



GIVEN

BITTEN AND BOUND
1

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GIVEN

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BOOK ONE

AMY PENNZA

Given

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PROLOGUE

The Queen Consort died in the middle of the night.

Crown Prince Rolund rarely ventured into her quarters, but today was an exception. With the Consort's women busy preparing her body and King Baylen taken to his bed with grief, there was no one else to watch over Rolund's sister.

Half-sister, his mother's voice echoed in his head. In the six months since Princess Given was born, the First Queen had never let him forget the infant only shared half his blood. If First Queen Amantha had her way, the little princess would share none of it.

Rolund stood next to the cradle and looked down at the sleeping baby. Silky eyelashes rested on plump, pink cheeks. A wisp of pale hair showed under the cap that covered her head. Such a small thing to cause so much grief and death.

Everyone in Sithistra had been shocked when the Consort conceived. At thirty-five and with eighteen unfruitful years of marriage behind her, it was assumed Vessa of Lar Satha was barren.

"Because your father was blinded by lust," Rolund's mother was known to mutter under her breath. *"He allowed his desires to rule him and took a vampire to wife."*

Even as a boy, Rolund had been wise enough not to point out that Amantha herself, for all her pure human blood, had only borne the king one child. Rolund also found it odd that his mother—known for her religious devotion—disapproved

of a marriage grounded in passion. It was, after all, the Lord of the Mir that called men to take two wives. A godly man chose his wives in line with the teachings of the Brotherhood, whose towers loomed tall over the capital city of Beldurn. Mirror images of each other, the structures nevertheless served entirely different purposes. The Tower of the Mind was where the Brotherhood worked and studied. The Tower of the Heart was a place for worship and celebrating feast days. The Lord of the Mir called for balance in all things, thus a man's first spouse should be the wife of the mind, and the second the wife of the heart. And as in the body, mind and heart should never stand in opposition to one another.

That tenet was the foundation of the faith. Rolund's father had prepared him to rule since before he could walk, and Rolund knew that no king who hoped to sit the throne of Sithistra would challenge it. As the future king, he was prepared to bow his head to the Lord of the Mir.

But as a man of twenty, he was experienced enough now to understand the practical realities of having two wives. Two queens. Two courts. Two beds. Queen Amantha was not mourning Vessa—and his lady mother would never consent to mother the princess.

And now the princess's mother was gone. Rolund had never spent much time in the Consort's presence. But he'd done his duty when it became clear she wasn't going to survive the fever that had plagued her since the princess's birth. He'd visited the hushed chamber. Had knelt by the bed and wished the Lord's blessings upon the pale female in the bed. Even on the edge of death, she'd been achingly beautiful. But so still...until her blue eyes had flashed open and she'd grabbed his hand.

“Protect her. It's important.”

His heart had pounded so hard he'd felt lightheaded. She'd released him before he could recoil, settling back into the stillness so quickly he was left wondering if he imagined the whole thing.

Protect her. It's important.

He stared at the baby now. She was as still as the Consort had been. Panic gripped him, and he leaned closer, peering at the infant. Her little chest rose and fell. The pale brow furrowed once and then smoothed out. A dream, maybe.

He relaxed.

“She’s a lovely little thing,” a woman’s voice said.

He looked up to find a servant standing a few steps away. She was dressed richly, with the badge of Lar Satha pinned to her breast.

An attendant of the Queen Consort, then. And a devoted one, it seemed. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her pale cheeks tracked with dried tears. It was rare to find a human who cared for vampires, much less one willing to serve a bloodsucker. Now that her mistress was dead, the woman was likely to find herself dismissed. Already, there was talk of his mother “cleansing” the castle staff.

Protect her. It’s important. A dying woman’s words. Maybe her last ones. It was a burden, he thought, staring at the servant. But maybe he could do something to ease it.

“Have you been offered another position?” he asked suddenly.

The woman startled, then spoke quickly. “N-No, Your Highness. I wouldn’t dream of—”

He waved her to silence. “I’m not questioning your loyalty. I’d like to offer you a place in my service if you’re willing.” He gestured to the cradle. “My sister will need care. I would put you in charge of it with a staff to assist you.” Even as he said it, he realized he knew nothing of this woman. It was entirely possible she loathed children and would rather walk the streets than change the princess’s nappies.

But his worries were put to rest when her brown eyes rounded with shock—and then filled with tears of joy. “Oh my...yes. I mean, yes, my prince.” She pressed a palm to her chest, her gaze lingering on the baby a moment before returning to him. “I would be honored, Your Highness.”

Excellent. That was one problem of the day solved.

“I’ll see to it you have all the coin you need,” he told her.

“Thank you, sir.” She pulled a scroll of parchment from her sleeve. “There is something else, Your Highness. A messenger from the Tower of the Mind delivered this. He said it was meant for the king, but his grace is indisposed, so I thought—”

“I’ll take it.” He accepted the scroll and read quickly. “Did the messenger deliver anything else?”

“No, Your Highness. Just that.”

Rolund looked up. “Thank you.” Abruptly, he realized he didn’t know the name of the woman he’d just hired to look after his six-month-old sister. “I apologize. Your name escapes me.”

“Helen, Your Highness. Helen Gelfort. I come from a fishing community on the coast of the Southern Sea.”

“Thank you, Helen.” He held up the parchment. “For this, and for your service to the Crown.”

“Of course, my prince.” She curtsied and left.

He read the parchment twice more. The information within it wasn’t new to him. The brothers of the Tower of the Mind had predicted Princess Given of Sithistra’s birth one year before it occurred. That made her a Child of Prophecy. It was a somewhat rare designation. No one—not even the Brotherhood—knew why certain members among their ranks could predict births. Likewise, no one could say whether being a Child of Prophecy conveyed any special significance on a person.

Certainly, history told of some Children of Prophecy who had done noble or important things. Yet there were also those who had committed crimes, waged wars, or participated in atrocities.

He looked at the baby. “Which way will you go, I wonder?” he murmured, amusement stirring in his mind. The princess was unlikely to know anything beyond a life of dresses, dancing, and etiquette. The only war she need worry

about was one of slights and petty injustices waged by the First Queen.

He'd shield his sister as much as he could. Even Amantha bowed her head to the king's heir.

The babe slept on, oblivious to her mother's death and the weighty circumstances of her birth.

He examined the bottom edge of the parchment. It was uneven, as if someone had torn a strip away. It wasn't unusual for the scribes of the Towers of the Mir to conserve and reuse parchment, but he was surprised they sent an imperfect scroll to his father. Most people took more care when presenting gifts to the king.

But the realm was in mourning—at least officially. And anyway, King Baylen was in no state to see the prophecy. He'd barely visited the princess since she was born, and not at all when it became clear the Queen Consort wasn't going to survive.

Rolund set the prophecy aside and stood over the cradle. He had little interest in babies, but he understood why the ladies of the Consort's court gushed over this one. Half-vampire or not, she was a beautiful child. She was also a quiet little creature—as if she knew it was best to go unnoticed in a kingdom of humans.

He'd protect her. He hadn't promised any such thing to the Consort, but he'd taken that vow in his heart. He just hadn't realized it until now.

He drew a finger down one plump cheek. "May you fare better in Sithistra than your mother did."

The babe stirred, then blinked open two big, blue eyes.

Rolund smiled. A second later, pain shot through his finger. With a muttered curse, he yanked his hand from the cradle.

Blood dripped down his finger and onto the baby's linens. More blood stained her lips, which were now pursed as she began to fuss. Tiny fists flailed, and she let out a cry, revealing the tips of dainty fangs.

She'd bitten him.

He examined his finger. Sure enough, two small puncture marks were already scabbing over.

The princess's cries grew louder.

Rolund stepped back from the cradle. He tucked the parchment inside his jacket and left the room. He was the Crown Prince of Sithistra, not a nursemaid.

Time for Helen Gelfort of the Southern Sea to begin her duties.

CHAPTER
ONE

GIVEN

Excitement hummed in my veins as I hurried through the castle, my heavy skirts swishing around my ankles. I was due to meet my brother in the courtyard, but I had to make one stop first. I could only hope it wouldn't take too long. The king abhorred tardiness—a trait he inherited from his lady mother.

“May the Lord rest her soul,” I said under my breath. According to the Brotherhood, Queen Amantha was almost certainly well-rested indeed. Few in Sithistra had been so devout.

Although, the current first queen was doing her best to fill my next-mother's shoes. Voices drifted from Elissa's chambers as I approached. The door stood open. The sound of a rattling, watery cough drifted into the hallway.

Worry stopped me in my tracks. I knew that sound well. Everyone in the castle did.

“Are you all right, Princess?” a man's voice said.

The cough subsided, and then a child said, “Yes, Brother Tomas. I'm sorry.”

“No need to apologize, Your Highness. Now, where were we?”

I straightened my skirts and stepped inside.

A teacher from the Brotherhood stood at a large table covered with a colorful drawing. My eight-year-old niece, Princess Cathrin, perched on a stool beside him. Morning

sunlight slanted over them. It turned the brother's red beard to fire and emphasized the dark smudges under Cathrin's eyes.

"This is the *Fir*," the brother said, "the underworld where demons dwell." He pointed to a pit of orange flames at the bottom of the drawing. "And this is the *Mir*." He drew his finger up to a star-studded sky. "The Godsrealm."

Cathrin observed obediently. She touched the pendant around her neck and looked up at him. "And that's why we hold mirrors sacred?"

The brother gave her an approving smile. "That's right, Your Highness." He tapped the blue sky on the drawing. "Mir." Now he gestured to her small, circular pendant. "And mirror."

"Everyone is made in the image of the Lord," Elissa said as she strolled from her solar, one hand on her swollen belly. Her dark-green gown was embroidered with golden apple blossoms. "That's why we wear a mirror close to our hearts. We can see the Lord's reflection every time we gaze upon ourselves." She spotted me standing just inside the doorway. "Given! I thought you left already."

The brother rose immediately and bowed. "The Lord favors you, Princess."

I inclined my head and spoke the ritual words I'd been saying long before I understood what they meant. "He favors us all, Brother." I looked at Elissa. "I received your message. I didn't want to go until I talked to you, Your Grace."

