora crossed her arms over her chest defensively. The presumptuousness of the woman was both irritating and a little endearing. What she’d said about people having the right look and attitude certainly had some basis in reality, at least.

Ivanna brushed her hair back over her shoulder. “At the risk of sounding arrogant instead of just confident, I’m attractive. I put a lot of effort into how I look and how I move so that men want me and women want to be me. But what I don’t want is to be the one at the top making all the decisions. I have no desire to be the best, merely part of something great. I’m determined and protective. Which means that with me at

your side, you're able to do what you need to do without looking over your shoulder.”

“At my side,” Aurora echoed. “And why would I trust you in such a position?”

Ivanna's brows rose slightly. “You forget that he's already the lord I serve. He's my earl, and someday, he'll be my duke. It's better to cultivate alliances now so that when it comes time to make official appointments, it's with people you know you can trust. So, look—not only do I owe Earl Eamon my life, but I have made my position and outlook very plain to his future wife.”

“Alright, alright,” Aurora said with a sigh. “You've made your point.”

“So I'm in?” Ivanna asked brightly.

“Eh, we'll see,” Aurora responded, feeling just a little unclean at the idea. “You can come with us for now, and you've given me something to think about. But there's a lot more to be discussed, and it would have to involve him, of course.”

“Of course,” Ivanna agreed, practically bubbling with excitement.

“But you're not getting laid unless I say it's time.” Aurora leveled a finger with Ivanna. “Understand?”

“I understand,” Ivanna replied, biting her lip.

To the nurse's surprise, Aurora's hand took hold of her chin to hold her gaze. “I'm serious,” Aurora reiterated. “Don't try anything. No hand slips, no casual brushing your tits up against his back when you reach for something, no ‘fuck-me’ eyes... nothing.”

Ivanna stared back at the blonde that had taken her off guard, looking mildly impressed with her show of dominance. Aurora leaned closer, speaking in a whisper only an inch from Ivanna's lips. “I want your word. I want to hear you say it.”

“You have my word,” Ivanna whispered back with a slight shudder in her voice.

“Mmhmm.” Aurora released her chin, satisfied with her answer for now. Turning to the door and stepping out into the hall, she looked back at Ivanna with a more conversational tone. “Wait for us downstairs. We still have a few things to pack up.”

“Ma’am,” Ivanna said respectfully before sneaking past her toward the stairs. Once she was out of sight, Aurora rested against the wall with a long sigh of relief. The intensity of the moment had been almost too much to bear, and it had taken nearly all her self-control not to fly into a shrieking rage. But as irritating as Aurora had found the encounter to be, it had provided her with a valuable lesson—several lessons, in fact.

Aurora would have to take a dominant position at Samuel’s side, not just to protect her relationship with him going forward but to help lift him up and support him. She had often taunted him for his birthright when they were in school, but she’d never really thought of what it meant in a practical sense. Nor had she ever considered being a part of that.

The rank of nobility meant nothing to her, but it would be where she found herself if their relationship reached a certain point. If she was going to ultimately profess her hidden desire to spend the rest of her life with him, she would have to take it seriously. That meant laying the groundwork now and making preparations. It meant accepting certain realities before she was completely comfortable with them.

As she returned to her room and assured everyone that she and Ivanna had hammered out the details, she began to refine the ideas a little more. Aurora wanted the best for Samuel and believed he wanted the best for her. Someday, he would be the duke, and if she remained with him, it meant she would be...his duchess?

The idea was sobering for a moment and slightly unnerving. But it was another reality she had to accept before being entirely comfortable with. She had no doubt that he

would overextend himself in his efforts to protect his people and provide for her while also existing as possibly the only Lust Reaper around. He had shown Snowball that he would sooner take a burden onto himself than put someone else in danger. His judgment could be compromised by trying to do everything at once.

As they saddled up their varo, her purpose became clear. She would perform as his second in all things, no matter how mundane or fantastical. She would learn what it took to function at the level of a noble and protect his people while also being at the head of his entourage.

Ylvesnia would continue to serve as their mentor, but more importantly, her desire for Samuel could be put to use, bolstering his reserves just as hers did. If Ivanna showed that she could be trusted, then she could be put into consideration for the same while working closely with Aurora as her second. The energy of their efforts would be fed upward to Samuel, who would then have the means to protect his people in turn. From the perspective of magical theory, it felt like a sound approach.

Aurora reached out to take Samuel's hand as they set out into the night, gently squeezing it.

"Are you alright?" Samuel asked with a note of concern. He offered her a faint smile as he returned the hand squeeze.

"Yeah," she assured him with a more confident grin. She could make this work. It had to work. "I think I am, Sammy."

## CHAPTER 21



**T**he trip to Cathil would not be a short one under normal circumstances. Samuel had thought it over at length and had decided that even without the added caution of taking indirect routes, the trip solely by varo would be too long for his liking. Using a map from the train station, he decided on a route that would blend the operational train lines with mounts they had borrowed from the Mysterium. Word was already spreading among the various guildhalls that he and Aurora were on the move, though the result of such talk remained to be seen.

Samuel had to consider the advice of Seeker Lumis as well, who had mentioned that if she found him, then the justicars would not be far behind. Train stations in the area would be under close observation, so the plan was to travel to the nearest station outside the local branches and junctions and then board for the most direct route to Cathil.

“You don’t think they’ll be watching that station?” Aurora asked as she passed him an apple from her pack. He’d been poring over the map while they rode, committing as many details to memory as possible.

“Likely, yes,” Samuel agreed. “If we disembark a stop before, then ride in from there, it should be alright.”

“We’re bringing the varo?” Aurora fished an apple out of her own and bit into it with a nice wet crunch. “Do they have space for them?”

“Apparently.” Samuel took a bite from his apple as well, offering Aurora a slight shrug. “I guess they offer some kind of service where you put your steeds in a stable car or something.”

“Hm,” Aurora grunted, offering an approving nod. “Well, that’ll make it much easier to conserve our energy until our arrival.”

Samuel smirked over at her as they passed under a row of trees along the road. The morning sun cast the blonde woman in a positively radiant light, but something about her had also changed that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. The combination of it and the lighting made it impossible to take his eyes off her.

“Lord Eamon,” Aurora said in a poorly imitated posh accent. “I do believe you are staring.”

Samuel laughed, looking away briefly to hide the fact that he was actually blushing a little at being caught. “Aw, now don’t start with that.”

“Get used to it, bucko,” Aurora laughed, almost cackling. “Do you think people in Cathil will let me get away with calling you ‘Sammy’?”

“Certainly not,” Ylvesnia said over her shoulder from ahead of them. She turned at the waist, bobbing from side to side with the gait of the varo. “If yer sincerely lookin’ to settle into yer role as earl, we’ll all need to make some adjustments. Myself included.”

“Sure, but not when we’re alone like this,” Samuel laughed. “And definitely not with that ridiculous accent.”

“Why, whatever do you mean?” Aurora responded as she sat up straighter, doubling down on the affectation. “I haven’t the foggiest!”

“I like it,” Snowball said with a smirk, half-bouncing as she walked beside them. She’d been offered to ride with him or Aurora but had opted to be on her feet for a while and stretch her legs. “It’s funny!”

“Ah!” Aurora gestured grandly toward Snowball. “A fellow woman of fine tastes!”



The succubus snorted and giggled while Samuel noticed Ivanna trying not to do the same. With a sigh, he waved a hand in her direction. “Go ahead, get it out of your system.”

Ivanna burst into laughter, unable to contain it any longer. As foolish as it was, Samuel found relief in hearing them all laugh together. Except for Ylvesnia, anyway. Rather than laugh, she held the faintest of smiles on her lips, which was essentially the same thing by the elf’s standards. But with a light-hearted moment of mirthful frivolity, the weight of what lay ahead was significantly alleviated.

It was an excellent start to the journey that Samuel was thankful to have, and it continued into the night when they made camp. The jokes and laughter weren’t constant, but there had been a silent agreement among them that speaking further on their plan and what may await them in Cathil didn’t need to be discussed for a while longer.

This was especially true for Samuel and Aurora, who had been on the road together enough times to know one another’s routines perfectly. They had a system they had constructed over the many trips that suited them well, which offered them a way to transition back into their old lives.

“I forgot how questionable some of these can be,” Samuel said over the pouch of alchemical food they had for dinner that night. “Guess I should have saved some of the beef stew pouches instead of eating them all.”

“Why, what do you have now?” Aurora asked curiously, craning her neck to see inside his pouch. From what he’d seen, she hadn’t been enthusiastic about her food either.

“Some sort of noodle with tomato sauce?” Samuel guessed.

“You mean that sweet Lamashian stuff?” Aurora laughed.

“No.” Samuel shook his head briefly. “No, I don’t mean that. Something much blander. Want to trade?”

Aurora leaned away quickly, “Ew! No. You have fun with your abomination.”

Of all the terrible food, Samuel's appeared to be the worst—something that stuck with him well after dinner as he settled down on his bedroll to study before sleep. Aurora did the same on the bedroll next to him, the light of the campfire flickering beyond the canvas flap of their tent. Neither of them said anything at first, but a few of Samuel's burps had caused them both enough distress that the silence was eventually broken.

"You might want to take something for that," Aurora snickered, the light of the wisp she had conjured to read by dancing elegantly across her cheekbones and offering her lips a hint of extra shine.

"You're probably right," Samuel agreed, pressing his fist against his mouth as he let out another acidic burp.

"How's the research coming?" the blonde asked with a brief nod towards the tome in his lap.

Samuel looked down at it before shrugging. "Sort of at a dead end right now. I'm basically in a section that talks about reaping, how to use it in spells, and so on."

"Reaping, eh?" Aurora repeated with a hint of a smirk. She knew exactly what he was talking about, but it was a slightly sanitized term.

"Yeah, all that emotional resonance and energy stuff we discussed," he clarified, ignoring her amusement for a moment. "Specifically as it pertains to other people, how to maintain balanced levels—"

Aurora held up a hand to stop him. "What do you mean balanced levels?"

"Well, it turns out that as my power grows, I need to worry about having too much or too little," Samuel explained, tapping the open book with the back of his hand. "There's a sort of bleeding effect that can occur with too much. It influences others, clouds their judgment, and reduces them to sex-seeking savages."

"What about you?" Aurora set her book aside, leaning a little closer to him. "What does it do to you if you have too

much?”

“Soulburn,” Samuel responded flatly. It was a phenomenon that happened whenever any Summoner channeled too much power from the Outer Spheres. It didn’t have to be too much at one time, but rather an effect that could develop over a long period of time.

Any magic user could get it, but Summoners were the ones known for channeling the most amount of energy with each single casting. Sorcerers and Arcanists that ended up with soulburn usually got it from overusing magic for menial tasks in their day-to-day activities over the course of years. Once someone had it, it could cause hallucinations, chronic pain, physical withering, and more. It was incredibly difficult to treat, even in its earliest stages.

“Fucking hell, Sammy!” Aurora snapped. “You couldn’t have mentioned this a little sooner?”

“It’s pretty recent information for me too. I hadn’t considered the question of too much when the possibility of too little seemed more likely,” Samuel sighed. He didn’t like upsetting her with this sort of thing, especially when the issue boiled down to how much sex he was having.

“Well, your powers atrophy when you have too little. We knew that much,” Aurora remarked. “That’s not quite on the same level as soulburn.”

Samuel shook his head, setting the book aside slowly. “No, Aurora. For me, it’s much more serious. I’m not just a human who has sought these powers out. Once I began using my power more significantly, my body began to rely on lust almost like a food source.”

“You could starve!?” Aurora nearly shouted, only just managing to keep her voice down at the last second. “Are you serious?”

“It’s an essential part of my diet,” he clarified, holding up both hands. “So it’s more akin to malnutrition than starvation, but... yes, sort of.”

“Why wasn’t this mentioned earlier in the book?” Aurora growled. “Seems like a big oversight.”

Samuel’s expression grew a little more somber. “Well, because it’s the sort of thing she had been expecting just to tell me as part of my upbringing. It’s only in the book as it relates to magic, not on basic living.”

“Oh,” Aurora muttered, growing quiet. “Of course. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so insensitive about it.”

Samuel forced a smile on his face, placing his hand over hers. “No, no. It’s alright. It puts into perspective how different things could have been, but I’m not upset with you or anything. I would like it to have been in the opening chapter, but I think we’ve got everything under control regardless.”

Aurora nodded, her expression growing slightly distant and thoughtful before refocusing her attention. “I was going to bring this up later, but maybe now is a better time.”

“What’s that?” Samuel wondered, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze to let her know she didn’t need to dance around anything with him.