Her eyes warmed. She turned to the brother. "That will be all for today. Please take Princess Cathrin to my ladies."

"Mama!" Cathrin cried, her voice full of outrage. "They just sit around and sew."

"Yes, and your stitches are crooked. It'll do you good to practice."

Cathrin opened her mouth—

"I came to say goodbye to you, too," I said quickly. "Since you're my favorite princess."

The little girl grinned. She climbed off her stool and flew to me.

“Careful, Cathrin!” Elissa said sharply.

Cathrin hugged my waist. I put an arm around her shoulders and tried not to let the shock I felt show on my face. She’d always been smaller than other children her age, but now her tiny frame felt as fragile as a bird’s. Without really thinking about it, I let myself listen for her heartbeat. It was a faint, thready sound. Between the beats was another sound—a soft shuffling I sometimes heard in the very old. Or the ill.

But these were things I kept to myself. “*You must never speak of it,*” my nurse, Helen, had warned me. “*Promise me, Given. Don’t give them any reason to remember your mother’s blood.*”

By “them” she meant the humans of Sithistra. It was good advice, but Helen was wrong. My father’s people would never forget where my mother had come from. For some Sithistrans, my human blood wasn’t enough to overcome the taint of my mother’s heritage. “*She’s the wicked product of unholy lust.*” I’d been younger than Cathrin the first time I heard Queen Amantha say it. But the words had seared themselves in my mind.

Cathrin coughed softly into my skirts, her body jerking. “Sorry,” she murmured.

I smoothed a hand over her brown hair. “It’s all right, favorite princess.”

Elissa watched us, her pretty face covered in worry. Rolund had brought in physicians from all over Ter Isir. None had been able to cure the child’s cough. Some nights, the rattling sound drifted through the entire castle.

After a second, Cathrin tipped her head back, her pale cheeks tinged with pink as she smiled. “You and I are the only two princesses in Sithistra.”

“I know,” I said with a mock sigh. “That’s why you’re everyone’s favorite.”

Her smile grew, as I'd intended it to. Then her little face became solemn. "I don't think you should ride to the Rift. Mama says the vampires throw their prisoners into it!"

"Cathrin!" Elissa cried.

"And the vampires practice blood magic. Their priests dip their beards in blood!"

"*Cathrin!*" Elissa's cheeks turned red as she gave her daughter a stern look. "I said the vampires have different beliefs than we do." She turned exasperated eyes to me. "Given, she misunderstood."

I waved it off. "It's all right." Inwardly, I didn't doubt for a second that Elissa had filled the little girl's head with tales. More than the Rift separated Sithistra and Nor Doru. The vampires worshipped thousands of gods, and the Lord of the Mir wasn't one of them. But it was their reverence for blood that caused the most tension. The Brotherhood condemned magic. Contrary to what Elissa claimed, they didn't view the vampires' blood worship as a mere difference in beliefs. They considered it sacrilege. A more cynical person might think their animosity had more to do with history. Sithistra and Nor Doru maintained a fragile peace now, but it hadn't always been that way. In ages past, vampires had hunted humans. The histories of Ter Isir bristled with atrocities carried out by both sides.

Elissa spoke sharply to Cathrin. "Apologize to your aunt."

The little girl lowered her head. "I'm sorry, Aunt Given. I just..." Her lower lip trembled. "What if you don't come back?"

I knelt and took her hand. "I'll have your father and his knights to protect me. And we'll stay on our side of the Rift." The excitement I'd felt all morning bubbled higher. I'd only visited the great chasm between the human and vampire kingdoms once before, when I was barely older than Cathrin. I wanted to know if it was as grand and terrifying as I remembered.

I also wanted another glimpse of what lay just beyond the Rift. I wanted to stand at the edge of Sithistra and gaze upon the purple sky of the vampire kingdom of Nor Doru. Known as the Deepnight, the blanket of twilight kept the vampire realm in perpetual shadow.

If I was really honest with myself, I wanted to acknowledge—if only for a moment—the half of myself I tried so hard to hide. I wanted a glimpse, however brief, of my mother’s homeland. I couldn’t see her, but I could see where she’d lived before she traveled south to marry my father. I knew next to nothing about her, or about the frozen north. Queen Amantha had forbidden Helen from teaching me about Nor Doru or my mother’s people. The scraps of knowledge I’d picked up here and there weren’t enough to satisfy my curiosity.

Anxiety shaded Cathrin’s brown eyes. “I still don’t want you to go.”

My heart squeezed. To her, I wasn’t *other*. I was simply her aunt who let her stay up late and eat too many sweets.

I kissed her forehead. “As princesses of the realm, it’s our duty to go where the king commands. He’ll take you to the Rift one day, too, so that you understand how important it is to keep the peace.”

“You won’t be gone long, will you?”

“Just until tomorrow. Your father wants to rest the horses overnight.”

Elissa made a sound. When I looked up, her brows were pulled together, and she clutched a pendant similar to Cathrin’s. “Rolund said that?”

I stood and tugged a lock of Cathrin’s hair. “Run along now.” I lowered my voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “And sit next to Lady Astrid. If she notices your stitches are crooked, she’ll take your piece and fix them herself.”

Cathrin muffled a giggle. She curtsied to her mother, then left with Brother Tomas.

The moment their footsteps faded, Elissa came to me. Her frown deepened. “Lidia said Rolund planned to return by nightfall.”

Tread carefully, a voice of warning whispered in my mind. At the same time, I mentally cursed my brother for pitting his wives against each other. He probably hadn’t done it on purpose. Most likely, he told Elissa his plans days ago and then spoke to Lidia this morning after he’d decided on a different course. It wouldn’t be the first time he left Elissa in the dark.

The Brotherhood taught that men should love and honor their wives equally. But it was an open secret that my brother favored his queen consort. Elissa was lovely with her soft brown eyes and auburn hair, but Lidia was ten years younger with black curls and deep green eyes—and a figure unmarked by a dozen unsuccessful pregnancies in as many years.

I plastered what I hoped was a reassuring smile on my face. “I’m sure Lidia heard wrong. And you know how Rolund is. Half the time, he neglects to tell his own steward his plans.”

“Perhaps,” Elissa said, not sounding the least bit swayed. She glanced at the doorway, then lowered her voice. “Given... I have a favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

She stepped close and spoke barely above a whisper. “I want you to check on the babe.”

Anxiety streaked down my spine. “Elissa...”

“Just this one time. I won’t ask it of you again, I promise.”

Indecision warred within me. For as long as I’d known her, Elissa had either been pregnant, trying to become pregnant, or recovering from pregnancy. Despite these efforts, Cathrin was her only child.

And the lords of Sithistra would never consent to a female ruler.

“Please, Given. It will put my mind at ease.”

I glanced at the door over my shoulder. “It’s against the law for me to take the vein.” As if she didn’t know. It was Rolund who had decreed as much.

For a moment, desperation shone in her eyes. Then she straightened her shoulders. “Very well. As your queen, I command you.”

My breath caught. She was no stranger to wielding power, and it showed. Her father was the Lord of the Meadowlands, a vast expanse of apple orchards and fertile valleys south of the Blacktop Mountains. In an earlier age, the lords of the Meadowlands had ruled their own kingdom. Even today, Elissa’s father commanded a formidable army. No Sithistran king had ever ridden to war without the support of the Lord of the Meadowlands. Rolund’s coffers would be empty without his father-in-law’s money.

Elissa knew all this, of course. It had made her a queen.

That didn’t change the fact that ordering me to take her vein was unlawful. But this was about more than the law. I’d lived under Queen Amantha’s rule long enough to know that. Rolund was my brother but he was like any other Sithistran man in how he viewed women. He had no patience for the cliques and power struggles within his wives’ courts, which he preferred to ignore. If I defied her, Elissa could make my life miserable in a hundred different ways.

“You’ll have to unbutton your sleeve,” I said.

She moved quickly, her hand trembling as she tugged the silk to her elbow and extended her arm.

My gums throbbed. Saliva filled my mouth as I let my fangs descend. Her heartbeat pounded in my ears. Suddenly, all I could see was the tracing of blue veins under her pale skin. *It’s been so long...*

I seized her arm and struck.

She cried out. Then she moaned low in her throat.

Pleasure swept me, and I moaned too. Blood flooded my mouth. It was richer than wine. Better than the most decadent dessert. The thump of her heart grew louder—and then

centered low in my core, in the most secret part of me. The place I only dared to touch late at night when I was alone and restless. I ached for her delicious blood the way I sometimes ached between my legs.

Rolund was right to forbid this. It was so very dangerous, this ache.

Elissa shuddered and swayed. The mirror pendant around her neck shifted, and my reflection swung into view. My eyes glowed with an eerie blue light. My mouth was stretched in a grimace, my fangs embedded deep in her arm.

Monster.

The spell broke. I reared back, pausing only long enough to lick the wound to seal it. Trembling, I dropped her arm and spun away. My chest heaved as I struggled to catch my breath. Pleasure still coursed through me. Buried within it, a far more powerful force urged me to pursue *more* pleasure. To finish what I started.

I clenched my jaw and ignored it.

Behind me came the rustle of fabric. A moment later, Elissa spoke at my shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Given. I know that’s difficult for you.”

She had no idea. No inkling of what she’d nearly unleashed.

Her voice was hesitant. “What of the babe?”

I closed my eyes briefly. The question was enough to wash the last of the pleasure—and the hunger—away. When I turned, her expression was a mix of regret and worry. She rested one hand on the swell of her stomach.

“All is well,” I said.

Relief spread over her face. “Thank you.”

“I should go.” I curtsied, and I was halfway to the door when she called for me to stop.

She walked quickly to me. “Here, take this.” She removed her pendant and put it over my head. The small, round mirror

settled between my breasts. “May the Lord protect you.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Don’t do that. Please, just...” She took my hand and squeezed it. “The Rift is dangerous. Promise you’ll be careful today.”

“As I told Cathrin, I’ll stay on this side of it.” Not *our* side. As Elissa had so handily reminded me, I could never truly lay claim to that designation. Nothing in Sithistra was wholly mine. Like the Rift itself, I was divided. Halved. Part human, part monster.

And today the two sides of my nature would meet in the middle.

Elissa dropped my hand, but the worry in her eyes remained. “Go then,” she whispered. “You know how Rolund hates it when you’re tardy.”

I curtsied again and left.

CHAPTER
TWO

GIVEN

Fifteen minutes later, my brother's squire led me down the double column of knights and horses waiting in the courtyard. "The king is spitting mad about the delay, Princess. Another five minutes, and I think he would have fetched you himself."

Elissa's pendant bounced against my chest. I shoved it down the front of my bodice, then hefted my skirts and walked faster. My cloak fluttered behind me. "Let's be glad it didn't come to that, Treston."

We reached my brother, who stood at the head of the column with a cluster of lords and several of his Green Guards. The Guards were easy to distinguish by their green cloaks, which bore the symbol of Sithistra. As the king's personal guard, they were the only knights permitted to wear it. Their cloaks depicted the Towers surrounded by the Solgard River and topped by a blazing sun. All the men wore full armor, although their heads were bare. Rolund broke off his conversation and watched in stony silence as I rushed up and offered a deep curtsy.

"Apologies, Your Grace," I said. "I was speaking to the queen."

My brother's gaze sharpened. "Which one?"

"Elissa, sir."

Blue eyes the same deep shade as my own lingered on my face until heat crept into my cheeks. There was nothing to do but stand there and wait for him to speak. Our father had

yelled when he was angry. Rolund never did. He just stewed in displeasure until he decided on a fitting punishment for whoever had been stupid enough to provoke his ire.

He was going to make me ride in one of the carriages. I darted a look at the wooden contraptions, and my heart sank. They were little more than cages on wheels, with silk panels that made it impossible to see out. Right now, they held *thralls* bound for Nor Doru. It was no dishonor to ride with them, but my stomach revolted every time I was forced to travel in one of the creaking, rolling conveyances.

I lowered my gaze and awaited my brother's judgment. In addition to his broadsword, he wore a solstone dagger on his hip.

He rested his hand on the hilt, as if daring me to take offense.

The silence in the courtyard stretched. One of the knights shifted his feet, his sword clinking against his chausses.

At last, Rolund motioned to his men. "Mount up. We leave at once."

Relief pounded through me—and increased when Treston brought my horse forward.

The squire gave my skirts a skeptical look. "You going to ride sidesaddle all the way to the Rift?"

I hiked my dress to my knees, displaying the leather trousers Helen had made me after Rolund threatened to sell my horse. "*If you flash your legs in front of his knights again, your brother is going to have apoplexy.*" As it often did, the memory of Helen filled me with a mix of sorrow and joy. This time, the sight of the trousers made me grin.

Treston grinned back. "Clever."

It took time for everyone to settle and fall in line, but soon we were past the castle gates and winding through the streets of Beldurn. The knights split their column in two so they were closest to the buildings where townspeople had gathered to watch the procession. Rolund and I rode side by side down the center of the street. A line of Green Guards rode just ahead of

us, their heads on a swivel as they scanned for threats. The Towers of the Mind and the Heart stretched toward a cloudless blue sky. The morning sun sparkled on the Solgard River, which formed a natural moat around the capital city.

I pulled on leather gloves, then drew my hood over my hair. Immediately, my skin stopped tingling.

Rolund nudged his horse closer to mine. He spoke under his breath as he waved to a group of women and children. “Your cheeks are flushed. You didn’t speak to Elissa. You fed from her.”

My stomach lurched. The accusation came so unexpectedly, I didn’t have a chance to school my features into anything approaching innocence.

My brother met my gaze briefly before focusing on the road. Under his short, dark beard, his jaw clenched. “You flaunt the law right under my nose, Given.” A muscle leapt in his jaw. “And today of all days.”

Misery wrapped around me. If I told him Elissa had ordered it, he would undoubtedly reprimand her. That could only end badly for me.

“You checked on the babe,” he said gruffly.

I looked at his profile. At forty, he was still fit and handsome, his temples barely touched with gray. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Is the child healthy?”

Lies sprang to my lips. It would have been easy to nod and leave it at that. But somehow, I couldn’t do it. Rolund was my brother, but he was also the king. I couldn’t deceive him, even to spare him pain.

He interpreted my silence correctly. “Another stillborn?”

“I...couldn’t say, sir.” Elissa’s blood had tasted like sugar-laced wine—which was how all humans tasted. A healthy pregnancy should have made it too sweet to drink. But I so very rarely took from the vein, I couldn’t tease out nuance. I wasn’t even certain such a thing was possible.

He stopped waving and gripped his reins. His horse tossed its head, obviously sensing his change in mood.

I groped for something appropriate to say. “I’m sorry, Brother. You and Elissa can try again—”

He snapped his head toward me. “As if we haven’t *tried* a dozen times already.”

My horse shied. Rolund grabbed my reins with a gauntleted hand and spoke in a low, soothing voice. When the beast settled, he released the reins and tossed me a look of disgust. “You speak of things you know nothing about. It’s long past time you were wed. A husband will curb your tongue, sister mine. And your impulses.”

Ice slid down my spine. The excitement I’d started the day with faded to dust. I stared straight ahead, blind to the cheering crowds. I’d known this day was coming. It was, as Rolund said, long overdue. Most noble ladies were wed at seventeen or eighteen. At twenty, I was fortunate to be unencumbered. But my freedom couldn’t last forever. My hand in marriage was political currency. My brother was no fool. He would spend wisely.

We rode in tense silence for a few more minutes. When we passed through the city gates, Rolund sighed. “My apologies, Given. I spoke in haste.”

I tried and failed to keep the stiffness from my voice. “Am I to know the name of the groom before the nuptials, Your Grace?”

“Father always felt that should be up to you.”

I looked at my brother sharply. “He did?”

“He made me swear before he died.” Rolund hesitated. “He wanted you matched with a lord who would honor you as a Princess of Sithistra.”

Rolund’s meaning was clear. My father had worried any future husband would treat me poorly because of the vampire taint in my blood. No matter how hard I tried to bury that side of my nature, I would never fool the people of Sithistra. Nor Doru was the enemy. The tenuous peace between north and

south held only because Sithistra ceded to the vampires' demands. The proud people of Sithistra resented it.

I couldn't really blame them.

I shook my head. "Why would Father wed my mother? It caused nothing but trouble."

A hint of humor entered Rolund's voice. "Do you count yourself among that trouble?"

"I think *you* do."

His lips twitched. Then he grinned. "Well, the Lord knows I've said it often enough."

We both laughed, and any remaining tension eased. Several of the knights looked our way, as if trying to puzzle out what had amused the king, who wasn't generally known for levity. I could have told them he hadn't always been that way. Once upon a time, before the crown and the need for an heir weighed him down, my brother had been kinder. Softer. When I was a child, and our father barred me from his chambers, it was Rolund who comforted me.

"Father hates me," I'd wept, soaking my brother's jacket.

Rolund's chest had rumbled under my cheek. *"No, he doesn't. It's just that you remind him of what he lost."*

I lifted my head. *"My mother?"*

"You're the image of her." He rubbed a thumb under my eye, drying my tears. *"Why are you up so late? Bad dreams again?"*

I nodded. *"I can never remember them."* My nightmares disintegrated the moment I woke. But they left me shaken and afraid to be alone.

Rolund clasped my hand. *"Come on. I'll take you to Helen."*

"No," I said. *"Let me stay with you."*

"Given—"

“I’ll sleep on the trundle. You won’t even know I’m there.”
It was too frightening to be alone. The nightmares always came back.

He’d shaken his head. But then he’d smiled. *“Yes, I will. Because you snore loudly enough to wake the demons in the Fir.”*

The clang of metal on metal pulled me from my memories. As the city gates closed behind us, the knights reformed into a double column, their horses’ hooves kicking up clouds of dust. In the rear, the carriages creaked and rattled.

Rolund studied the road ahead with a faraway look in his eyes. “Father loved your mother deeply. Anyone who saw them together knew it. He believed the same kind of love was possible for you regardless of your blood. It’s why he wanted you to choose your own husband.”

I hung on his words, wanting to ask for more detail but reluctant to interrupt. His mother had forbidden the court to speak Vessa of Lar Satha’s name. Queen Amantha had been dead for fourteen years, but the rule endured. As a result, I knew next to nothing about the woman who’d given birth to me.

Rolund turned serious eyes to mine. “I believe father was right in this, Given, and I intend to honor his wishes. But we must also be mindful of our duty. As royals, we serve the realm before ourselves.”

“I understand.” My path had been laid out for me since birth. Rolund might let me suggest potential husbands, but I had little doubt he’d require his seal of approval on anyone I picked.

And now that he’d mentioned marriage, I knew it was inevitable. Maybe that was his true purpose for asking me to accompany him to the Rift. He wanted to break the news—and perhaps discuss the candidates he had in mind for my husband.

My hands began to sweat inside my gloves. I looked at the lords riding closest to me from under my lashes. Many already had one wife, but they would take another...

I tore my gaze away. The excitement I'd begun the day with fizzled to a knot of anxiety. Despite their dangers, I'd looked forward to seeing the Rift and the darkened edge of Nor Doru. No harm could come to me surrounded by the most battle-hardened knights in Sithistra.

But nothing could save me from the future that awaited me. It was marriage and monotony, and I had about as good a chance of escaping it as I did surviving a plunge down the Rift.



THE NEXT FEW HOURS PASSED UNEVENTFULLY. WE STOPPED TO rest the horses and eat a hasty mid-morning meal. After another hour on the road, one of the Green Guards brought his horse alongside Rolund's. "We approach the Thicket, Your Grace."

His observation was kind but unnecessary. It was impossible to miss the Thicket, which cast a long shadow over the ground. "Thicket" was far too jovial a word for the ancient elven forest, which was anything but welcoming. The wall of trees stood in a forbidding line, the black trunks as big around as the Towers of the Heart and the Mind. Clouds stirred at the top of the trees, which some scholars claimed were a thousand feet tall. No one knew for sure, since men who attempted to climb them either fainted from lack of air or fell after they grew too tired.