“I think we should reap Ylvesnia,” Aurora answered directly. The response surprised Samuel, despite how ready he had told himself he was.

“E-excuse me?” Samuel choked, waving a hand quickly. “First of all, what’s this ‘we’ business? And second of all, where the hell did this idea come from?”

Aurora’s attitude didn’t change. Instead, she explained it as dispassionately as she could. “Well, we’re both linked on this. Not just magically but symbolically as well, you thriving is me thriving. Understand?”

Samuel nodded ambivalently before she continued. “Second, she has been an excellent teacher but has been teaching us from the sidelines. I’m willing to bet that if I could read that book, I’d find something in there about how Lust Reapers train with one another, don’t they? They fuck each other’s brains out to get their techniques down?”

Again, Samuel offered a slightly hesitant nod. “Yeah.”

“Well,” the blonde waved a hand dramatically toward the tent flap. “She’s the closest thing we have right now. I was going to suggest it later, but now that I know your physical and spiritual health is at stake, I don’t think we should wait.”

“Spiritual health,” Samuel repeated with a raised brow. “What do you mean?”

“The soulburn,” Aurora responded. But as Samuel failed to connect what she was talking about, she tilted her head to one side. “Praetia’s mercy, you didn’t pay attention in church at all, did you?”

“No, not really,” Samuel admitted, turning his hand over a few times, signaling her to get on with it.

“Soulburn damages your connection to the Outer Spheres, which in turn damages your ability to move on from Midgardia when your soul is freed from its physical anchor,” Aurora continued. “You could go spiraling into some random sphere, the space between them, or remain here as a wraith.”

“I’m not exactly holding my breath regarding going to Heaven, Aurora,” Samuel grunted incredulously. “But I get your point.”

“No,” Aurora shook her head quickly. “You don’t. You’re not going to Heaven no matter what you do because you’re not meant for it. It’s not meant for you. You’re likely bound for Eros when you die.”

Samuel’s brows furrowed, realizing she was probably right. Much of what the two of them had learned had to do with how the Outer Spheres were interpreted by the people of Midgardia and how it differed from what the Spheres actually were. The conflux of creation formed the Inner Spheres, but the energy was not held there indefinitely. When people died, they returned to the Spheres. Usually, this meant Heaven or Hell, by Preatian interpretation. But with the knowledge they had accumulated recently, it seemed more likely that those destinations were more diverse. Being half succubus meant he

already had a tether to an Outer Sphere that would guide him when he finally passed away. But not if he had soulburn.

Now that Samuel's mind had put onto this line of thought, it brought into question the effects it would have on the bond between them. Soulburn was known to disrupt or even break the bond Summoners formed with familiars, so it didn't seem like a stretch for it to go further in his case.

"I hadn't thought about any of this afterlife stuff," Samuel admitted. "I never really do."

"No, but I do," Aurora replied, squeezing his hand again. "It might surprise you to hear, but I contemplate that sort of thing a lot. I've also become quite attached to you if you hadn't noticed."

Samuel acquiesced with a solemn nod. "Alright, so then how do we want to handle that? It's pretty straightforward with succubi, but she's not a succubus."

"But I am an elf with sensitive ears," Ylvesnia remarked from inside the tent flap. Aurora nearly jumped out of her skin with how much the elf's words had startled her.

"You need to stop doing that!" Aurora gasped as she pressed a hand to her chest. "You're going to give me a heart attack."

Ylvesnia raised a brow but made no apology for her appearance. Her eyes looked quickly between the two before she began unbuttoning her shirt. Despite the cut and fashion leaning toward what men would typically wear, she always seemed to make them look feminine just by them being on her. "Ye'll be pleased to hear that I require no convincin' on yer part. I am prepared to lay with you."

Aurora's face twisted up indignantly as she raised a hand. "Hold on! We need to discuss a few ground rules before—"

"I've no intention of replacin' you as his mare," Ylvesnia interjected. "Even outside of my trainin' as a Summoner, I would have a more liberal view toward sex just by bein' an elf."

Samuel thought he should have some say on the matter, but as Ylvesnia pulled her shirt off to expose her elegant breasts with soft pink nipples already erect in the cool night air, he found himself temporarily tongue-tied.

“As a mentor to both of ye, I will do what is required,” Ylvesnia added, folding her shirt neatly and dropping it on the ground beside her.

Aurora lifted her chin, smirking a little as she jabbed a finger in Ylvesnia’s direction. “Don’t give me that duty-bound nonsense. You’ve been looking forward to this for a while. You can’t fool me.”

Ylvesnia opened her hands a little, feigning innocence in a way that only she could. Being as impassive as she typically was, it was often difficult to tell her feelings about anything. Somehow, Aurora had seen through their mentor’s facade, though Samuel wasn’t sure how. In fact, he was so lost in the intricate patterns of the elven tattoos that ran up Ylvesnia’s arms and across her chest that he was surprised when Aurora took her by the hand to bring her to their bedrolls.

“You might be our tutor,” the blonde told her as she pushed some of Ylvesnia’s fiery ginger hair behind one ear. “But in our bed, you defer to me. Understood?”

“This is the elven custom, as well,” Ylvesnia agreed with a whisper. Establishing that fact, Aurora pressed forward to kiss along the side of the elf’s neck. Even though he’d done something like this before with Snowball and Aurora, Samuel was still at a loss with what was unfolding.

“Good,” Aurora whispered. “Now, take your pants off.”

Ylvesnia’s blue eyes flicked briefly to Aurora, surprised at her assertiveness, before turning to Samuel. He suppressed an amused smile as he gestured with one hand toward the elf. “You heard her, pants off.”

Despite Samuel’s engagement in watching the women disrobe, he managed to pry his attention away to focus inward. The link that had been established between him and Aurora

flared brightly in much the same fashion as the one between him and his familiar. Though it didn't have a true color, it did give the impression of being a different hue, characterizing it as having a different nature than the one with Snowball.

He refined his focus, feeling the arousal and desire that passed through the link. Thin filament-like fibers extended along the length of it, reaching out in what he could only describe as a receptive state. In the texts, this process was described as being singular on the part of a Lust Reaper, but here it existed in the link as well.

As he opened his eyes, he kept the magical perception firmly in mind, overlaying it with his actual sight. What he found was that both Aurora and Ylvesnia shimmered and gleamed with a subtle light that only his mind's eye could see properly. It lacked definition and color, but he remained aware of it as the women pressed their hands against him and pushed him down to his bedroll. He found it difficult to engage with them physically as he studied and decoded what he was observing, his mind resisting his efforts to do both.

Fortunately, Aurora taking the reins had bought him time and flexibility. Sighs and whispers mingled with the crackling of the fire outside as he was relieved of his clothing with little difficulty. The care that Ylvesnia had given to her clothing while undressing was wholly abandoned as she and Aurora tossed his garments wherever it was most convenient at the time. The light in them glimmered and popped as Aurora took hold of his erection at the base and offered it to their mentor.

"Show me how elves suck cock," Aurora whispered with a devious smirk. "Then maybe I'll let you mount him."

The light from Aurora shifted, advancing upon Ylvesnia's and mingling with it. The two entwined with each other, twisting around one another as that which rested in the elf submitted gently to that within the blonde. Samuel couldn't explain what he was seeing, and the effort to find the words for it grew more tenuous as the slick velvet of the elf's tongue ran along the underside of his erect cock. Ylvesnia's hand



danced around his sensitive, swollen glans, whirling and flicking quickly before taking the head into her mouth entirely.

“Oh!” Samuel gasped, consistently on his back foot for the sexual encounter he had not envisioned even minutes before.

Satisfied with his response, Ylvesnia sank to the base quickly, where the tip of his cock slipped briefly into the back of her throat before she made the return trip up. Samuel ran his fingers through her fiery-red hair, pushing it back away from her face to ensure the best view and that it didn't interfere with her endeavors. The elf turned her head to the side while her tongue continued to move and dance around the firm flesh in her mouth. The effect was astounding, twisting and wringing at his eager erection without requiring additional pressure.

“Praetia's mercy, look how hungry she is, Sammy!” Aurora teased. “More cum-starved than the succubi.”

Ylvesnia's pace quickened as if signaling her agreement with the statement. Aurora dove lower, licking up along the soft, tender sack at the base of his cock before suckling gingerly.

Samuel's other hand went to the blonde's hair, holding both women in place as they feasted upon his manhood. At the rate they were going, Samuel knew he wouldn't be able to hold out for long. Especially with how their hands grasped and stroked at his chest like supplicants receiving communion.

“He's close,” Ylvesnia said, her mouth popping free of his flesh. “I can sense it.”

Tilting his head to one side, Samuel's brow rose. “Sense it?”

“The energy flares when ye get close, bubbles like a volcano,” Ylvesnia explained even as she ran her tongue along the side of his shaft, with Aurora doing the same on the other side. “The quidditas of Eros grows strong as climax approaches,” she added as Aurora took hold of him tightly and began to stroke.

Quidditas was a term he hadn't come across since school, used in older studies of the Outer Spheres but still in use by the elves. It referred to the essence of the Outer Spheres that found its way into their world. It underpinned every magical tradition and was theoretically at the heart of the alternate set of natural laws found in the Outer Spheres. The sense he was developing was a perception of that energy specifically.

"Well, I wouldn't want to disappoint you two," Samuel laughed. Now that he knew what he was dealing with, he had a plan. His mother's tome had covered numerous spells, but many required him to wield the power of lust specifically for them. Otherwise, the principles were not unlike the ones he knew. Borrowing a few threads of the quidditas from each woman, Samuel wove them into a spell for himself.

"Vigaris," Samuel whispered as the spell took hold, pulling him back from the precipice of orgasm and causing the meat of his erection to surge with strength and vigor. Aurora's eyes widened, feeling the change in her grip as it occurred.

"There," Samuel breathed with a smirk. "All set."

No explanation was needed as Ylvesnia rose to her knees and moved into position above the pole of meat, standing at attention. Before sinking onto it, though, she looked over at Aurora for permission, who took the elf by the hips and pulled her onto it. "Don't make him wait!"

Impaled to the hilt in an instant, Ylvesnia let out a shocked gasp of pleasure. Samuel's Mind's eye perceived it clearly as a burst of light that followed the threads up the elf's body like a flaring, forking pulse. The tense network of fibers in her abdomen glowed brightly, sparkling like afternoon light on a pristine pond. Whereas Aurora's pleasure derived from a sort of 'up and down' stroke that favored penetration, Ylvesnia's moved back and forth to favor stimulation of her clit, which Samuel realized was a bit larger than expected.

"Ah, ah!" Ylvesnia panted, her brows knitting in a girlishly helpless way that surprised even her. Samuel figured

it only strengthened Aurora's argument about Ylvesnia genuinely desiring this for much longer than she'd let on.

"Close already?!" Aurora gloated, positioning herself behind Ylvesnia as she reached around to grab her tits. "I thought you were supposed to be an expert? What happened to all of that elvish bravado?"

The blonde pulled the ginger elf's naked body against hers and moved forward with her hips. As her hips came forward, so did the elf's, which drove Samuel deeper into her while forcefully grinding her greedy clit.

"After all that talk," Aurora whispered in Ylvesnia's ear, pinching and pulling at her nipples in tantalizing ways. Samuel's hands came to rest on his tutor's hips as Aurora bucked more fiercely against her, fucking Samuel with Ylvesnia's body as her toy. "And you almost cum just from sitting on a cock? I guess I can't blame you. Not everyone is as accustomed to the cock of a Lust Reaper as I am."

"D-don't be ridiculous!" Ylvesnia protested as the blush in her cheeks brightened. "It's just been longer than I realized!"

"Sure," Aurora replied, unconvinced. "Well then, hurry up so I can have my turn."

The pace of the blonde's hips quickened as the power in them grew. Her hands latched onto Samuel's arms, using him as a brace. "Come on," Aurora groaned through her teeth. "Come on my man's cock. You know you want to."

Ylvesnia's sounds of ecstasy grew, unable to withstand the assault of the blonde behind her and the man bucking up into her from below. The couple had pinned her between them and had no plans of letting up until she climaxed. It only took a few moments as Ylvesnia's back arched in erotic exhilaration, her chest thrusting out to put her beautiful breasts on display for Samuel. The pink buds of her nipples had reached peak hardness with the extra stimulation Aurora had provided them.

“Ah, Ahn!” the elf cried as the light in Samuel’s vision bubbled up and exploded like fireworks at the start of the new year. He watched as the orgasm exploded through her, lighting her up perfectly in the darkness of the tent and casting her in an erotically radiant glow.

Behind her, Aurora’s arousal shimmered in complimentary fashion as Samuel siphoned small portions of the energy from Ylvesnia’s mindblowing orgasm. The link between the couple blazed with renewed power. The elf’s body went taut as if frozen in time at the moment of orgasm before her muscles finally relaxed, releasing her.

“W-wow!” Samuel laughed, exchanging glances with Aurora. “Quite the display. I think we’re getting the hang of this. What do you think?”

“Mmm, definitely,” Aurora said, licking along the side of Ylvesnia’s neck with a slight giggle. “But there’s always room for improvement in round two.”

“W-what?” Ylvesnia asked, genuinely looking as if she’d only caught part of what they were saying through her post-coital mind fog.

“Well, we’re not done yet,” Aurora scoffed. “He’s just getting started. Now kiss me while you fuck her this time, Sammy, or I’ll throw a fit.”

Samuel nodded dutifully at the command. “Yes, ma’am.”

## CHAPTER 22



The nights were filled with intense threesomes as Aurora and Samuel repeatedly bedded their mentor, while the days were filled with lively discussions of magical principals and the Outer Spheres. Initially left out of much of the discussion, Ivanna managed to join their discussion with a surprising breadth of knowledge about the Inner Spheres.

As a child, she had done some stargazing with her father before he'd gone off to war. Much of the knowledge she had accumulated in that time had remained, and she would read books on the subject whenever she had the chance.

Soon the practical work turned towards the Outsiders in Samuel and Aurora's service. Ylvesnia would review their arrays to ensure they were as energy efficient and compatible with Samuel's use of Eros quidditas as possible.

"I really feel like it needs a different name," Aurora remarked as she sketched a refined array for Rohm, her bound verndari. "Quidditas of Eros or Eros quidditas feels awkward and dated, don't you think?"

Samuel shrugged thoughtfully, "I suppose so. But I don't think it's my place to start changing naming conventions and re-writing the book on things."

"Why not?" Ivanna asked as she poured hot water into the alchemical food pouch she was having for lunch. "From everything you've said, you're the only one of the Lust Reapers around, and no one's bothered to preserve much of your lore. If there were more of you, holding back would make more sense. But there isn't."

“Well, there’s still Ylvesnia,” Samuel countered, motioning toward the elf as she munched on some trail mix in the shade of a nearby tree. “She’s much more experienced than I am.”

“No,” Ylvesnia responded calmly without looking in their direction. “She’s correct. As the last remainin’ Lust Reaper, it falls to ye to canonize and codify everythin’ that comes next. As a Mienkardi, I cannot speak for ye. But we can mend the rift that formed between our people long ago.”

“Alright,” Samuel sighed. It was another responsibility to throw on the pile with everything else he had in store for him in Cathil. “I suppose a little brevity wouldn’t hurt.”

“That’s the spirit!” Aurora chirped. “Just something to use in casual situations, something less academic sounding!”

“How about quideras?” Samuel suggested. “Sort of a combination of the two terms in a single word.”

Aurora’s face pinched with a distinct cringe. “Maybe we workshop it a little more?”

Samuel scoffed indignantly. “I suppose you have something you’d like to suggest?”

“Esera,” Aurora replied quickly. “Quidditas is simply the essence of a thing, so using that word with Eros in a feminine form.... You get Esera.”

“It sounds sexier, at least,” Ivanna admitted as she took another bite of her food. “So thematically, it’s good.”

“What happened to it being up to me to decide the future of this stuff?” Samuel laughed.

Ylvesnia tilted her head to one side as she shrugged a shoulder. “That was before you suggested quideras.”

Throwing his hands up in surrender, Samuel got to his feet and stepped away from the camp. No one asked where he was going because they already knew. Each day he summoned one of the succubi and gave them some of his time one-on-one to ensure that they were taken care of. The only exception was

the widows, who preferred to be together whenever possible. Today was Nadirah's turn, and she required distance from everyone else, or her aura of lust would influence them quickly. Even he still struggled to resist the influence of it if she had a mind to focus it upon him.

"Mmm, master," Nadirah moaned as she looked back at him over her shoulder. He'd placed her up against a tree where her talons buried themselves into the bark as he took her from behind. Her tail feathers lifted slightly to show him the pearlescent fluid dripping from her freshly fucked hole. "You're feeling unusually vigorous today. Is Aurora not catering to your needs?"

"Don't start," Samuel grumbled as he cleaned himself up and fastened his trousers. "You have her to thank for a lot of the extra energy I have for you. You ought to be grateful."

"Like Snowball?" Nadirah scoffed, retrieving some of the cum with one finger before licking it clean. "I'm on a different level than her, Master. You know this."

Samuel sighed. His efforts to disabuse Nadirah of this attitude had not been going well. She had quite the haughty view of the other succubi, considering herself the pinnacle of Samuel's summonings. It was in her nature to preen, but she often took it too far, especially when it came to Aurora. It was one thing to attempt to bully the other succubi, but she was breaking new ground trying to establish dominance over a human. It was a unique problem to which there was no guidance on solving.

"You'll show Aurora proper respect, or you'll find that you're not above punishment," Samuel warned. The admonishment earned him a look of surprise from Nadirah, who always seemed to forget that she wasn't in a position to be saying such things or acting in such a manner.

"Forgive me," the colorful bird-succubus responded in a more measured tone. "I forgot myself for a moment. Allow me to make it up to you?"

As the succubus leaned her back against the tree and ran her hand slowly down her chest, Samuel struggled to shake his head in refusal. “No, it’s alright. We have to be getting back on the road soon. We’re making good time, but Ylvesnia says there’s a storm coming up behind us, which could bog us down if we don’t stay ahead of it.”

Nadirah rolled her eyes with annoyance when she thought Samuel wasn’t looking at her, but he still managed to catch it from the corner of his eye. She turned one hand over a few times. “If I could ensure you stayed ahead of the storm, would you be inclined to provide me with seconds?”

Samuel’s brow rose slowly. “Well, that all depends on how you would do that.”

“You’re traveling by varo, correct?” Nadirah asked, not bothering to stand upright. She let Samuel’s eyes wander over her while some of his cum continued to ooze from between her legs, her heavy breasts rising and falling gently with her breath.

“Yeah,” Samuel muttered, realizing that he was losing focus. Nadirah was always tricky to handle, more so than Hecate these days. So long as the hellhound had time to fuck and run around, she was usually content to do as she was told. Usually.

“I could lend them some of my power,” Nadirah continued nonchalantly. “It would grant them a swiftness and stamina never before seen in such creatures.”

Interested in the proposal, Samuel began to undo his trousers again. “Alright, you’ve got my interest, but let’s not take too long, hm?”

Nadirah’s eyes flashed predatorily as she licked her lips, her arousal only growing whenever she got her way. True to her word, she kept the second round brief and provided him with a token made of her feathers. She assured him it would continue to function even without her present before he dismissed her to get back on the road. Despite the extra time



he had taken, Aurora refrained from scolding him, allowing him to show her what he'd returned with.

Placing the feathered token around the neck of his varo, the dark colors of the steed shifted to become more like Nadirah's. The coloration was striking and would have been detrimental if they were still concerned with remaining hidden.

Once packed up and back on the road, the difference in the pace was clear. So long as Samuel remained in the lead, the benefits were conferred to the other varo in a magical wake of sorts. The creatures moved much faster, maintaining a swift canter at their slowest point, with much of the ride being at a gallop for the remainder of the day. A pace that would have been incredibly stressful to maintain was second nature to them now.

They arrived at the train station a day and a half ahead of schedule. Samuel removed the token from his varo and placed it into his pack, restoring the creature to its original form before registering it in the stable car. He'd considered seeing the town now that they were ahead of schedule but decided against it. Now that they were approaching the final leg of their trip, the seriousness toward things that he had been putting off needed time to breathe. He couldn't afford any further distractions.

The ride on the train was interesting despite his renewed focus. Having never ridden on one before, he didn't know the differences between the pricing options offered at the station. To avoid prying eyes, he elected to pay for a luxury car that provided them with beds and space where they could continue their studies and nightly routine. Expensive as they were, he had plenty of coin to spare from the jobs he'd been doing at the guild hall, along with the funds he had managed to hang onto from before he'd been forced into hiding. Though the ride was smooth for most of the trip, Samuel found himself unable to focus much on anything as he stared out the window, watching the world whiz by at a surprising speed.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” A familiar voice said from the open door. Looking over, Samuel’s face lit up to see Wilson standing there with his cane in hand. “Makes getting around much easier for the old and infirm, such as myself.”

“Wilson!” Samuel gasped, nearly jumping to his feet. “What are you—How did you get here?”

The older man stepped in, closing the door behind him as he paid the women in the car a respectful nod. “I was informed this station would be where you were boarding. I was a little late arriving, unfortunately.” He indicated the cane briefly as he took an empty seat across from Samuel.

“You didn’t have to go out of your way,” Samuel assured him as he sat back down. “I would have been happy to come see you in Cathil.”

“No, m’lord,” Wilson grumbled, shaking his head. “I’m afraid things are worse in Cathil than you realize.”

“What do you mean?” Samuel frowned, leaning forward in his chair. “What’s happened?”

Wilson adjusted his posture as he set the cane aside before explaining. “My duties to your father have kept me on the move for quite some time. After seeing you, I returned to Cathil to inform him of your good health. I was denied entrance by the guards, who I didn’t recognize.”

“What?” Samuel blinked a few times in disbelief. “Why?”

Wilson folded his hands. “I don’t know. But people I spoke to in town said there has been a shift in tone from the Duke since the attack from Mystuval.”

“Shift in tone,” Samuel repeated, a shadow of concern falling over his face. “How?”

Wilson looked out the window with a discontent sigh. “Mainly that it’s not coming from him. Requests, orders, and directives of any kind have been handled through new

intermediaries while any public appearances have been kept dreadfully brief.”

Samuel’s frown deepened as he shook his head. He knew such behavior was quite unlike his father. His staff turnover was one of the lowest in the country. He typically sourced them from the surrounding lands he held and tried to keep employment generational whenever possible. He’d often go on about how it bonded their lines together in joined interest to work so closely for so long.

Moreover, he prided himself on the facetime he had with those under his charge because it allowed him to gauge their needs and interests. Doing so was actually one of the reasons he didn’t have redundant middlemen that other nobles typically had.

“So what does this mean?” Samuel pressed, every muscle in his body growing tense. “Mystuval, perhaps?”

“I’m told that a group of soldiers came into town shortly after the attack, but they were clearly Terthish,” Wilson continued. “Combined with how quickly word of your reappearance at the Battle of Bredon spread back home, I suspect we’re dealing with Justicars.”

“No,” Samuel waved his hands. “That’s far too brazen, even for them.”

Wilson’s dark expression didn’t change. Behind him, Ylvesnia placed a hand on the back of his chair to gently interject. “Samuel, they killed a High Summoner in a Mysterium Guildhall with witnesses and managed to still frame ye for it.”

His eyes darted between the two for a moment as the weight of what they were saying began to settle uncomfortably. “A duke? The King would never give such an order.”

Wilson took a deep breath before putting words to the obvious conclusion. “Which leads me to believe that these are not the orders of the king.”

The shock of such an idea nearly put Samuel through the back of his chair. “Rogue Justicars?”

“The whole group could be actin’ on its own,” Ylvesnia muttered. “I told you before, my experience with these people is not as rose-colored as yours.”

Wilson shook his head. “Loathe though I am to say it, m’lord, your mentor is not wrong. Even during my service, the Justicars were regarded with a degree of suspicion and hostility among the regulars. The assumption, however, had always been that their ruthlessness was leashed, that it served to our benefit.”

“But this is treason we’re talking about,” Samuel growled as he leaned forward. “For what purpose?”

“Yer king is not popular,” Ylvesnia speculated. “Perhaps a rival who wishes to unseat him.”

Samuel waved both his hands quickly. “You know what? I don’t care, actually.”

“M’Lord?” Wilson asked, astonished at his reaction.

Samuel closed his eyes, regaining his composure before clarifying. “I care, just not in that way. I want my father safe and my people protected. When it comes to the politics, I just can’t be bothered with it. If any harm has come to my father, I will address the perpetrator directly, no matter who they are. If my people are threatened, I will move to protect them, no matter the source of the threat. That’s it.”

Samuel caught a glimpse of Aurora glancing in his direction with a look of approval on her face while she tried to look engrossed with her book. He held a hand up to silence any objections Wilson wanted to voice. “It doesn’t matter what politics are behind it. It doesn’t matter what reasons are given or who the players are. My duty is to my family and my people, and I intend to uphold that duty.”

After a moment of consideration, the older man who had served Samuel for so many years relented. There was no arguing the matter or impressing upon him the importance of a

bigger picture. In the end, Samuel suspected that Wilson agreed with him on some level. Even Ylvesnia seemed to be satisfied with his stance on the matter. He wanted to put the people first and handle everything else after he was sure they were safe.