Then there were those who simply...disappeared.

There was a saying every child in Ter Isir learned: *Only fools tarry in the Thicket*. None who entered ever returned. From time to time, adventure-seekers or those hoping to see the ruins of the fabled elven city of Vai Seren ventured into the trees. No one ever heard from them again. The people of Wesyfedd, the tiny free territory that bordered the Thicket, claimed the undead souls of the elves haunted the woods—and captured those who dared to trespass.

As the shadow of the towering forest fell over us, I shivered.

Rolund noticed. “We won’t get too close. Just near enough to use the Pass.”

“I wish we could build a bridge away from it,” I said, combing my fingers through my horse’s mane so I wouldn’t have to look at the wall of unrelenting black. The Bleak Pass was the only crossing over the Rift. Unfortunately, it was right next to the Thicket. The Pass itself was a marvel of engineering—a hanging bridge anchored by twin stone forts on either side of the Rift. It spanned the chasm at its narrowest point and was passable only on foot, as horses were too heavy for the wooden deck.

My brother offered a humorless smile. “You would give the vampires unfettered access to Sithistra.” He nodded toward the trees. “The Thicket reminds them of the perils of war.”

I couldn’t control my smile. “I know you don’t believe that story.” According to legend, the Rift formed during the War of the Three Kingdoms, when the elves of Eldenvalla summoned demons to help them invade Sithistra and Nor Doru. There was no Rift back then, and humans and vampires had fought their own war for years. With north and south distracted, Avenor, the elven king, saw an opportunity to rule the entire continent. Long rumored to practice dark magic, the elves brought forth a demon army from the Fir.

But King Avenor’s greed was Eldenvalla’s undoing, as the demons proved too difficult to control. When the elves sought to banish the demons from Ter Isir, the demons struck back by opening the Rift. The kingdom of Eldenvalla was rocked by earthquakes for days, which ground the elven capital city Vai Seren and every other town to dust and killed most of the elven race. As the gouge in the earth splintered east, the kings of Sithistra and Nor Doru feared their people would perish too.

The way the Brotherhood told it, the brothers used powerful magic to raise the Thicket, which stopped the Rift from widening and sealed the demons—and the doomed elves—inside Eldenvalla forever.

Rolund raised a brow at me. “You don’t believe it?”

“Believing it would require me to believe the Brotherhood once practiced magic.”

“It was five hundred years ago.”

“Five hundred and twenty-nine.”

He smiled. “So you *have* read the histories.”

“Helen thought I should know all the stories the lowpeople tell themselves.” I glanced around to make sure no knights were within earshot. “The Brotherhood condemns magic, but the brothers have no problem taking credit for raising the Thicket and saving Sithistra. Don’t you find that hypocritical?”

Rolund gave me a patient look. “Devotion is for the masses, sister mine. The Brotherhood traffics in power, and there’s power in letting the lowpeople believe you can raise a forest and banish demons back to the Fir.”

His cynicism didn’t surprise me. Although Rolund gave generously to the Towers, it was rare to see him inside one.

“Perception is everything,” he said. “No one has ever been able to prove the brothers weren’t responsible for the Thicket. In the absence of another explanation, the lowpeople on both sides of the Rift believe the Brotherhood raised that forest and vanquished evil. The legend is as much of a deterrent as the trees.”

I studied the long shadows that fell over the road. “If everyone believes the Brotherhood raised the Thicket and defeated the elves, why do we bargain with Nor Doru? King Laurent demands thralls. Why give him our people’s blood when we could simply threaten to seal his kingdom behind another forest? Complying with Laurent’s terms makes us look weak.”

Rolund didn’t respond. When I turned, he sat stiffly in the saddle, all humor gone from his face.

“It was only an observation, Brother—”

“The Deepnight creeps south, or have you forgotten?”

I hadn't. The encroachment of Nor Doru's blanket of everlasting dusk had been the talk of Sithistra for years. No one was certain when it had started moving. For as long as men had dwelt in Ter Isir, the sun was the only thing that kept humanity from being invaded and enslaved by our powerful northern neighbors. But now the twilight of Nor Doru was adrift. Every year, the threat loomed larger.

The thunder of hooves drew Rolund's attention, saving me a response. Treston galloped toward us, his cloak flying out behind him.

Rolund raised a hand, halting the column and the creaking carriages.

Treston pulled his mount to a stop. "The advance party has returned, Your Grace. They have news from the fort at the Pass."

"I'll speak to them at once." Rolund rode off. The Green Guards and a group of high-ranking lords followed.

Treston watched them go, then turned to me. "Is he still angry about you being late?"

I shook my head. "I found something new to irritate him."

The squire grimaced. "Well, it can't be any worse than what the advance party is about to tell him."

"What is it?"

He maneuvered his mount until he was close enough to speak without being overheard. "The vampires are at the Bleak Pass...*without* King Laurent."

Shock jolted me. "He's not coming?" It was a longstanding tradition, not to mention the terms of the ancient treaty between Sithistra and Nor Doru, for the kings of north and south to meet at the Pass. Once a year, the king of Sithistra sent blood thralls over the Rift to serve in Nor Doru. In return, the vampires pledged not to hunt humans. The exchange had continued unbroken—and without incident—for five centuries.

“No sign of King Laurent,” Treston said. “Just his general.”

The hair on my nape lifted as foreboding slid down my spine. I sat taller in the saddle, straining to see into the distance. The fort on the Sithistran side of the Rift was a dark smudge on the horizon, but we were still too far away to make out anything else. At the head of the column, Rolund, the Green Guard, and the lords gathered on horseback in the middle of the road. They talked with a pair of dust-covered knights who had ridden ahead to scope out the Pass and prepare the soldiers at the fort for our arrival.

Treston spoke under his breath. “I guess we shouldn’t be surprised Laurent sent Lord Varick in his stead. Word has it the king and his general are quite close.”

“You shouldn’t repeat gossip,” I said, but my mind was spinning. Lord Varick of Lar Keiren was a favorite topic of discussion among Queen Lidia’s ladies. The general of the vampire army was supposedly one of the most handsome males in all of Ter Isir. He was also known to be ruthless in battle. But the detail the women whispered about most often was the one Treston had hinted at.

Lord Varick was rumored to share King Laurent’s bed.

The ladies had even more to say about King Laurent, who supposedly enjoyed both males and females. According to one story, he’d seduced a lady at court to win a bet—and then seduced her husband mere hours later.

Ahead, one of the Green Guards broke away from Rolund’s party and raced toward us. At the same time, Rolund signaled for the column to move. Knights shouted and spurred their horses forward. The carriages began rolling again.

My heart pounded as noise and dust filled the air. “What’s happening?” I asked Treston. “Are we riding to war?”

The Green Guard reached us before he could answer. The Guard’s mouth was a grim slash under the nose piece of his helmet. “We go to the Rift at once, Princess.”

The next half hour was a blur of fear and confusion. My thoughts whirled with speculation as I clung to my horse. Were we hurtling toward a fight? Why would King Laurent send his general in his place? I had no answers to these questions, because Rolund remained at the head of the column with his knights. Fort Sithistra loomed larger. The Thicket cast its forbidding shadow over everything.

We crested a small hill.

And then I saw it.

The Deepnight.

The purple-tinged edge of the vampire kingdom spread across the horizon as if a giant had pulled a curtain over the sky. As we approached the Rift, my breath caught. When I was a child, the Deepnight had stopped at the edge of the chasm. But now the twilight extended so far across the Rift, the crumbling cliff that marked the border of Sithistra was bathed in darkness.

The Deepnight creeps south, or have you forgotten?

No. Not now. Once seen, no one could forget this.

And it wasn't even the most arresting sight. As the column stopped and Rolund dismounted, my gaze locked on the mounted knights who lined the edge of the Nor Doru side of the chasm.

Vampires. Every one of them. They sat totally still in their saddles, their eyes glowing through the haze of the Deepnight. Their armor was black, each breastplate stamped with the twisted night-blooming rose of Nor Doru. They weren't ordinary vampires, either. Even from a distance, they were massive. These were males from the warrior class—highborn vampires bred for speed and strength. They served in the highest ranks of King Laurent's army.

"This way, Princess."

I looked down to see the Green Guard at my stirrup. "Me?" I said stupidly.

He lifted his hand. “The king wants you at his side when the thralls cross the Pass.”

Confusion pummeled me. Rolund wanted me with him?

I let the Green Guard help me from my horse, and I was grateful for the heavy skirts that concealed my shaking legs as we walked the short distance to the Rift. The yawning chasm split the land like an unhealed wound, the gouge so deep no one knew how far down it went. It ran straight across the continent, severing Sithistra and Nor Doru from each other.

Except here, where the Bleak Pass connected the two kingdoms at the very edge of the Thicket. An eerie silence descended as the Guard escorted me to Rolund, who waited at the head of the Pass.

He turned at our approach, his knuckles white as he gripped the hilt of his solstone dagger. His lords clustered on one side of the bridge’s entrance, the rest of the Green Guards on the other. The Deepnight was so close now it caressed the edges of the men’s boots. It was near enough to touch, like standing under a porch while rain falls just out of reach. Sun beat down on my cloaked head, but a wall of dusk hovered less than a foot from my nose. For the second time in my life, I stood in the sunlight of Sithistra and faced down the perpetual twilight of Nor Doru.

The silence stretched. My heart thumped painfully. I tried to catch Rolund’s eye, but he turned away, his gaze on the center of the bridge.

Indistinct shapes moved on the Nor Doru side of the Rift. Booted footsteps rang out, and then a tall man in full armor and a crimson cloak emerged from the twilight and walked slowly to the center of the bridge.

No, not a man. A *male*. This was a vampire. He could never, under any circumstances, be confused for something else.

My heart raced as I took him in. He was clearly of the warrior class, with broad shoulders that seemed to span the width of the Pass. His black armor was a dull contrast to his

hair, which was the burnished gold of a newly minted coin. Eyes the same bright shade glowed in the swirling dusk. He had the look of a big, indolent cat. A bored predator prepared to toy with its prey—until it decided to strike.