“So, how is this accomplished?” Ylvesnia asked. “Do ye have a means of gettin’ in unnoticed?”

“I have to assume that anything I’ve used in my youth is easy enough to detect by professionals,” Samuel chuckled. “And that they’ve already gone over the schematics to ensure the castle is locked down.”

“It’s a castle?” Aurora piped up, grabbing the attention of the three. “You live in a castle. As in an actual castle with the stones and curtain walls?”

“Yes,” Samuel answered uncertainly. “It’s been in the family for generations. It’s over nine hundred years old.”

“Of course, it’s been renovated and rebuilt a few times,” Wilson added.

Aurora sprang to her feet and rushed to Samuel’s pack, which she rifled through quickly. “That would explain why this book was included with all of the others.”

Samuel’s brows furrowed as she approached them with a book on ancient architecture and design pertaining to castles and cathedrals. He’d mentally marked it as a low-priority read in light of everything else he had to review and study.

“You said you and your father would go into town to church with everyone else,” Aurora stated as she opened the book and flipped through the pages. “Which I thought was a little strange at the time, but I didn’t say anything.”

“Ah,” Wilson laughed, evidently arriving at whatever conclusion Aurora had already reached. “Clever.”

“What the hell is she talking about?” Samuel demanded, confused with the sudden turn things had taken.

Wilson's eyes gleamed with approval toward the blonde before turning his attention back toward Samuel. "The castle chapel, m'lord. She intends to use it as your insertion point."

"We don't have a castle chapel," Samuel argued.

"Not anymore," Aurora explained as she dropped the book into his lap. It was opened to illustrations of various castles from the same period in which his home was originally built. "But it used to."

Aurora jabbed a finger at the illustration that bore a resemblance to his father's castle. "Not all the nobles had them, but dukes definitely did. It was placed within the walls to offer additional protection to the parish in times of war while also situating Praetia's protection closer to the noble family...Which was theoretically what a duke would value above all else."

Looking the illustration over, Samuel noted the differences between the original construction and how he remembered it now. "How does this help us?"

"In the early days, all the chapels had extensive crypts attached to them," Aurora explained. "It was the resting place of everyone in the parish who passed. A special section was dedicated to the nobles, but, for the most part, it belonged to everyone. They stopped doing it when burial rites and customs changed. Once we moved churches to town centers, burial grounds tended to get moved too."

Samuel turned the page at Aurora's urging to do so. The illustration on the next page showed the crypts in more detail, along with paragraphs of context and explanation. He didn't need to scan them with how thoroughly Aurora knew the subject. "During that time, many families wanted their ancestors' remains moved from castle crypts to church crypts. They had tunnels that connected to the churches so they could move them without parading them through the middle of town."

“So, somewhere, there is a tunnel leading from the church to inside the castle walls,” Samuel speculated, looking up at Aurora, nodding excitedly. He couldn’t help but smile in return. Her energy was infectious.

“And it’s connected to the keep!” Aurora laughed. “If we find the tunnel, we can walk right in. Step out from behind a painting or something like that.”

“You got all that from me saying my father and I used to go to town for church?” Samuel scoffed, unable to hide how impressed he was.

“Well, I thought it was weird to make the trip if you had a chapel right there on the grounds!” Aurora replied, throwing her hands up. “So then I thought maybe you lived in some kind of manor or fancy house closer to the town center.”

“You’re gonna have to keep your eye on this one,” Wilson chuckled. “She’s got the same attention to little details as you do.”

“Only on certain things,” Aurora argued with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Sammy’s a much bigger nerd than I am, by far.”

“So we have a way in?” Ylvesnia asked, glancing between them. “Then what? Yer father is very likely a hostage in his own home.”

Wilson shook his head. “More likely that they have something they’re using to compel him rather than holding a knife directly to his throat. People have seen him, just not for very long and not consistent with his routine.”

Samuel nodded, looking down at the illustration of the crypt before returning to the chapel page. He’d have to ask his father what had happened to it and why it was never rebuilt, but for now, he was sure there was nothing there but storage. The crypts and tunnels might have been situated close to the wine cellar.

“Is this something that would show up on the schematics?” Samuel asked no one specifically. “Would the

justicars know of this?”

Wilson thought about it with a frown before shaking his head. “No. Something like that would be ancient. There may be something registered to the church, but we would have no need for it in the castle. Not after so many rebuilds. Besides, your father is the one that provided me with the selection of books, so you have to consider he planned for something like this if you were discovered.”

“You think he foresaw the justicars becoming this bold?” Samuel wondered. Wilson shrugged, having just as little insight into his father’s thought process as him on the subject. If it was true, it begged the question of why his father would have suspected such a thing. Was the incident with High Summoner Elantrica what tipped him off, or had there been something before that to make him suspicious?

“I’ll have the widows check it out ahead of us when we get there,” Samuel decided. “Just to be on the safe side.”

Samuel shut the book with a loud clap before handing it back to Aurora with a smirk. The blonde beamed, clearly pleased that her knowledge of the subject had benefited him. He looked out the window, but as night fell, there was little to see beyond dark shapes occasionally silhouetted against the sky’s deep blue. If everything went according to plan, he would be back home to free his father of the justicars this time tomorrow.



## CHAPTER 23



The station in Larton where they deboarded the train was one of the busiest places Samuel had ever seen. The crowd swelled and crushed anyone who remained directionless in it for too long. Most people going about their business seemed familiar with the ebb and flow of the shifting mass. Samuel did his best to remain focused on where he was going as Wilson led the way to the counter to submit their tickets for the varo in the stable car. Samuel had never considered Larton a large town, but seeing how busy everything was during the day caused him to rethink the assumption. There was enough going on around him to merit a trip back someday.

The claustrophobic feeling remained with Samuel long after they'd left the station and taken to the road, the colorful varo with the token in its feathers turning heads nearly everywhere they went. Even those in motorcars took a moment to admire the creature's plumage, astonished by its speed and its companions as they shot past. They spent the first half of the day entirely focused on reaching their destination in Cathil, albeit to reach the church instead of Ciriscastre Castle.

Samuel had traveled this road many times in his life, but never with such a weight upon his shoulders. Despite this, it was hard not to feel a wave of nostalgia as he returned home once again. Seeing other parts of Terth had been a treat. Living in Millbell had been a delight. But there would always be something about Cathil that was a soothing balm for his soul.

Coming around the final bend of the road around noon provided them with an excellent view of the town as it sprawled out before them. Cathil had a robust town center that bustled with activity, defensive walls that offered a sense of

protection and security for generations of citizens, gently flowing streams and creeks, and the watchful presence of Ciriscastre on the hill that overlooked it all.

Cherrywood Church was closer to the center of town, with minarets and towers that stood out amid the more modest construction of the surrounding buildings. The district surrounding it shared its namesake and was one of the most vibrant parts of Cathil on weekends and other Praetian holidays. Though, today it appeared mostly empty.

“Quiet here,” Samuel remarked as the varo casually walked along the cobblestone street. “Even for a weekday.”

“It’s a little unsettling,” Wilson agreed as he slid off the back of the varo he had been sharing with Ylvesnia. Smoothing out his clothes and positioning his cane carefully, he glanced around to get a read on things. “Like the town is holding its breath.”

“I’ll go in and speak with the priest,” Aurora muttered, dismounting her varo at the church’s front steps. Samuel didn’t think that anyone would be better or worse for the task, but Aurora clearly wanted to embrace a sense of familiarity as himself.

“Alright,” Samuel agreed, glancing over at Ivanna. “Where are you headed next?”

Ivanna took a deep breath. “Home, I think. It’s been a long time. But I’ll come by Ciriscastre after you’ve retaken it.”

“You do not wish to assist?” Ylvesnia asked with a look of disapproval. “It is not just his home at stake.”

Ivanna nodded, understanding the criticism directed her way. “I only have a brief period to warn what’s left of my own family. If things spill over, I don’t want them anywhere near it.”

Samuel extended a hand to her, which she took happily. “I understand. Take care of your family, and I’ll see you soon.”

The elf watched as Ivanna brought her varo about and headed home before turning her gaze toward Samuel. “That was kind of ye.”

“She’s seen enough bloodshed for a while, I think,” Samuel replied as he watched Ivanna vanish from sight. If things got out of hand, it would be better to have her off helping people than up front where the fighting was. “Let’s get the varo stabled real quick.”

Samuel offered Wilson a nod as they took the varo. The older man sat on the small brick wall at the foot of the steps as he waited for Aurora. It didn’t take long for them to find somewhere to put the varo up, though the stablehand they spoke with seemed anxious to get back to something else the entire time Samuel and Ylvesnia were present.

“Are ye ready for what comes next?” Ylvesnia asked him quietly on the walk back to Cherrywood. “There may be difficult decisions yer forced to make.”

“I’ll do my best,” Samuel said, skirting the question with his answer. “That’s all any of us can really do.”

“Just remember yer battlemind,” the elf urged him as she brushed some fiery red hair from her face. “Ye’ll be alright. I have faith.”

Samuel glanced up at the church’s stained-glass windows as they approached. “Faith. You don’t talk about that sort of thing a lot. What is it that elves back home believe, anyway? Are they Praetian as well?”

“Some are,” Ylvesnia said as they approached Wilson, who stood to meet them. “But before the Praetians, faith was a very personal thing for us that could vary from clan to clan.”

“Aurora thinks regardless of how I live my life, I’m bound for Eros,” Samuel chuckled. “Instead of something like Heaven or Hell. What do you think? Do elves have anything like that?”

“We do,” his mentor acknowledged. “Though in our beliefs, it is not like Heaven or Hell. Morality plays a lesser

role in our eternal fates than understanding and enlightenment do.”

Samuel looked at her with a look of surprise. “So, no eternal damnation or anything like that?”

Ylvesnia shook her head with the ghost of a smirk on her lips. “No. We either go to Arcadia or Tirna’nog, dependin’ on whether we lived a life of intellectual curiosity and growth or lived simpler lives.”

“So where do murderers and the like end up?” Samuel scoffed. He wasn’t religious, but for some reason, the idea of someone living a life of evil and never being punished for it felt wrong.

“Depends on where their hearts and minds were at the time,” Wilson chimed in, much to Samuel’s surprise. “Arcadia is a place of pastoral simplicity and unspoiled nature. You could be a person who lived a simple life and end up there, or you could be a person who lived a life of savagery and end up there as well, albeit as one of the beasts to be hunted.”

“Is that so strange to you?” Ylvesnia asked with a hint of amusement.

“A little,” Samuel admitted. “But I suppose there is a sort of logic to it.”

Ylvesnia’s eyes gleamed with a hint of approval. He didn’t have to accept it whole-cloth, but keeping an open mind put him in better company than most. “Before Praetia, yer ancestors had similar beliefs.”

“Ah, Avalon,” Wilson said with a slightly wistful look. “My father used to tell me stories when I was a little one.”

The front doors to the church came open as Aurora stepped out. “We’re all set. I had to smooth out some ruffled feathers, but we’re among friends here. They’re looking for the access point to the tunnel now.”

Samuel felt a surge of excitement at the news. “I almost can’t believe that it’s still here.”

“Well, they have to find it, as I said,” Aurora cautioned. “And it may be sealed up when they do.”

After all this time and planning, Samuel wouldn't allow a little brick-and-mortar to stop him if that's what it came to. Nearly every one of his succubi had the means to break through such a mundane barrier if needed. The thought reminded him to summon a few before they went any further.

The summoning platform inside the church was more than up to the task, though the clergy looked baffled at the form his summonings took when they eventually stepped off the platform. The widows drew more attention at first, but after taking their spider forms, the attention shifted to Snowball.

Though clothed, Snowball wore what was comfortable for her rather than the disguises she had been forced into using for the last several months. The result was a revealing top that barely covered her nipples and a pelvic curtain that would have offered anyone at the right angle a full view of what was beneath. The fact she had long rabbit ears and decorative bat-like wings seemed to go entirely unnoticed.

“They've found it,” a nun announced as she emerged from a door that let down into a basement. “It was just behind a bunch of old furniture.”

“Excellent, thank you,” Aurora replied with a smile, glancing at Samuel with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. The reality of everything was beginning to settle in for her as well.

“Well, let's investigate, shall we?” Samuel said, though it was meant more for the spiders skittering down his arm to the floor than anyone else.

By the time they had descended the stairs and approached the doors, the furniture that had been stacked there had all been moved to the opposite side of the room. Desks, chairs, stools, and other items teetered haphazardly in a large pile likely to come down at any minute. The priest shivered next to

the door, the air coming from it much colder than Samuel expected.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, my lord,” the priest said, his brows creased with worry. “It would break my heart to oversee your naming and your funeral.”

Samuel looked at the elderly man, surprisingly touched by the sentiment. He extended his hand to the man who took it firmly. “Not to worry, I’ve got everything under control. You’ll be seeing me soon.”

“With a sizable donation, I expect,” the priest joked dryly, patting the back of Samuel’s palm with his other hand. “Good luck.”

Samuel laughed briefly as he bid the priest farewell and stepped through the door into the tunnel. Aurora and Ylvesnia stepped in behind him. The blonde snapped her fingers, creating a small candle flame just above her palm to light the way for them.

“Lead the way, m’lord,” Wilson said, entering the tunnel behind Ylvesnia.

“Wilson,” Samuel responded hesitantly, glancing at the valet’s cane. “You don’t need to do this.”

Reaching into his coat, Wilson pulled out a small revolver and cocked the hammer, the man’s eyes gleaming with a steely resolve. “I think I’d rather see this through if it’s all the same to you, m’lord.”

“Very well, you bring up the rear then, I guess.” Samuel didn’t have it in him to argue with the man, especially when Ciriscastre had been home to the older valet for longer than himself.

The first section of the tunnel was a long, straight, bricked corridor with only a few holes along the walls for drainage to break up the repetition. The gloom was seemingly impenetrable even after Aurora brightened the light from the flame hovering over her palm.

Every step they took seemed to cause the musty, damp smell of the tunnel to intensify, even as it began to slope gently upward. Samuel wondered briefly why they wouldn't just have built it with stairs before remembering that one of the chief purposes of the tunnel was to move bodies from one crypt to another. Stairs on a steeper grade would have been a bad choice.

“What’s the plan from here?” Aurora whispered aside to him. “Kick the door open and start slinging spells?”

“If that’s what needs to happen,” Samuel agreed. “But if not, then we’ll break into pairs. You and I will go straight to my father’s chambers to see if he’s there.”

“I’ll have a look at his study downstairs, then,” Wilson said from behind them. “He’s bound to be there if not in his chambers.”

“Then we get him to safety,” Ylvesnia continued. “Before any fightin’ starts. If such is required, anyway.”

Samuel nodded his agreement as the corridor curved into another level span. After just a few minutes, the musty smell Samuel had almost become accustomed to suddenly changed. The air was a little warmer, which made the putrid smell all the worse.

“Ugh!” Snowball gagged, clapping both hands over her nose. “What is that!?”

“Furosent,” Samuel wretched. “Widows say we’re reaching the end of the tunnel. It’s blocked off, but there’s a gap in the wall where the smell is coming from.”

“Can they get through it?” Ylvesnia asked.

Closing his eyes, Samuel focused briefly on the link between him and the widows and shook his head. “No, too small even for them.”

As they approached the end of the corridor, Samuel knelt briefly to let the widows crawl up his arm before settling on his shoulder. Pressing his hand to the wall a few times, he was

able to find the seam where the door ought to have opened. It was made of a smoother stone than the surrounding brick and felt as though it had been shaped from much larger pieces, perhaps through magic. He turned to look over at Snowball. "Alright, you know what to do."

The familiar stepped forward, positioning herself in front of the door before motioning for them to stand back. Whirling around to create momentum in one powerful leg while the other remained planted, Snowball's kick cracked the stone on impact. Thin beams of light spilled into the tunnel from whatever lay beyond. Surprised that one strike wasn't enough, Snowball glanced at the group before leaning into a standing sidekick to finish the job. Pieces of stone fell inward, scattering across the floor to the surprise of the creatures beyond.

The room, which Samuel recognized as old kennels for his grandfather's hounds, held rows of caged furosents that grew discontent from the commotion of crumbling stone. Stepping into the room, Samuel saw that the hidden passage had been closed up by a fireplace that had been constructed and placed in the room to keep the animals warm in the winter.

"Ah, I should have known," Wilson chuckled as he exited the tunnel. "Your grandfather's kennels."

"Kennels?" Aurora repeated, her voice muffled slightly by the hand over her nose. "Lot of space for kennels. Why are there furosents here?"

With a flick of his wrist and a mutter, Samuel flung a dart of pure cold at the armed man who came scrambling in through the door. The uniform was Terthish but of the regular army rather than those normally assigned to guard the castle.

"Off to a good start," Aurora grumbled as she moved quickly past Samuel to check the door. Though he followed after her, his pace slowed as he passed a desk propped up against a support pillar. A small magic lantern illuminated the desktop with a cool, white light. It was littered with books,



ledgers, and files, which Samuel flipped through with one hand as he drew his spear and kept it trained on the door.

“What is it?” Ylvesnia asked, glancing over at him as she moved past.

“I don’t know,” Samuel frowned as he scanned the pages as quickly as possible. “Looks like records for the furosents. Dates, tag numbers...”

“They’re breeding them,” Wilson said, looking over another of the ledgers. “Then shipping them off to different parts of the country to release into the wild.”

Samuel’s eyes darted up to Wilson as the man handed him the ledger he was holding. His eyes flew over the first few pages before dropping it on the desk abruptly. “The Justicars have been breeding the furosents?”

“It would seem so, m’lord,” Wilson answered grimly, aware of the implication. “We can sort it out when we’re done, but now is not the time.”

“Of course, you’re right,” Samuel agreed, prying himself away from the desk to join Aurora next to the man he had struck with his spell. He appeared to be out cold, having knocked his head off the stone floor when he’d fallen. “Aurora, you’re with me.”

Nodding, the blonde fell in behind him as they stepped into the corridor. “Not exactly how I imagined seeing your home for the first time.”

“Remind me to give you the tour later,” Samuel said, climbing the stairs quickly. The door at the top opened out into a large corridor with two more guards, both of which were not employed by the duke. They drew their weapons, but Samuel and Aurora were much faster with their magic. Samuel’s kinetic thrust hurled one against a wall while Aurora blasted the other with an unusually aggressive fire spell.

“Whoa,” Samuel commented with a pointed look at the smoldering uniform and scorched armor of the guard. “I don’t think I’ve seen that one in a while.”

“Can’t afford to take any chances here,” Aurora spread her hands. “Not after you promised me a tour.”

“Fair enough,” he muttered, pushing a set of doors nearest them open. Though there was a way to get to the main keep through a series of interconnecting corridors, crossing the inner bailey was a much faster and more direct route. It also allowed them to make use of more powerful magic if they needed it.

Snowball followed behind them. Samuel could feel her struggling to restrain herself from sprinting past them now that they were in the open.

The sun had begun to set on the horizon, casting shadows across the bailey, disrupting anyone’s ability to make them out clearly or for them to see anyone beyond a certain point. Somewhere far off to Samuel’s right, he heard a voice yell for them to stop, but he had no intention of complying without knowing if they were friend or foe.

“You’re up,” Samuel muttered to the widows, who slid off the back of his shoulder and assumed their humanoid shapes. It would be their job to restrain anyone who tried to sneak up behind them while relaying critical information to Samuel about the situation outside.

Aurora motioned with both hands as they ran, speaking a breathless incantation as best as she could. The result was a blast of fiery light overhead as Dawn, the heat Shrike, took to the air. Aurora’s link with Dawn wasn’t the same as Samuel’s with the widows, but it would be enough to give them additional information from the air. Dawn would also be able to light up any threat the widows deemed too risky for them.

As Samuel threw open the doors to the keep, a squad of armed guards leveled their weapons at them. Leaping to either side of the opened doors, the trio managed to narrowly avoid a hail of bullets that came pouring out. Snowball jumped to her feet, poised to rush in the moment the men began to reload.

“Wait!” Aurora whispered from the other side of the door, a sound that Samuel couldn’t make out amid the gunfire, but his familiar could.

“Tunfla!” Aurora said into her cupped hands, forming a crackling ball of light between them that was difficult to look at. Then, leaning over a little, she tossed the ball of light through the doors and leaned away with both hands on her ears. Samuel and Snowball followed her cue and did the same. A second later, an intense flash like lightning and a ground-shaking bang like thunder detonated inside.

“Ok, now,” Aurora said to Snowball, nodding for her to proceed. The familiar moved swiftly, bolting through the doors like a darting rabbit to begin beating on the blinded and deafened soldiers as Samuel and Aurora got to their feet.

“Is that blinding effect permanent?” Samuel asked Aurora with a note of concern, stepping over the bruised and battered bodies of the first few men.

“Not if it doesn’t go off right in your face,” Aurora assured him with a dismissive wave. “Try not to worry about it.”

In a space like the foyer and hall of the keep, Snowball was difficult to keep up with, even for Samuel. She could use every surface around her to propel her to the next foe. Bounding off walls and ceiling alike, her unusual attack vectors would have been confusing even for men not robbed of their sight a moment before. Samuel motioned to the large staircase. “This way.”

Samuel felt Snowball’s awareness split as her ears picked up something scratching below the stairs as he ascended them. Unfortunately, his reflexes weren’t nearly as honed as hers, and he could only take a step backward before an immense, black scorpion claw ripped through the wood like tissue paper. Instead of being caught in its grip, he was sent tumbling down and into Aurora before the two came to rest at the foot of the stairs in a heap.

As the pair struggled to untangle themselves from one another, the stairs were torn open by the owner of the claw that had nearly clipped Samuel in two. The creature was larger than a varo and smaller than a kindleback, covered in black chitinous plates. Resembling a scorpion with thick spikes and ridges on its bottom half, the top half was a beautiful woman from the waist up. Though nude, her body was covered in ancient jewelry, and her long white hair concealed the nipples of her ample breasts whenever she was at rest. Her human hands shimmered with magical light as the claws below her waist pushed the remaining debris of the stairs aside. The scorpion tail poised to strike dripped with thick yellow venom.

“The prodigal son returns,” a smooth male voice called down to them as a tall elf in Justicar uniform emerged from the hall atop the stairs. “My sincere kudos, Summoner Eamon. I don’t know how you bypassed all the added security posted on the walls, but I would expect nothing less of Charvienne’s son.”

“Charvienne...” Aurora whispered, looking over at Samuel with wide eyes.

“You knew my mother?” Samuel responded, only humoring the man to buy themselves some time. The creature standing between him and the Justicar was a scorpia, a powerful and rare creature in Midgardia and originally believed to be from the Sphere of Hell. Samuel had seen mention of them in his mother’s grimoire as being native to Eros before that, like succubi. “Because I don’t know you.”

“Ah,” The elf raised a hand, descending the steps to the lowest point he could before reaching the hole the scorpia had created. “My apologies. I was so keen to meet with you that I neglected to introduce myself. I am Summoner Delsran of the Justicars.”

Upon hearing the name, Samuel felt the floor go out from under him, his gaze moving over the elven man again in a desperate attempt to authenticate the claim. He had long platinum-blond hair with large blue eyes. The faintest hint of

elven clan markings could be seen poking up above the collar of his uniform along his neck. Aurora took a step back, readying her rosary for whenever Samuel had to make a move.

Summoner Delsran was one of the most powerful Summoners alive and had been regarded as such for a few decades already. It was said that he would have held the rank of High Summoner had he not chosen to leave the Mysterium and serve under the Justicars instead. The falling out had been historically messy, but Delsran's exploits in the last few wars had been so legendary that most had decided to look the other way.

"Say I believe that you're Summoner Delsran," Samuel responded. "I'm not saying I do, but let's just say I buy it for a moment. What business could you possibly have had with my mother?"

"Why, dear boy," Delsran sounded almost amused, his hands clasped neatly in front of him. "I'm the one that Summoned her, as well as the one that gave the order for her 'dismissal.' You could say that you owe your existence to me."

## CHAPTER 24



o,” Samuel shook his head. “That’s bullshit, but nice  
“Ntry.”

Delsran shrugged, seeming unconcerned with whether Samuel believed him or not. “Believe what you wish, but it’s true.”

“She was in Midgardia for years with me before she died, years with my father before,” Samuel argued incredulously. “That’s not even getting into how long she was here before they met.”

“Just over a hundred,” Delsran said.

“What?” Samuel’s face scrunched up irritably.

Delsran motioned casually toward Samuel. “How many years before she met your father. The number is just over a hundred. Though, she didn’t spend the entire time here, of course. But I first summoned her shortly after my Proving, which was recorded as approximately one hundred and twenty years ago, give or take a few years.”

The amount of detail in the answer made it difficult for Samuel to deny it outright, which could have been the entire point. If it was, it was an unorthodox tactic. Skilled liars usually kept lies simple so as to have to recall as few details as possible, and Samuel had to consider that a Justicar would know how to lie. Whether that would make lies more detailed or follow the behavior of keeping things simple was unknown. It was also confusing.