He rested his hands on his sword pommel. He pinned Rolund with a hard stare, the tips of his white fangs showing as he spoke. “You’re late, Your Grace.”

His voice was deep and rich. In the quiet, it echoed off the stony walls of the Rift. I couldn’t help glancing at the chasm—and imagining the poor souls tossed into its inky depths. A shiver crept down my spine.

Rolund, still standing in the shafts of sunlight, stepped forward. The toe of his boot grazed the edge of the Deepnight. “Where is Laurent?”

“Not here,” the blond giant said. He let the air fill with silence before adding, “Clearly.”

Rolund’s shoulders tensed. Silent anger rolled off him. “Your king breaches the treaty, Lord Varick. I’m within my rights to return to Beldurn and send you back to Lar Katerin empty-handed.”

The Sithistran lords stirred. Some glowered at Lord Varick. Others gazed at my brother’s back with worry on their faces.

If Varick cared about any of this, he didn’t show it. His golden stare remained hard, his expression inscrutable. “Do what you wish, Your Grace, but do it quickly. My king expects me back before evening.”

One of the Green Guards next to me muttered, “I’ll bet he does.”

Varick’s gaze snapped to him. “Speak up, sweet knight. I couldn’t hear you.”

The Guard paled, then grew flushed. Everyone on the bridge would understand the insult. In calling the Guard *sweet*, Varick implied he’d taken the man’s vein.

After several seconds of tense silence, the Guard dropped his gaze.

Rolund turned from the Pass. “Bring the thralls.”

Knights sprang into action, their armor jangling as they jogged to the carriages. While they helped the thralls descend the steps, the uncomfortable silence around the Pass continued. I grew warm under my hood, and I found myself staring at the line of vampire knights who still watched from the opposite side of the Rift. Their crimson cloaks fluttered in a breeze that didn't stir where I stood.

Suddenly, the feeling of being observed crept over me. When I shifted my gaze, I locked eyes with Varick, who studied me from the center of the bridge.

All the force of those eerie eyes had fastened on me. Suddenly, I felt stripped. Picked apart. As if he could see under my skin to the uncertainty and fear that had sweat trickling down my back. The Green Guard was a fool to mock this male. He wore command like he'd been born to it—and he had. His father had served as commander of the Nor Doruvian army, and his father before him. Generations of warrior blood ran through his veins. All that power and strength stared out from his eyes now, stretching across the distance to press against my skin.

Flustered, I looked down. Moments later, the thralls filed past me.

There were twelve males and twelve females. All young and attractive. All clearly nervous. They walked in a line, most of them casting anxious looks at Varick and the vampires behind him. A few kept their heads down.

My gut clenched. Service as a blood thrall was voluntary, but it was common for poor families to press a younger child into signing up. The vampires treated the thralls with honor, compensated them handsomely, and sent them home unharmed. For the lowpeople, the money a year of service brought could lift an entire family out of poverty.

But there was a stigma attached to those who served. A vampire's bite wasn't necessarily sexual, but the act of feeding brought euphoria to the vampire and the bitten. The pleasure was...intense.

A dangerous ache.

Rumors about the vampire court abounded in Sithistra, and most of them centered on the sexual depravity of King Laurent and his nobles. Elissa banned her ladies from discussing the stories. Lidia reveled in them. The vampire king had ascended the throne at just nineteen years old. In the fifteen years since, the whispers that drifted from Nor Doru spoke of elaborate feasts and blood orgies that lasted for days.

A brother from the Towers of the Mir walked last in line behind the thralls. As they clustered at the head of the bridge, he bowed to me. “The Lord favors you, Princess.” He straightened, and the sun flashed in the mirror pendant around his neck.

I dipped my head. “He favors us all, Brother.”

The brother turned to Varick and raised his voice. “The Lord favors you, my lord.”

I startled, as did several of the knights around me. Lord Varick was a Child of Prophecy?

Varick said nothing. He merely gazed at the brother with the same hard expression he’d worn since he stepped onto the bridge.

The brother hesitated. When it became clear Varick wasn’t going to reply, the brother turned to the thralls and raised his hands. “May the Lord of the Mir protect you. Go now and keep his reflection in your minds and hearts.”

Rolund stepped aside. In the center of the Pass, Lord Varick did the same.

One by one, the thralls stepped onto the bridge and entered the Deepnight. They filed past Varick and crossed into Nor Doru.

My heart sped up as I watched their silhouettes grow fainter. *This* was why Rolund had insisted I accompany him. It was one thing to know Sithistra sent thralls over the Bleak Pass once a year. It was quite another to see the procession with my own eyes. My brother was right: As royals, our first duty was to the realm. It was humbling to watch the lowpeople

act so selflessly. This is what it took to keep the peace. Suddenly, my misgivings about marriage seemed shallow in comparison.

When the last thrall disappeared into the Deepnight, Varick faced Rolund once more. “We’re missing one, Your Grace.”

I looked toward the carriages, expecting to see a straggler.

“The Princess Given.”

Varick’s deep voice brought my head back around. He extended an arm, his eyes an eerie, glowing gold. “Come, Princess. Your brother has pledged you in service as a blood thrall. And as I said, my king is waiting.”

CHAPTER
THREE

GIVEN

For a moment, shock held me immobile.

All I could do was stare at Varick as confusion pounded through me. He still held his hand outstretched, as if he expected me to go to him.

As a *blood thrall*. I was a true-born princess of Sithistra—daughter of one king and sister to another—and my brother had bartered me away like something he owned? Lent me to the king of the vampires as...food?

There had to be some mistake.

A Green Guard grasped my arm and propelled me forward.

“No!” I wrenched from his grip and swung toward Rolund.

He was in front of me in seconds, his big hands gripping my shoulders. His eyes were stark, his jaw tight. “Given, I had no choice.”

“Have you lost your mind?” I searched his face as reality hit me in an icy blast. There was no mistake. He was sending me to Nor Doru—like the stream of thralls who’d just crossed the Pass in front of me. Nausea burned my throat. “Rolund?” I gasped, my voice cracking.

He pulled me away from the head of the Pass—away from the lords and knights. Still, their regard was a heavy presence behind us as Rolund grasped my upper arms and spoke in a low, urgent voice. “Laurent demanded it. He put me in an impossible position.” He darted a look at the Pass. “He seeks to humiliate me.”

I sucked in a breath. “Really? Because it feels like he’s trying to humiliate *me*.”

“I’m trying to keep Sithistra and its people safe.”

“By sending your sister to the court of your enemy to be *fed* upon?” I tried to pull from his grip, but he was too strong. “Father would roll in his grave—”

“Father would do *exactly* the same,” Rolund ground out. His fingers bit into my skin as anger and frustration colored his tone. “Dammit, Given, look around you. The Deepnight drifts south, inching farther into Sithistra every year. Soon, it will blot out the sun and destroy our crops, not to mention put our people at risk. The power to control it sits with the throne of Nor Doru. Laurent is the only one who can pull back the gloom. This is his price.”

“One you’re happy to let me pay. How convenient for you, Brother, that this debt doesn’t come from your own pocket.”

He growled and gripped me more tightly. “You think I haven’t made sacrifices? The crown is a burden and one I’d gladly lay down more often than not. But we were born to our stations. For whatever reason, the Lord put us on this path.”

I couldn’t stop the huff of laughter that escaped me. “Your devotion to the Towers is as convenient as your willingness to make me a slave. You *know* what awaits me in Nor Doru. Laurent won’t be content to sip from my wrist, Rolund. He’ll have me in his bed.”

Rolund winced.

I shook off his grip at last. “What will happen to me when I come home defiled?”

The anger bled from his eyes, replaced with something that might have been regret. “You’ll marry whomever you choose,” he said hoarsely. “I meant what I said. You’ll pick your own husband.”

“As if I could ever trust your word again.” My hand itched to slap him, but a lifetime of deference held me in check. “I’ll never forgive you for this.”

“Given—”

“Never.”

He fell silent. We stared at each other, the gulf between us as wide as the Rift.

And just as permanent.

I turned and walked to the Pass, numb to the stares of the men. I didn't care if Rolund followed. He was in my past as surely as he was behind me.

For now, the only way for me was forward.

I stopped at the head of the bridge, my skirts gripped in tight fingers and my heart hammering in my chest. The lords and knights of Sithistra clustered on either side of me. No one spoke.

Lord Varick hadn't moved. On the other side of the Rift, the line of vampire knights still waited atop their mounts. Vampires were faster and stronger than men. In every battle, they had an edge. But only the highborn could endure the sun. For the ordinary citizens of Nor Doru, the Deepnight was a refuge—and a prison.

Varick watched me with glowing eyes. Perhaps he wondered if he needed to fetch me, or if Rolund's men would have to drag me kicking and screaming to the other side of the Pass. The tale would be the talk of Sithistra for months.

The Deepnight touched the hem of my gown. Cool air drifted from the purple, twinkling mass. I lifted my chin and stepped out of the sun and into the twilight.

The temperature dropped.

And a riot of color assailed me. Like a dark room suddenly flooded with light, the world burst into full clarity. There was no gloom. No veil of darkness. Just bold, beautiful color. A glance up confirmed the sun was still there. But it was muted somehow. In Sithistra, I could never look at the sky. But now I could stare into the sunlight without pain. The world was *awake*, and it was like I'd emerged from a dream and was

experiencing real life for the first time. It was so disorienting, I was halfway across the Pass before I realized it.

I stopped and gazed around with wonder swelling my chest. Everything was stunning, as if the world had been painted with liquid gems. The chains that held up the bridge sparkled. The crimson cloaks of the knights of Nor Doru stole my breath.

“It’s the Deepnight,” Varick said. He was mere steps away from me now—and even more frustratingly gorgeous up close. His hair and eyes looked touched with gold dust. *Vampires are mortal the same as men.* It was a popular saying of the Brotherhood. But seeing Varick right now, it was hard to believe anything could harm him.

I pulled my gaze from the burnished waves of his hair. “Is it like this for everyone?”