“You expect me to believe you just let her run off and have a human life?” Samuel asked, gripping his spear a little tighter. The act caused the scorpia to move a foot or two closer in her master’s defense. “Why?”

“Well, no,” Delsran admitted with a sigh. “I’m ashamed to admit it, but she broke free of my control. It seems your father was quite the smooth talker as a young man.”

Samuel’s brows furrowed as he glanced at Aurora, who answered his look with a vague shrug. It wasn’t unheard of for Outsiders to break free of Summoners. It was a common enough occurrence that it was discussed during their schooling. Weak wills, overreaching, and abuse were all common causes of summons going rogue and becoming unfettered. But none of those things squared with the Delsran he’d read about and whose works he’d read about in years past.

“So she was not only your summon, she was an unfettered one,” Samuel reiterated.

“Correct, unfortunately,” Delsran folded his hands in front of him. “But we’re getting off track. Your parentage is hardly the largest concern before us right now.”

“Agreed,” Samuel replied, glancing at the scorpia nervously. “I’d say you getting out of my house should be a higher priority.”

Delsran lifted one slender finger. “Well, on that point, it seems I will have to disagree. You see, you’ve caused me an awful lot of trouble in the last couple of years. I’m not normally the type to overlook such slights and hindrances.”

Samuel felt a swell of anger in his chest. “You? Do you have any idea how much upheaval you’ve caused in mine? In the lives of the people your furosepts have lured monsters closer to?”

The elf’s thin brow rose slowly. Samuel glowered. “Yeah, I’ve encountered your little project in the wild. We found the tag. I’ve also had a look at the books you have here to keep it all straight.”

“Well, aren’t we the savvy little investigator,” Delsran growled, feigning amusement. Somehow Samuel could tell that he was getting under his skin.

“I might not know why you’re doing it, but once I’ve dealt with you, the furosents will go right after,” Samuel threatened. This, strangely, caused the tension in Delsran to dissipate.

“Awfully confident in your blossoming abilities,” Delsran mocked. “Assuming you could expel me, what makes you think that this is the only breeding facility I have? It’s barely large enough to meet my demands for the region. I’ve many more to draw from, should I require it.”

“Why?” Samuel growled. “What is the point? You’ve left us vulnerable to Mystuval in the wake of the monster attacks.”

“Precisely,” Delsran agreed, pointing at Samuel briefly. “After Charviene’s betrayal and Summoner Elantrica’s interference, I had little choice but to take a different approach.”

Aurora gently closed a hand around Samuel’s arm to get his attention. Looking sideways at her, the blonde woman shook her head slowly, cautioning him not to give in to his anger. “Don’t take the bait, Sammy.”

“The heretic speaks,” Delsran feigned astonishment. “I thought perhaps you’d fornicated her into a near-mute state already. I’ve heard so much of her boisterous and vulgar nature. I admit I expected more.”

“Don’t pretend you know anything about me,” Aurora responded venomously.

“My dear,” the elf scoffed. “I know everything there is to know about you, even that which you don’t. For instance, your family has completely disowned you in the wake of your heresy to save their failing business ventures. They’ve gone on record airing as much of your dirty laundry as possible, much of which I have confirmed as spurious lies. Yet they persist in the hopes that it might save them a few coins. Such naked avarice is almost commendable in its pure dedication.”

“You’re so full of shit!” Aurora spat. “As if I’m expected to trust anything you have to say.”



Delsran frowned despite how much he enjoyed getting a rise out of her. “Now, see, that’s the thing about spycraft. Everyone believes it’s about deception and lies, but they fail to see that it’s not our deception and lies that are the focus. It’s all of yours. Knowing truths, the hidden truths people keep from each other is far more valuable than any lie. It’s a principle you’re familiar with that knowledge is power. In this case, it’s merely a matter of selective application of that power with just the right amount of leverage.”

“I wouldn’t call summoning a scorpia a selective application of power,” Samuel grouched. The scorpia raised her chin, perhaps proud of the fact that she was beyond even some expert-level Summoners.

“You might if you understood the extent of my capabilities,” Delsran warned darkly. “But I digress. I will present you with two options.”

“Pass!” Aurora rudely interrupted, causing a surprising level of frustration to flash in the elven Summoner’s eyes.

“You haven’t let me finish,” Delsran said coldly. “Wouldn’t you like to—”

“I said pass,” the blonde repeated, using one hand to mime the act of flicking her ear. “You’d think with those honkers on your head that you would have heard me the first time.”

Samuel turned his head ever so slowly to look at the woman he had come to care for so very deeply over the last year, wide-eyed with disbelief. Was she bullying one of the most powerful Summoners in the world?

“What are you doing?” he muttered through his teeth as discreetly as he possibly could.

Aurora laughed, nearly cackled, in response. “You know, I kind of buy that he had a hand in your existence now. I think I see it. Both of you nerds have the same problem where you like to hear yourself talk.”

Delsran's brows furrowed, his expression darkening in a way Samuel found distinctly frightening. His scorpia shifted uncomfortably, sensing the growing tension from her master.

"You just drone on and on," Aurora pressed. "Very disappointing to see that it only gets worse with age."

"ENOUGH!" Delsran roared before snapping his fingers. The scorpia surged forward with surprising speed, focused on Aurora as the source of her master's rage. It was precisely the kind of focus that led one to neglect their surroundings, which was precisely how Snowball took the scorpia by surprise. Like a shot from a cannon, Samuel's familiar streaked through the air before planting her heel firmly in the side of the scorpia's head. The impact was solid enough that it caused the upper half of the creature to bend at the waist while the scorpion part of the body stumbled slightly.

Samuel stepped back onto the crudely drawn amplification rune that Aurora had drawn with her shoe in the dust and debris covering the floor as he shouldered the spear. Tapping the run on its shaft to link its magic to the one on the floor, the magic of Samuel's spell went into overdrive. "RU!"

The remainder of the stairs on which Delsran stood erupted under his feet, scattering slivers and debris at high speed in a mostly upward trajectory. The elf fell through the destruction to land gracefully on the floor below, now on the same level as Samuel and Aurora, where they could reach him more easily. Though mostly unharmed, due to enchantments justicars often wore in their uniforms and armor, the exposed parts of the elf's face ran red with blood.

Briefly pausing to check how much he was bleeding, the justicar leveled his gaze upon Samuel. "Not bad, young man."

The scorpia shifted, its tail whirling around to strike Snowball out of the air mid-attack. Though the succubus had been fortunate enough to avoid the stinger on the end, the force was enough to bounce her off the floor painfully and send her sliding several feet back.

Aurora brandished her rosary to conjure a protection spell as one of the creature's claws snapped out at them. "Protecka!"

The claw struck the shimmering shield of light harmlessly, offering Samuel a brief window of opportunity to fire a kinetic thrust from his spear at the top half of the creature. To his surprise, the scorpia was capable of defensive magic as well, simultaneously working a spell while attacking with its lower half.

"Deflecka!" the scorpia cried, bouncing the spell back on them and shattering the shield Aurora had presented only a second before. Despite the reduction of power the shield had provided before being destroyed, the force was still enough to send the pair sliding awkwardly back along the floor.

Scrambling to get his bearings, Samuel saw Delsran conjuring a spell of his own from a ring he wore on his right hand. His form was immaculate and controlled despite his head injury. "Boldat!"

The stone, brick, and miscellaneous debris around the elf gathered quickly into a solid mass before hurling itself as a large boulder toward the two. Together, Samuel and Aurora produced the same shield spell as before to defend against the attack. The boulder shattered against the shield into a storm of smaller debris that shattered the windows behind them, covering everything with shards of sharp glass. The scorpia advanced, prepared to use the terrain change to her advantage.

"Eyes," Aurora said simply before hunching over. Samuel did the same, closing his eyes and covering his ears. Snowball rolled to one side, curling into a ball as she folded her ears down.

With a whisper, Aurora conjured the ball of crackling light in her hands and rolled it behind her between her legs, where it exploded in the same spectacular fashion it had with the soldiers. The light reflected off the various shards of glass, casting the room in an utterly dazzling display of brilliant, blinding light that lit up Samuel's vision beneath his eyelids.

The scorpia shrieked in agony, though much of it was drowned out by the crushing thunder accompanying the flash of light.

When Samuel opened his eyes, Snowball was on her feet again, rushing the scorpia. The larger creature flailed with human and scorpion limbs alike, unable to predict where Snowball's assault would lead her.

Taking a deep breath, Samuel forced himself into a state of battlemind. Without it, they stood little chance against someone as experienced as the elven Summoner. As a centered state of mind that allowed a person to become less emotional and less distracted by intrusive thoughts, it allowed a magic user's energy to flow more freely in defense of oneself. Upon reaching a state of calm within himself, Samuel stepped forward and began to move his spear in quick motions. Spinning it from one side to the other to keep his directional spells from being easily predicted, he hurled spell after spell at the elven Summoner, who met them in kind.

Despite his impaired vision from Aurora's spell, Delsran could intercept the magic along its projected path. Capable of sensing incoming spells and with a battlemind of his own, Delsran batted the spells to either side with ease while countering with his own. The battlefield around the dueling Summoners became a chaotic storm of attack spells meant to create even the slightest edge in the fight. Both were robbed of the ability to accurately command the Outsiders they possessed, so both seemingly had to rely on the training experience of the summons on their own. In this respect, Delsran had the advantage. Or he would have if that was what Samuel had committed to as well.

As capable as Samuel believed Snowball to be in a fight, he hadn't left her to her own devices without assistance. Aurora was right behind her, moving in tandem with her in ways that only Samuel should have been able to anticipate. With his mind cleared of clutter, his link with Snowball was open to the connection he shared with Aurora. Samuel had effectively handed Snowball off to the woman temporarily,

altering the succubus's spells, capabilities, and tactics in the process.

"Sumaheland!" Samuel growled as he got within range of the more experienced Summoner, his body screaming in protest at the immense amount of energy he was expending in the duel. Tapping into the stored lust he had built up over the last several days, he was able to bring Hecate onto the field explosively. The hellhound succubus burst from the floor behind the elven Summoner, an aura of intense hellfire fanning out from her body in all directions.

"Surprise, motherfucker!" Hecate laughed, acrid smoke spilling from her mouth as she spoke. As the hellhound drove a flaming strike toward Delsran's skull, the elf's ring hand snapped up and caught the strike with shocking speed.

Closing his hand down around her fist, Delsran forced a powerful dismissal upon her with the force of his will alone, sending the hellhound back to whence she came in a burst of smoke and fire. Though this would have been a staggering setback in a duel to the death, Hecate possessed a particular quirk that Samuel found unlikely for anyone to predict unless they'd already seen it.

Just as quickly as she was dismissed, she appeared again. Attacking from another angle, Hecate landed a blow on the elf's ribs, burning a hole in his uniform and weakening the armor beneath it significantly.

"What!?" Delsran coughed, swiping at Hecate with another abrupt dismissal, only for her to emerge from another blast of flame behind him. But even in his state of momentary confusion, Delsran was able to divide his attention between the two attackers, slapping the palm of his hand against the shaft of the spear to turn Samuel's strike aside.

In a surprise shift, Delsran went on the attack, advancing on Samuel with a fluid quickness. Samuel moved to strike the elf with the butt of the spear, only to find the blow had been baited out of him to provide an opening. Delsran lifted his arms under Samuel's, grabbed hold, and converted his

momentum into a throw back toward Hecate. Surprised by the sudden turn, Hecate failed to evade the body of her master, and both fell to the floor heavily.

“Fuck,” Hecate muttered as she tried to scramble out from under Samuel. With another word of magic from Delsran, the ground beneath them surged upward, hurling them up to the next floor at incredible speed. Each of them collided with the stone wall, where a loud pop from Samuel’s shoulder and blinding pain that shot through his body told him it had been dislocated.

“You’re a clever one, I’ll give you that,” the elven Summoner remarked as he floated up through the air, setting down gently several feet from them. “But clever will only get you so far without the power to capitalize on it.”

Samuel struggled to get to his feet, the pain in his dislocated shoulder causing his arm to hang limply at his side. He grabbed the spear with his other hand, knowing it would be better than nothing. Below them, on the ground floor, Aurora and Snowball continued to battle with the scorpia. He couldn’t tell who had the advantage without looking, and it was too difficult to focus on the link with Snowball due to the pain in his shoulder.

“It needn’t be like this,” Delsran said, spreading his hands. “Your heretic bitch may be too stubborn, but you strike me as a more reasoned individual. You seem more measured and insightful.”

“Is this the part where you offer me a chance to join you?” Samuel groaned.

Delsran sucked his teeth briefly before shaking his head. “No, I believe that ship has sailed. It was the offer I had on the table for you before this all began, but now I’m convinced you possess the same rebellious spirit as your mother—the same spirit that forced me to have her put down.”

“What?” Samuel seethed.

“I told you before. I brought her into this world, and I was the one who ordered her to be removed from it.” Delsran clarified. “Of course, I had to keep my distance. She would have sensed my presence well before I got close enough. Fortunately, the Praetian dogs take just about any anonymous tip seriously and are willing to pursue it with prejudice.”

“You...you sent the church after her?” Samuel stammered in disbelief. Behind him, Hecate held herself poised to attack on his word.

“She left me no choice,” the elf explained coldly. “I had such big plans for her, but betrayal such as hers cannot go unpunished. But we’re getting off track again, aren’t we? I have an offer for you.”

Samuel brought his spear to the ready, but Delsran hardly batted an eye before continuing. “Yield now, and your father will be allowed to live. I will even consider allowing the heretic to remain here with him under house arrest, but your life will be forfeit.”

“Not much of an offer,” Samuel mumbled. “Is that the best you can do?”

“Well,” Delsran frowned with a dismissive shrug. “It’s that, or I eliminate you by force and proceed to do the same with them out of an abundance of caution. Indeed, this whole wretched castle, and everyone in it, will likely share your fate.”

The tip of Samuel’s spear sank slightly as he chanced a look out toward Aurora, who still battled valiantly alongside Snowball. The two of them performed exceptionally with one another.

“You fancy yourself a protector of others,” Delsran pressed, wiping some of the blood from his face with a handkerchief he produced from a pocket. “Consider it carefully. Are your stubborn pride and desperate need to defy me worth all of their lives?”

Samuel stared down at Aurora, the woman he loved. He wanted desperately to grow old with her, live a life outside this turmoil, and perhaps even raise a family in the same home he'd grown up in. But if he continued on like this and failed, it would mean the end of her. It would mean the end of his father, his entire legacy, and the lives of every last person in Ciriscastre who had sworn themselves to their family. He could save them and ensure they would be allowed to find happiness and full lives without him.

“How can I trust that you’ll keep your word?” Samuel asked, returning his attention to the Summoner waiting patiently for his decision.

Delsran took a long breath, growing weary of the back and forth with the younger human. “Well, if it’s a question of honesty, I assure you I can be trusted at least as much as your own father, who has lied to you for practically your whole life and kept the truth of everything from you. More so, I’d say. So ask yourself what that’s worth.”

Samuel bristled at the barb toward his father but could not completely deny the underlying logic. It was true that his father had much to answer for, much to explain to him, but he would never be given the chance regardless of Samuel’s choice, it seemed. Tears began to form in Samuel’s eyes as the fire of his determination began to flicker and fade. He felt heavy, tired, and unable to see anything beyond this moment in time. He had to lean on his spear just to stay on his feet.

“Master,” Hecate whimpered. “Please...”

Delsran leaned a little closer as magic built in the palm of his ring hand. “What’s it going to be, Summoner Eamon? Don’t make the same foolish mistake as your mother.”

“My mother,” Samuel repeated, gazing into the distance. Too much had been unloaded on him to process it all, but the fact that the man responsible for his mother’s death was asking him to roll over and accept his own death now...For a moment, Samuel was a child again, weeping in the rain beside



his mother's lifeless body. His father had been the one to bring him back inside, to teach him strength in the face of adversity.

Samuel shook his head slowly. "My mother didn't entrust everything to my father, only for her son to throw it all away."

Grasping tightly around the rune he'd inscribed into the spear, Samuel rallied his focus just enough to channel what could be his final spell—one that Aurora often used. "Hemital."

"Wha—?" Delsran hardly had a moment before the metal of the ring he wore became superheated around his finger. Out of pure reflex, he tried to remove the ring with his other hand, only to burn his fingers on that one as well.

"You fool, do you realize what you've done!?" The elf shrieked in wide-eyed horror. After so many years of channeling magic as the Summoner's implement, the ring held a significant amount of magical resonance. Though resistant to breaking, implements were not indestructible. When one was broken, it tended to shed the entirety of its accumulated resonance all at once.

"How long did you say it's been since your proving?" Samuel smirked dryly. The young Summoner expended everything he could for this—Hemital was not conducive to most duels. It was a simple utility spell, but for this particular scenario—a metal ring used as an implement, with untold years absorbing resonance? With Samuel's rare degree of raw power, he had high hopes.

As an intense squealing or rending magic began to fill the space, Hecate hurled herself at Samuel to tackle him off the side of the broken stairs to the floor below. Now at the hottest the amplified spell would go, the ring burned clean through Delsran's finger, falling to the floor at his feet as he dove desperately away.

A torrent of violent flames exploded outward, washing over everything in the area. Hecate's body, immune to the effects of fire, shielded Samuel from most of the explosion.

The fire rose, licking across the ceiling and instantly igniting anything with a moderate flashpoint it touched. Below, along the floor, the flames crashed over the scorpia like a tidal wave before breaking across a hemispherical shield that had formed around Aurora and Snowball. Inside, the blonde that Delsran had referred to as a heretic held her rosary high over her head, channeling the magic to save her life and that of Samuel's familiar.

The stone floor struck the back of Samuel hard as he and Hecate hit the floor, the flames along her back a strange iridescent color as her natural immunity contended with the resonance of the ring's magic. She seemed unbothered by it as she slowly pulled herself to her feet, extending a hand to Samuel.

"I'm uh..." Samuel waved a hand at her as the flames vented from the open windows and into the corridor. "I'm alright here for now. Might take a quick nap."

The hellhound succubus furrowed her brows and looked up as Aurora rushed over to the two of them. Samuel nearly jumped out of his skin when she flicked his nose.

"Idiot! You probably have a concussion now. You can't just go to sleep!" The blonde scolded. She and Snowball stared at him with concern through smudged soot, blood, and dirt. He squinted a little, trying to recall any information he might have read about concussions but couldn't think beyond his exhaustion and pain.

"I'm pretty sure you're making that up," Samuel argued weakly. "That sounds made up."

"Come on, dumbass," Aurora laughed, pulling him into her arms and kissing him gently. "Let's go find your father."



## CHAPTER 25



“You were a cute kid,” Aurora remarked as she glanced at Samuel. The portrait over the mantle of him and his father had been painted shortly after his mother had passed. It had been specifically to replace the one they’d had with her when he was just a toddler. “What happened?”

Samuel laughed once before wincing at the pain rolling through him from head to toe. “Oh, don’t make me laugh.”

Aurora had already provided him with a bit of healing magic after popping his shoulder back into place, but she was doing her best to spread it across everyone else in need of it as well. She rubbed Snowball’s shoulders as the familiar sank a little lower in her chair with a pleased groan. Threads of gentle healing magic moved from her fingers into the succubi’s aching muscles.

“Is good,” Snowball said, her eyes closing as she savored the experience.

“Well, you earned it,” Samuel beamed. “You really held your own today.”

Aurora nodded in agreement. “We synced up surprisingly well too. I still can’t believe the switch worked out so smoothly.”

“Clearing out the way with battlemind and having the reserves of quidditas did the trick,” Samuel agreed, though Aurora sneered in disgust at the use of the word quidditas. He leaned back in the chair slowly, peeling his boots off awkwardly with his feet. He could never fully relax while wearing anything on his feet. He didn’t know why.

“Getting comfortable?” A male voice asked from the doorway behind him. As Samuel strained to look around the

chair, Aurora stopped what she was doing and gave her best curtsy.

“Your Grace,” the blonde greeted the duke.

Samuel attempted to get to his feet but found that his arms weren't up to the task of pushing him up from the comfortable chair. The duke's hand clapped down on Samuel's shoulder to keep him seated as he stepped around to see his son.

“That's not necessary, Ms. Brandt,” The duke said with a wave of his hand. Standing tall and statuesque, the man looked very much like Samuel, with a more chiseled jaw and gray along the temples. The duke was also built more muscularly, a fact highlighted by his attire tailored to his exact physical specifications. “After all you've done for us here, I think we can dispense with such formalities. Nathaniel is fine outside of a formal setting.”

Aurora stared back at him wide-eyed, glancing at Samuel as if to ask if his father was joking with her. The Duke turned his attention to Samuel, beaming with pride at the young man. “Look at you, the conquering hero.”

Samuel laughed bashfully. “Well, I don't know about that. We just followed the breadcrumbs you left for us.”

“Ah, but it took a keen intellect to do so, did it not?” The Duke countered.

“Well, yes. But it was mostly Aurora's this time, not mine.” Samuel smirked as he shot her a thankful look. Snowball glanced between the three, probably not fully understanding the significance of the Duke's position.

“Well then, certainly the need for such formalities is not required,” The Duke laughed, kneeling to have a look at Samuel. “How are you feeling, son?”

“Like I've been trampled by a herd of varo,” Samuel responded with a weak shrug. “But I'll live.”

The Duke nodded, glancing back toward the door. “Yes, I saw what remains of the staircase on the way in. Wilson informed me of the situation when he found me in the study. I never thought I would see him pick up a weapon again.”

“Surprised me too,” Samuel agreed. “Sorry about the staircase.”

“Easily replaced,” his father said dismissively. “What’s important is that you’re alright. But I’m afraid I’ll have to insist you clean up the burned remains of that creature you left behind.”

Samuel’s grin widened as he resisted the urge to laugh again. “What about Delsran? Any sign of him?”

The Duke pressed his lips together in a thin line as he shook his head. “I’m afraid not. No remains have been recovered, though considering the heat generated by the explosion, it’s possible he was completely incinerated.”

Samuel sighed, shaking his head. “No, he managed to slink away, I’m sure.”

“Hi!” Snowball said abruptly, shoving her hand practically in the Duke’s face. “Am Snowball! Master’s familiar!”

Looking at the succubus with charmed bewilderment, Samuel’s father shook Snowball’s hand gently. “A pleasure. I’m Nathaniel, Samuel’s father. Many refer to me as Duke or Your Grace.”

“Ah,” Snowball acknowledged with a nod. “Understand. Nice to meet you.”

Nathaniel smiled, looking at Samuel. “How long has she been speaking?”

“Since the start,” Samuel answered with a smirk. Snowball puffed her busty chest out proudly. Though the others spoke better than her, she was the one to do it first, which was all that mattered to her.

“Impressive,” his father remarked, inspecting her carefully. His interest appeared to be more from an academic perspective than anything else. “Built for speed, quick, powerful strikes with the legs, and mobility.”

“You seem to have insight on succubi I was unaware of,” Samuel quipped dryly. “Perhaps you’d like to tell me a little about that?”

Nathaniel sighed as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Of course, you require answers, and I’ve been withholding critical information.” The man stood and turned to look at the small fire burning in the fireplace. “There will be time for all of that, but you must know that I kept what I did from you for your protection.”

“I understand that,” Samuel acknowledged, leaning forward in his chair. “Lust Reapers being what they are—but you should have had something in place for what was a very likely outcome.”

Nathaniel turned to look at his son. Though his expression was stony and impassive for the most part, Samuel saw a pain in the man’s eyes that he hadn’t seen since he was a child. His father had always been a powerful and stoic figure in his life, only warming as he approached adulthood. He had always assumed that the duke just never understood what it was to be a father to a young child, that he related better to him as a man. But Samuel realized now that the strength he projected had been for both of them, to ensure he could make it to a point in life where he could finally be honest with his son.

“You’re correct,” the duke agreed. “I was not prepared, despite it plaguing my thoughts every day since your mother told me.”

“She knew?” Samuel asked. Aurora and Snowball shifted uncomfortably, unsure of the tone the conversation was about to take. “That I would likely become a Lust Reaper?”

His father nodded. “She did. She felt it was almost a certainty, so she began making preparations. I tutored her on many things, including the ways of Terth and its politics. Some she already knew, but there was much that she didn’t. She was brilliant and caught on quickly. She began to write down her experiences and try to relate things in terms others might understand.”

“About Eros?” Samuel tilted his head to one side.

“And Hell,” Nathaniel admitted. “She’d been to many Outer Spheres in her journeys but had the most to say about Eros and Hell. And about Praetia.”

“Praetia?” Aurora asked, unable to resist the urge to speak up. “What did she have to say about Praetia?”

“She spoke of her with respect, but not like a goddess,” Nathaniel answered, taking the question in stride. “Evidently, Praetia is an important figure in the Outer Spheres, but in a very different way than she is here. More like someone of my rank than someone to be worshipped. They’re called Paragons.”

“I’ve seen this term in some of the lore,” Aurora muttered thoughtfully. “I’d assumed the meaning was in line with the conventional definition, but perhaps not.”