“No. You see it with a vampire’s eyes, halfling.”

Halfling. But that wasn’t enough to stop me from becoming a vampire’s thrall.

Fresh anger pounded through me. If Rolund told the truth, King Laurent had demanded I enter his service—and then he’d heaped insult upon insult by sending his general in his stead. What kind of welcome could I expect to receive in Nor Doru? And what kind of life could I hope to return to? For as long as I could remember, my vampire blood had rendered me an outsider at court. I was the daughter of the king’s second wife—the vampire he’d wed against the advice of his lords and councilors. The courtiers whispered my mother had seduced him. The Brotherhood claimed she’d bewitched him. I grew up on those slanders, but my title had protected me.

But what good was a title now? I’d never be just *princess* again. For the rest of my life, *thrall* would follow in my wake.

Out of nowhere, a murmured voice lifted around me.

Thinking it came from the men at my back, I started to turn

The voice sounded again. And it wasn’t from the lords I’d left behind. This came from the Rift.

Again, the murmur came, spoken in a deep, rich voice that twisted through the air. I strained to make out the words, but they shifted like smoke. The voice rose and fell, varying from a high-pitched feminine to a masculine growl that was almost feral.

The hair on my nape lifted. I wanted to flee from the sound. At the same time, I was drawn to it.

I stepped toward the edge of the Pass.

Varick appeared in front of me.

My breath caught. He'd moved inhumanly fast.

Because he's not human.

“You'll find no help down there.”

My lips parted. Did he think I meant to jump? Or had he heard the voice, too?

His breastplate filled my vision, the matte black obscuring the Rift behind him. He was so tall, I had to tip my head back to meet his gaze. Once again, I was in awe of his beauty. Bright, golden eyes regarded me. He was golden all over, from his thick, wavy hair to the strong column of his throat. Blond stubble covered his jaw. His eyelashes were several shades darker than his hair and long enough to make any woman jealous. The ladies of Lidia's court would drool over this male. But if the rumors were true, he wouldn't notice.

His gaze dipped to my mouth...and lingered.

Confusion flitted through me.

Somewhere at my back, a horse whinnied. Varick's head snapped up, and something like anger flashed through his eyes. It was the first real emotion I'd seen from him.

“Come,” he said gruffly, taking my arm. “I've had enough standing around on this fucking bridge.” He hustled me forward, his boots ringing out on the wooden planks. We moved so quickly, I had to grope at my skirts so I wouldn't trip. Now that the veil of the Deepnight had been lifted, I saw the knights of Nor Doru in all their glory. There were at least fifty of them. Crimson cloaks streamed from their shoulders.

Their black armor reflected the glow of the muted sun. The human thralls clustered off to one side of the Pass, their eyes wide.

All watched the general of the vampire army manhandle me across the bridge like a piece of meat.

“I don’t need your help,” I said, jerking away from him.

In another quick movement, he yanked me to a halt. His hand flashed out, and I expected to feel it wrap around my throat. Instead, he snapped the ribbon of my cloak and then flung the garment away, exposing my hair and gown.

“You—” Fury burned hot and bright. “How *dare* you?”

“Don’t conceal your charms, halfling.” His golden gaze flicked to my hands. “Lose the gloves, too. Thralls don’t cover their pretty wrists.”

My fist flew.

He caught it lightning fast. His other hand gripped my jaw, and his voice dropped to a silky growl that made my hair stand on end. “*That* won’t happen again.”

My heart pounded so fast I felt lightheaded. Menace rolled off him in waves. He was violence held in check, and I knew in that moment I never wanted to see him loosed and unrestrained.

His fingers on my jaw squeezed, slowly forcing my mouth open. “Look at that,” he murmured, “you’ve bared your little fangs.”

With shock, I realized he was right. My gums throbbed. I hadn’t lost control like this in years. Shame twisted through me, along with other ugly emotions. Humiliation at being exposed. Anger at being ridiculed. Terror as the true vulnerability of my new position sank in.

He held me that way for a moment, prolonging my embarrassment in front of his knights and the human thralls. Then he leaned in and spoke close to my ear. “Careful, Princess. The monsters on this side of the Rift have a much deeper bite.”

CHAPTER
FOUR

VARICK

The princess jerked away from me with an angry gasp. But only because I let her. She knew it, too, and it made the anger in her deep blue eyes flare higher.

Interesting.

She was frightened. Of that there could be no doubt. But she was also enraged. And if I wasn't mistaken, her rage eclipsed her fear. With her flashing eyes and those dainty fangs itching to tear at my flesh, she was something of a surprise.

I'd expected beauty and vapidness. In my experience, the two almost always went together.

Given of Sithistra had the former in spades. That, at least, wasn't a surprise. Vessa of Lar Satha had so beguiled the old human king, he'd pissed off his queen and risked his throne for the privilege of fucking Vessa whenever he pleased. Lar Satha was a shitty little estate in the middle of nowhere, but Vessa had been called "the jewel of Nor Doru." The princess was supposedly the spitting image of her.

But I had to wonder where Given's fire came from. Not from her human side, surely. Rolund had about as much passion as a fencepost. His halfling sister may very well prove to be vapid, but she wasn't meek. If I had to guess, her brother had sent her north to spy.

Which begged the question I'd been asking myself since this morning, when I learned I was to fetch Given of Sithistra from the Rift: *Just what the fuck are you thinking, Laurent?*

There was only one way to find out.

Anger rose in my chest, but I shoved it down. With the Rift before me and the Thicket at my side, I needed a cool head. And I wouldn't feel totally at ease until we'd left Rolund and his knights behind.

"Lar Katerin is an hour's journey from here," I told Given. "You'll ride with me."

She lifted her chin. "I'd like my own mount."

I went to my horse and accepted the reins from my squire. I mounted and flung my cloak out of the way, then nudged the beast forward. The giant war horse walked slowly toward the princess.

She tensed but stood her ground, her chest rising and falling rapidly. She had fantastic tits—high and firm and big for her slender frame. She'd tucked her fangs away, but her pale hair was mussed from our scuffle. My thumbprint was a red mark on her chin. Her green gown was simply cut but obviously expensive. It was probably supposed to be modest, too, but it failed miserably at its task. She was built for sex—a fact my knights hadn't missed. More than one looked ready to ride to her rescue.

Charming.

Without breaking her stare, I lifted my voice and addressed my men. "Stop gawking and gather the thralls."

At once, knights moved to do my bidding, riding to the humans and helping them atop the horses. This was accomplished within minutes. Through it all, Given and I maintained our standoff.

"You can ride before me or facedown across my saddle," I told her.

Her nostrils flared.

"And before you decide, Princess, you should know I don't make idle threats."

I saw the moment she realized I meant it. Her jaw set, and she gave a tiny nod. When I reached down, she took my hand

and let me swing her up and into the saddle. I wrapped an arm around her waist and settled her against me. The second her ass nestled against my groin, she stiffened, her back going ramrod straight.

She was tall, even for a female of Nor Doru. Anyone looking at her would assume she descended from the warrior class. But as far as I knew, Vessa of Lar Satha's people had been ordinary nobles. A highborn but impoverished family of little significance. The Lar Satha estate had dwindled to a small tower house and a few acres of untended land. The family had died out.

Except for the halfling princess doing her best to avoid touching me.

Her scent teased my lungs. She smelled like clean skin and flowers and something rich and spicy.

A horse's soft whinny pulled me from my thoughts.

I'd been staring at Given's back. And now my knights were waiting for my command and doing their best to pretend they weren't watching.

"We ride for the city," I called out, spurring my horse forward.

Given held her body away from mine. We'd see how long she could maintain that position at a trot over the uneven countryside. The knights fell into formation, and we left the Rift and the Thicket behind.



WE WERE HALFWAY TO THE CITY WHEN THE PRINCESS'S SPINE unbent.

An admirable effort. She lasted longer than I expected. Another surprise. They were quickly accumulating.

The stitching around the neckline of her gown was exquisitely done. At first glance, the gold thread formed naught but a pretty pattern. Upon closer inspection, tiny gold

towers marched along a bed of emerald green. Her needlework, most likely. Rolund had set his half-breed sister to sewing the symbols of Nor Doru's blood enemy into her clothing.

My breastplate couldn't feel good against her back, but she rested against it anyway, no doubt fatigued from her earlier journey. Her white-blond hair was pulled back from her face and arranged in some kind of intricate braid highborn women wore. She gripped the pommel with tight fingers in an obvious effort to avoid leaning her whole weight against me.

"I told you to remove the gloves," I said.

She caught her breath, and I could almost hear her thinking over her response. At last, she settled with, "I assumed I would take orders from your king."

"Thralls take orders from whoever gives them. Or did your brother not tell you that?"

Some of the steel reentered her spine. I couldn't see her face, but I could imagine her pink lips tightened with displeasure. Some of it was assuredly for me, but I'd wager there was plenty for Rolund, too. Royal women were raised with the expectation of being sold, but the transaction was typically accompanied by a wedding.

I hummed under my breath. "Perhaps he neglected to mention that part. Nevertheless, you'll remove the gloves or I will."

"More threats, General?"

"Let's call it a promise, halfling."

Another sharp intake of breath. "It's cold."

For a moment, I let silence fall between us again. But only for a moment. "Do you know what makes vampires from the warrior class such lethal fighters?"

No answer. Not that I'd expected one.

"Superior senses," I said. "Superior speed. Superior strength. A superior sense of smell." I put my mouth next to her ear. "I can smell your sweat, Princess. I can gauge your

body temperature with startling accuracy. And just now, I heard your heart speed up with fear as you realized I can sniff out a lie.”

With jerky movements, she pulled the gloves off and flung them to the ground. The horse to my right promptly stepped on them.

“The right decision, halfling.”

“I don’t like that name.”

Reluctant admiration tugged at me. She was frightened and completely out of her element. Plenty of males in her position would be cowed into submission. But she refused to bend, let alone break. For now, at least.

“You shouldn’t hide what you are,” I said. “Denial leads to unhappiness.”