“So the grimoire is the result of her work?” Samuel pressed. “It doesn’t seem to extend beyond the nature of the magic.”

Nathaniel nodded, leaning on the mantle with one hand. “There are more.”

Samuel stood, despite the screaming protests of pain that shot through his body. “More?”

His father nodded, glancing back over at him. “The Grimoire is only meant to be a manual. She attempted to codify magical practices and traditions from the Outer Spheres in ways that could be taught here. But she wrote other books on other subjects close to her heart. Some of them she wrote multiple times as her skill with our language improved.”



Samuel became agitated as he shifted his weight from one foot to another. “And she never mentioned Delsran to you in all that work?”

“She did,” Nathaniel admitted. “Of course, never by name. She spoke of a powerful Summoner that she had broken free of. Who had sent her to compromise me and use me for his own designs. She assured me that the matter had been dealt with.”

“You should have checked. You should have looked into it!” Samuel’s tone became distinctly more accusatory. “He said he was the one responsible for her death, which would never have happened if—”

Aurora’s hand on his arm jarred him from his frustration and despair, grounding him long enough to see the turmoil in his father’s eyes. He so seldom saw that look on the man. It was disquieting now that it had been brought to his attention. “Father, I’m sorry. I...”

“No,” Nathaniel said, turning to face Samuel. “It’s quite alright. I would not think to deny what you feel about this. There is much to unravel, but it must be done. I promise you, from this day forward, you shall be privy to every and any detail you wish to know. You need only ask.”

“A-Alright,” Samuel stammered, still feeling guilty about his outburst. Such disrespect toward his father was practically unheard of. Such understanding from him in the face of disrespect even more so. “It’s been a long day. A long year.”

“Speaking of which,” Aurora interjected, big blue eyes turning to look at the duke. “What will happen now? We’re still wanted for questioning for what happened in Eldruna. Word of us being here is going to spread like wildfire.”

“I’ll handle that,” Nathaniel replied, offering her a reassuring nod. “There are protocols for such dire accusations against nobles that must be followed. We are tried by our peers or by the king himself.”

“What about Aurora?” Samuel asked, placing his arm around her.

Nathaniel’s eyes gleamed with pride at the sight of Samuel’s protective instinct. “It’s my understanding that the main accusations contest that you somehow seduced or coerced her. Even if you were to be found guilty, she likely would not be.”

“And how likely am I to be found guilty?” Samuel’s brow creased with worry. Having just returned home, the prospect of standing trial for crimes he didn’t commit in front of a bunch of people he didn’t know was distressing.

“Your mother used to have a saying that I was rather fond of,” Nathaniel said stoically. “She would say ‘a snowball’s chance in hell’.”

Snowball tilted her head to one side with a frown, earning an apologetic gesture from the duke. “Apologies, I didn’t mean you.”

“We might want to work on that one before using it again,” Samuel chuckled. Snowball’s ears twitched as she glanced between the humans in utter bewilderment.

“Fair enough,” the duke agreed. “But the point remains that there is no chance that you will be found guilty. Not after I have presented my evidence directly to the king.”

Aurora’s brows shot up. “You’re going right to the king?”

“It’s my right,” Nathaniel said, spreading his hands. “As well as my duty. A rogue element in the king’s employ has attempted to murder my son, an Earl, and held me captive to further his own treasonous ends. I would be remiss not to bring this to his immediate attention now that I am able.”

“What should we do then?” Aurora wondered, breathing a sigh of relief that Samuel’s father had matters well in hand.

The duke raised his hands. “Whatever you like. Consider your freedom to be a foregone conclusion requiring only a few signatures. Here, in my home, you are free to do as you like.

Though, might I suggest a time of recovery and reflection before undertaking anything else?”

Samuel chuckled as he eased himself back down into the chair. “That sounds like a perfect idea to me.”

“Ms. Brandt,” Nathaniel began. “It’s come to my attention that your relationship with your family has been rather strained. In light of matters with the church, my invitation for you to remain here is indefinite. You needn’t worry about securing lodging elsewhere, provided you are comfortable enough to remain here. I will have a room made up for you near Samuel’s.”

Aurora’s eyes lit up, overjoyed with the duke’s generosity. Rather than offer him a respectful bow or curtsy in return for his kindness, the woman threw her arms around him as tears welled up in her eyes. “Thank you! You have no idea how much that means to me.”

A surprisingly warm smile spread across the duke’s face as he put one arm around her, patting her back gently. “You’re quite welcome, Ms. Brandt.”

Samuel’s recovery was a swift one with Aurora staying with them. Not only had her magic grown for utility and combat, but her healing abilities had blossomed as well. Complex wounds suffered by those loyal to the duke she would have been hesitant to work on a year ago were routine for her now. The battle had extended far beyond the Summoners’ duel, spreading across the grounds as justicars and those under their banner were prevented from coming to Delsran’s aid. The Widows had been instrumental in holding them at bay while Dawn had prevented any additional reinforcements from outside the inner bailey.

Both the Duke and Samuel were under orders not to leave the city for the time being, which was better treatment than the young Summoner expected. Once his father had informed the king of everything that had happened, a more formal trial was planned, and Samuel would need to be present for it in the flesh. For now, though, he stayed in his father’s home—

practically the best possible outcome. But he wasn't out of the woods yet, of course.

Rebuilding was going to take time, Samuel thought as he stared out the window of his bedroom, but there was a sense of calm that had settled on him regardless. He was home again, and the people he had returned to were welcoming of the quirks of his summons. Many of the succubi were allowed to move freely on the grounds, drawing glances and stares from staff and guards alike. Nadirah was the only one of his bound Outsiders who Samuel held in reserve until he could contain her aura of lust. His father understood the strange ways of succubi from personal experience, but Samuel didn't want to press the matter.

Strangely enough, one of his main concerns had been alienating the priest of Cherrywood. The man had struck a chord with him in their exchange and had stuck his neck out considerably to aid them. Succubi were creatures that the church staunchly opposed, but after paying the man a visit, found there was no animosity there on the matter. He refrained from speaking to him about it at length, preferring to keep the tone positive for the time being. He'd been steeped in negativity for so long that pleasant interactions like that and those he shared with the townspeople were like a refreshing breeze blowing through a home that had been closed up all winter.

Wilson had returned to his duties as Samuel's valet, though with slightly fewer responsibilities at Samuel's insistence. The man had been through a lot in the last year or so and deserved a little more time for himself, he reasoned. Especially considering that Samuel was not hurting for assistance. Without the need to have her concealed, Snowball was allowed to accompany him at all times the way any Summoner would with their familiar, and the succubus was much happier for it. The more she was allowed to roam and accompany her master, the more her communication improved. She would often pay close attention to Samuel's

father, listening to the proper way he spoke and trying to imitate him when she thought no one was listening.

Ylvesnia remained for only a week after they got settled before insisting she had to depart.

“How long will you be gone?” Samuel asked as he took his attention from the window to look at his mentor. “There’s still a lot for me to learn from you.”

“There is,” Ylvesnia agreed. “But Delsran is one of my people. If ye feel he still lives, then I must look into it. I will speak with Ketan as well, see if he knows anythin’.”

Samuel heaved a sigh of surrender. “Alright, I suppose that makes sense. But you will be returning, right?”

“Of course,” Ylvesnia replied with a twinkle in her eye. Samuel sensed that her thoughts had taken a turn for the lewd with her answer. “Ye could not keep me away forever if ye tried.”

“Heh,” Samuel chuckled as he approached her with open arms for a hug. “Alright, we’ll be ready for you when you do.”

The two embraced for a long moment before Ylvesnia pulled back, placing a gentle kiss on his lips before departing. Later he found out that the elf had stopped off with Aurora to say her goodbyes and again to thank his father for his generosity.

Samuel and Aurora returned to their studies after a couple of weeks, with Ivanna giving them a clean bill of health in her new position as the attending nurse in Ciriscastre. Aurora was her direct superior, instructing her on some of the more esoteric procedures and medical alchemy taught in the church. Though Aurora and Cherrywood had no bad blood, she knew that she would not be accepted back into the faith with open arms by the church at large. In truth, Samuel doubted if she genuinely wished to be. Her studies had included more material from the Norvathians, which she had begun to combine with their standard studies. Questioning the authority

of the Exalted wasn't tolerated with the Praetians the way it was with the Norvathians.

"Your mother was quite the prolific writer," Aurora commented as she dropped a small stack of books onto the library table in front of Samuel. "I finally got to go through her private selection. Your father undersold it a little."

Samuel glanced at the books before turning his attention back to the one he was engrossed in. "I'll get to translating them as soon as I can. Shouldn't take me much longer to finish reading this."

"No need," Aurora chirped smugly. "I can take care of it."

Samuel looked up at the blonde as she sat on the table before him, a self-satisfied look gleaming in her beautiful blue eyes. "She didn't ward them like the grimoire?" He speculated.

"Oh, she did," Aurora replied happily. "But I can read them now."

Samuel stared at her in a moment of silence before reaching over to the book at the top of the pile and flipping it open. He gestured to a subheading on one of the pages. "You can read this?"

The blonde leaned over, tucking a loose lock of her hair behind one ear as she looked where he was pointing. "The Schism of Eros."

Samuel's brows shot up with genuine surprise. "How?"

Wiggling her fingers in a childish imitation of spellcasting, Aurora grinned. "Magic."

"Come on!" Samuel groaned. "You're not going to tell me?"

Aurora cackled gleefully. "No, really! I literally made a spell for it."

Samuel made a motion with one hand for her to elaborate. She was enjoying withholding the information far too much. Aurora motioned between them with one finger. “The link between us. I used some of the Esera to craft the spell thanks to that.”

“You mean the quidditas?” Samuel countered.

“No, I mean Esera,” Aurora argued with a smirk still present on her face. “It allowed me to establish a sympathetic link with a slightly altered version of a language spell. So, now I can read what is written here.”

“Do you get the headaches?” Samuel wondered. His had become less severe with time, but too much time reading the grimoire always resulted in one regardless.

“Yeah,” Aurora’s grin faded slightly. “But I’ll get to work on that later. We can test it out together.”

“That has a nice ring to it, you know,” Samuel said wistfully, leaning back in his chair. “Working on this stuff together. For a moment, during the fight, I really didn’t think \_\_\_”

“I know,” Aurora interjected. He had told her about his moment of doubt before he rallied. But she didn’t know the whole story.

Samuel sighed, pressing on. “What I’m trying to say is \_\_\_”

“I know,” Aurora laughed a little, shaking her head. She wasn’t letting him finish, and he was sure that she did actually know what he was trying to say. But with a brief scowl, he managed to convey how important it was for him to say the words aloud.

“Thinking about what my mother worked so hard for made me really want to have that with you. Not as a cover story but as the real thing. I know it’s a little soon to be talking about what happens a year or more down the road for us, but I’d like to have you here so we can find out.” Samuel spread

his hands, having said most of what he meant to say. “I just wanted to put it out there, you know?”

“It’s out there. Now, I’d like to put out there that you stole my Hemital spell for your big moment.” Aurora said in a melodramatically accusatory tone. “You’re going to have to pay for that, sir.”

“Steal?” Samuel laughed, pretending to be utterly scandalized. “I’ll have you know that despite your attachment to the spell, it is readily available in any textbook at school. Some would call it a staple.”

“Name one time you ever bothered using it for anything before you saw me use it,” she challenged, leaning closer as she bit her lip. “Go on. I’m waiting.”

She had him there. It was possible that he had used it before, but he couldn’t remember a single time. Worse, the only times he could remember were indeed tied to her. She had been the exact reason why the spell had come to him at that moment.

“Alright, alright,” he conceded. “You win.”

“Well, in that case,” Aurora mused, rolling her eyes as she leaned closer to him. She took hold of his collar gently and drew him in, her lips only a fraction of an inch from his. “I suppose I could let you be my boyfriend. For now. As long as you behave yourself.”

Samuel grinned happily. “Yeah?”

“Just don’t let me regret it,” Aurora warned playfully, her eyes searching his in a way that felt like she was seeing right down into him—as if his soul was laid bare to her and all she wanted was to explore more of it.

“I think I can manage that,” Samuel agreed, closing the remaining distance for a kiss as the two embraced.

“Aurora?” Samuel whispered as she allowed his arms to overwhelm her.



She pulled back for a moment to gaze into his eyes.  
“Yeah, Sammy?”

“There’s something else I just need to make sure you know. Something I have to say aloud, at least once.”

Aurora grinned impishly and shook her head. “I love you, too.”

# THE AUTHORS



Virgil Knightley was once described as a modern-day Shakespeare if the bard had been more willing to include cat girls in his written works. Also, Virgil cannot explain how a radio works.

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