“Thanks for the advice.” She turned her head slightly, exposing the long sweep of her lashes. “Or was that another order?”

“A suggestion. When I give an order, you’ll know it.” I tightened my arm around her waist and kicked my horse into a gallop. Around me, my knights did the same. The sooner we returned to Lar Katerin, the sooner I could be done with this mission. I’d only returned to the city last night after being away for more than a month. I was eager to spend a day without armor strapped to my body.

And I was eager to get some fucking answers.

The princess clung to my arm, although it was clear she only did so to avoid falling.

Good. Things would go easier for her if she realized she no longer had choices.

She was beautiful. Undoubtedly, she knew it. Although, perhaps human bigotry had kept her humble. The Sithistran hatred for vampires ran as deep as their religious fanaticism.

Even so, she was the king’s sister. Her beauty and station should have guaranteed a line of lords eager to take her to wife. And yet Rolund had never entertained any offers for her.

Enough information flowed between north and south for me to know that.

Another mystery to unravel.

Spires appeared over the horizon. I clenched my jaw. The King of Sithistra's motivations could wait. Right now, I wanted to know what was going on in the King of Nor Doru's devious mind.

"We approach Lar Katerin," I said.

Given was immediately alert. She lifted in the saddle as though she was eager to see the city. The move arched her spine and exposed the round curve of her ass.

"Sit down," I said, my tone sharper than I'd intended. It achieved its purpose, however, because she obeyed at once—and then stiffened again. This time, she stayed that way.

It was another fifteen minutes until we reached the city's gates. The guards saluted us, and we entered with the crimson and black banners of Nor Doru snapping in the wind above us. Lar Katerin spread out in a neat grid, the outskirts of the city bustling with merchants in horse-drawn carts making their way into the markets. On a hill in the distance, the Midnight Palace's obsidian exterior glittered.

Given spoke with wonder in her voice. "It's not what I imagined."

I guided the war horse around a pile of fresh manure. "You expected streets running with blood?" Rolund, of course, knew better, but he'd obviously let her believe whatever wild stories his court bandied about. The Brotherhood did its part to spread falsehoods too.

"It's just...different than I thought it would be." Her head swiveled as she looked around. "The walls are so clean."

I grunted. "We don't mount convicts' heads on spikes like the humans. When you break the law in Nor Doru, we slit your throat and toss your body in the Rift."

She didn't answer, but I read her response well enough in the tight line of her shoulders and the rigid length of her spine.

The wind picked up, pushing more of her scent into my lungs. The spicy note was less powerful than the others. At first, I couldn't place it, and I found myself drawing a deeper breath.

Cloves. She smelled of winter and nights in the forest. It suited her.

“General?”

I pulled my gaze from the spot where Given's gown met her neck. One of my knights rode next to me with an expectant look on his face.

“Yes?”

“The men wondered if we're still training this afternoon.” When I said nothing, he swallowed. “Because of the feast. For the thralls—”

“I know what the feast is for. We train today as we do every day.” Our schedule had been interrupted enough as it was. “Threats to the kingdom don't pause for feasts.”

“No, my lord. I mean yes, my lord. Of course. I'll ready the men to train.” He saluted and wheeled his horse away.

I pinned my gaze on the palace, my thoughts on the meeting that had become inevitable the moment a servant handed me a note with the royal seal on it this morning.

Given stayed stiff and silent for the remainder of the ride. She made no comment as we entered the palace courtyard, and she didn't protest when I lifted her down from the horse. My men weren't the only ones preoccupied with the feast. The courtyard bustled with noise and people. Servants hurried to and fro, most too busy to cast more than a cursory glance at the thralls. But several did double takes when they spotted Given's svelte form at my side. When a cook in a stained apron lingered overlong, I pinned him with the look I used on squires.

“Want me to paint a portrait for you?”

He startled and scurried away with a mumbled “m'lord.”

At last, the palace steward appeared, his long robes snapping around his ankles. He rushed up to me and bowed. “My lord. Forgive me for not meeting you right away. The kitchen has been a tempest this morning. So much dropped food I could plant a garden. We’ve already put out two fires and not the figurative kind. It’s been—”

“Tibern,” I said, interrupting what promised to be a stream of information about palace happenings I couldn’t give a shit about. I gestured to the two dozen thralls. “Our guests have traveled from the Rift, and from Beldurn before that. I’m sure they’d like to rest before the feast.” Especially since they were on the menu.

“Of course.” The steward nodded. His gaze went to Given and quickly skated away. “Of course, my lord.” He turned to the thralls. “Ladies and gentlemen, if you’ll please follow me.”

A servant streaked across the courtyard, her gaze locked on Tibern. She skidded to a stop, dipped a hasty curtsy in my direction, and then went on tiptoe and whispered in the steward’s ear.

His eyes widened. “Another one?”

“Yes, sir,” the servant said. “Cook put it out.”

Tibern closed his eyes on a long blink. “Gods.” He shoed the servant away. “Go on. I’ll be along in a minute.” He turned back to me, his demeanor hesitant. “Ah, the king asked you to escort the princess to her chamber upon your return.”

The anger that had simmered in my veins all morning threatened to boil over. “Laurent asked me to do this?” The second the question left my mouth, I wanted to snatch it back. The courtyard was full of eyes and ears, including ones unseen.

Tibern looked like he desperately wanted to return to his kitchen fires. “Yes, my lord.”

“Which chamber?” I bit out.

He lowered his eyes and his voice. “The one next to his, my lord. The, um, queen’s old rooms.”

This wasn't the place to show anger. It wasn't the time to storm off, either. Not with eyes watching. So I said nothing. Let that be the tale tongues wagged.

With a nod to Tibern, I took Given's elbow and escorted her from the courtyard. I led her through the palace and up the various staircases. Down hallways and corridors. Courtiers bowed as we passed. Curious stares followed in our wake.

My anger grew with every step.

The princess was silent as we walked this gauntlet, and when we reached the royal chambers at last, the only sounds were the thunk of my boots and the rustle of her long green skirts.

Big double doors loomed ahead. To my surprise, they opened at our approach. A slight young man in dark gray robes slipped between them. A small, round mirror dangled from a chain around his neck. He carried a leather book tucked under one arm. Behind him, the doors shut with a solid sound.

He saw us and froze.

Given gasped. I couldn't fault her reaction. It was unusual to see a member of the Brotherhood in Nor Doru. But this one was also remarkable because of his youth. Typically, only elder members of the Brotherhood interacted with the public. The young men among their ranks were restricted to the Towers. But this boy looked fresh from his mother's teat. His dark brown hair was curly, his cheeks plump with the last traces of baby fat. Sky-blue eyes were framed by thick, dark lashes. Gods, one night on the streets of Lar Katerin and criminals would empty his pockets and lighten his veins. What the fuck was he doing in Nor Doru? In the palace? Coming out of *those* doors?

I gripped the hilt of my sword. "You're far from home, Brother. Perhaps you're lost."

His cheeks went pink as his gaze moved from my sword to my face. As soon as it landed there, he grew flustered and looked at my chest. "Ahh...f-forgive me, my lord." He bowed low. "The Lord favors you, my lord."

I could feel Given's stare as I stayed silent.

After an uncomfortable silence, the brother straightened. He cast me a wary look and then bowed to Given. "The Lord favors you, Princess."

She dipped her head and spoke softly. "He favors us all, Brother."

He flashed her a grateful smile. Then he glanced at me again and sobered. "I was meeting with the king. He's very interested in the history of Ter Isir."

Given murmured something polite and meaningless.

The brother paused, obviously waiting for me to do the same. When I didn't, the color in his cheeks deepened. "Well, I should..." He cleared his throat, then offered another bow. "Princess. My lord." He scurried off, his book tight under his armpit and the little mirror bouncing against his chest.

Given turned to me at once. "You're a Child of Prophecy."

"If you say so."

"The Brotherhood says so."

I held her stare.

"You don't believe in it." She made it a statement.

"I'd be more inclined to believe in it if the Brotherhood predicted the births of pig herders and shit shovelers. But somehow they only seem to forecast the births of people who grow up to line their pockets." I pointed to an arched door set in an alcove next to the king's chambers. "Your room is there. Go to it."

Anger leapt into her blue eyes. Her lips parted, and for a moment she seemed on the verge of unleashing fury she'd no doubt nursed since her brother sent her over the Rift. Instead, she snapped her mouth shut, turned, and disappeared into the chamber.

I stood with her scent swirling around me. My armor was heavy, and I wanted nothing more than to remove it and soak

off the sweat and dust of the road. But these luxuries would keep a while longer.

I looked at the double doors the brother had exited.

I had a meeting to attend, and it couldn't wait.

CHAPTER
FIVE

VARICK

Laurent wasn't in his chambers.
Not at first glance, anyway.

It didn't matter. I knew exactly where he was.

More games.

With a clenched jaw, I strode through the outer chamber and entered his personal space. I didn't look at the massive canopied bed as I crossed his bedroom and stopped before a wood-paneled wall carved with night-blooming roses. I pressed a curved petal. There was a soft *click* and then a hidden door creaked open, exposing a spiral staircase carved out of the stone.

The steps were as old as the palace, and they'd been climbed so often they dipped in the middle. Not all of the wear and tear was from me, although the gods knew plenty of it was. I'd been climbing these stairs since I was sixteen years old. Back then, I had to worry about someone catching me. A nosy servant or one of my father's spies.

But I'd climbed them anyway, because I'd never been able to resist the male waiting for me at the top.

Shoving memory aside, I made my awkward way up the twisted steps, armor scraping stone. My cloak swung out behind me as I climbed the final twist and reached the top.

And there he was.

Laurent of Nor Doru, the vampire king.

He lounged against the circular room's sole piece of furniture—a massive bed that, according to palace lore, had been built on the spot after carpenters discovered the steps were too tight to accommodate one even after it was taken apart. But one of Laurent's ancestors had wanted to fuck his mistress undisturbed, so workers had labored in the small, windowless chamber until they created a trysting place fit for a king. The *Rose Room* it was called. A winsome name for a space built for life's basest pleasures.

The current king met my gaze with a lift of one dark eyebrow. "Took you long enough."

He looked good, as he always did. I didn't want to notice. I didn't want to appreciate the tousled black hair and the piercing silver eyes. I didn't want to admire the pure, noble features touched with arrogance. The firm jaw with the lazy black stubble that saved him from being too pretty. The kissable mouth with its easy smile, usually at my expense. The metal bar in his earlobe the same shade as his eyes. The knowledge that he had another in his tongue—and knew exactly how to use it.

Fuck.

The irritation that had been nipping at me all day sank its fangs so deep I snarled. "Your *princess* is delivered. She's in the chamber next to yours, just as you ordered."

He pushed away from the bed's footboard, his lean body a contrast to mine. While I was wrapped in chain mail and metal plates, he was casually—almost carelessly—dressed. A pair of leather pants rode low on his hips. His shirt was open, exposing his smooth chest and defined abs. His feet were bare. Rings set with priceless jewels circled several fingers. He radiated sex, even when he wasn't trying to.

I swallowed a growl. "Having a long chat with that young brother about history, were you?"

One corner of his lips quirked up, which drew my gaze to his mouth. I tore it away, but probably not before he noticed me looking.

“You think I met him in here?” he asked, a teasing edge in his usual husky voice.

I met his gaze steadily. “You tell me.”

Laurent huffed a soft laugh. “Trust me, Varick, the brother is much more interested in *you*, for reasons both obvious and less obvious.”

Confusion drifted through me, which only made my temper flare higher. It was always this way between us. Laurent was the quicker, faster thinker, and I was forever scrambling to keep up.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, resenting the fact that I had to.

He drifted closer, his silver gaze alight with mischief. “The brothers are forbidden to take wives. All those men living in a pair of big, round towers just brimming with phallic energy. It’s not hard to imagine how they pass the time. I have a sense for these things, and I believe Brother Jordan prefers males who are a bit...top heavy.”

I grunted—and tried to ignore how his words affected me. It amused him to be filthy, but I wasn’t in the mood to entertain. “What’s the less obvious reason?”

“He has an interest in researching vampire families rumored to have elven blood.”

Gods. “And you thought it was a good idea to let someone from the Brotherhood come here? He could be a spy.”

“He was released from his position under less than favorable circumstances. Technically, he’s not even a brother anymore. He has no loyalty to Sithistra.”

“Is that what he told you?” Frustration built, as it always did when we spoke of our southern neighbor. “You so badly want to torment Rolund you’re willing to invite vipers into your court. This obsession with crushing the humans is a weakness, Laurent. Did it ever occur to you that Rolund might exploit it?”

Now both dark brows went up. “Bold words, General. Are you sure you want to call me weak?”

The anger that had been simmering in my veins all day reached a boil. “There are a lot of things I want to call you right now.”

“Don’t let me stop you.”

“You’re an asshole.” I turned and started for the stairs.

In a blink, he was in front of me, blocking my path. “We’re not finished here.”

“Yes, we are,” I snarled. My arm shot out, and I spun us around before he could react. The tight rein I’d kept on my temper snapped. I bore down on him, getting in his face and backing him up. He wasn’t a small male, but I was a lot bigger. Centuries of breeding ensured it. “What happened to watching each other’s backs? Rolund could have put an arrow in mine today.”

“He doesn’t have the balls to do that.”

I continued crowding Laurent, the metal-on-metal shifting of my armor loud in the quiet room. “Easy for you to say when you’re playing footsie with some brother in the palace. You broke a treaty and five centuries of tradition and didn’t even ask me what I thought about it. You sent me to the Rift with a fucking *note*. No explanation, no discussion.”

“I gave you an order,” he said, stumbling against the bed’s footboard. His breathing picked up, and a wild light danced in his eyes. His fangs showed between his lips. “That’s how it works, General. I give the orders. You follow them.”

Before I realized what I was doing, I had him across the room and pinned against the wall. I pressed my forearm across his throat and leaned into him, using my superior height and strength to keep him in place. I bared my fangs. “Oh, that’s not at all how it works between us. Maybe I should remind you.”

Silver eyes taunted me even as he struggled for breath. “I could have your head for this.”

I loosened my grip, my gaze locked on his mouth. “Fuck you,” I muttered, then crashed my lips to his.

Our kiss was hot and unhinged, an aggressive tangle of tongues and fangs. I speared my fingers through his hair and held his head in place while I plundered his mouth. He smelled so fucking good, like cinnamon and the spicy herbs his servants sprinkled on top of his bath. He tasted even better, which made me hard—and angry. I tightened my fists in his hair, using my grip to keep him where I wanted him.

He gave as good as he got, sucking on my tongue and biting at my lips. His fang scraped my sensitive flesh, sending a shot of my own blood down my throat. He must have gotten some, too, because he groaned and tried to deepen the kiss.

I shoved him harder against the wall, forcing a grunt from his chest as I denied him control. I stroked deep, curling my tongue around the bar in his. He pushed his hips against mine and moaned. Anger spiked along with my lust. I didn’t want his pleasure. I wanted to punish him—to make him hurt the way he’d hurt me. But to do that I’d have to stop kissing him, and I couldn’t just yet. Not with his taste in my mouth and his scent in my lungs.

His hand moved between us, unlacing my pants and freeing my cock. The second his warm palm closed around my rigid flesh, fiery pleasure seared my veins.

My hips thrust forward, and I ground against him, feeling the outline of his hard cock as I ravaged his mouth. But even Laurent had to come up for air sometime. With strength borne of desperation, he shoved me away. When I came right back, he slapped a hand on my breastplate to hold me at bay. He squeezed my dick with his other hand, then stroked up and down my length, working me with sensual skill that threatened to make my eyes roll back in my head. His silver eyes glittered. Blood dotted his lip. I wasn’t sure if it was mine or his.

I braced my hands on the wall on either side of his head and glared down at him. We both panted, our chests heaving.

Blood pounded in my ears. My balls tingled with the need to come.

Fuck, I wasn't going to last.

In a blur, I flipped him to face the wall. I manhandled him against the stone, pausing only to rip his shirt away. A few fumbles later, I had his pants open and shoved to his knees. His dick sprang free, swollen and leaking.

He jerked when I gripped him, then moaned when I began to stroke. His taut, round ass flexed. The muscles in his shoulders bunched as he struggled to hold himself away from the rough stone.

I put my mouth to his ear. "Given of Sithistra."

"What about her?"

I pulled his cock up sharply. With my other hand, I squeezed his balls and tugged down hard. As he sucked in a breath, I delivered a brutal slap to his sack.

"Fuck!" He sagged against the wall, his breaths ragged.

"That's for putting my men in harm's way today. Now enough of your games. You risk war bringing the princess here. What are you plotting, Laurent?" I gave his balls another warning tug before moving my hand back to his dick. I pushed my hips into his ass, my erection lodging in his crease. I was tall enough to peer around him, and I couldn't resist looking down at my fist wrapped around his cock. He was waxed smooth, his dick and balls and asshole totally bare. So fucking sexy. I wanted to punish him for that, too.

He shuddered as I stroked him. "Attend a Council meeting sometime and you won't have to ask questions like that."

For a second, I was too incredulous to speak. Then I slung an arm around his chest and hauled him against me so his back was plastered to my breastplate and his head rested on my shoulder. Still working his cock, I growled in his ear. "I have better things to do than sit around a table with old men who would fleece the kingdom to fill their pockets. Have you forgotten the threat in the Thicket?" The humans of Wesyfedd had reported strange occurrences for years. Unexplained

disappearances. Dark shadows moving within the forest. Eerie lights that danced in the air, as if they tried to lure people inside.

“Ghost stories,” Laurent gasped. “You accuse me of being obsessed with the south when you never stop thinking about that stupid forest. Our attention should be on the Rift and Sithistra. The Council agrees with me that Rolund is scared. Now is the time to strike. Unfortunately, the commander of my army would rather patrol trees and chase phantoms than see to his duties at court. You were gone for a fucking month!”

Anger tightened my hand around his cock. “So today was a punishment, then? A public humiliation in front of humans and vampires alike? I put up with enough shit because of what we are to each other. Now all of Ter Isir will be snickering.”

“Varick—” My name ended on a pained grunt as I squeezed the base of his dick.

“You had me fetch a female to warm your bed. But not just any female. You sent me to collect Sithistra’s princess like I’m your fucking errand boy. Then you made sure the kitchen staff saw me escort her to your private chambers. That’s how rumors start. The whole fucking court is probably buzzing about it by now. But you know that already because you planned it that way.”

“Since when do you care about court gossip? It’s not like you spend that much time here.”

“Well I guess I have to now, since you’re filling the court with Sithistran spies.”

He gave a soft, derisive laugh. “So now everyone is a spy? The brother and the princess? You’re paranoid.”

“And you’re a fool.” I thrust my hips hard against his ass, making him grunt. “The only reason Rolund would send his sister here is to put a knife in your back.”

“Then do your job and make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Rage lashed at me, urging me to release him and walk away. But I couldn’t. It would have been easier to stop breathing.

He moved against me, grinding all over my dick and forcing my erection deeper between his cheeks. His ass was perfect, and he knew it. Round and firm. Tight as a fist inside. He rocked his hips, dragging his hole up and down my shaft. Unabashedly wanton. Utterly filthy. Lust crackled through me. I went back to stroking his shaft, relishing his hard, silky length against my palm. I moved with him, sliding my dick against the hot furrow of his ass.

Within seconds, I was leaking, my precome slicking his crease. A moan started deep in my chest and wound its way up, escaping in a sound somewhere between pleading and pain. My resolve crumbled, loosening my hold across his chest.

He took advantage right away, twining an arm up and around my neck. His long, muscled body was plastered to my front, his smooth skin on glorious display.

Still working his dick, I ran my other hand down his chest to his taut abs.

He turned his head and spoke against my lips. “It wasn’t a punishment, baby.”

I teetered on the edge of losing control, my mind too clouded to decipher his meaning. “What?” I mumbled.

He turned all the way around in my arms. Eyes gone pewter with lust, he took our dicks in one hand and stroked us together. Heat blistered through me. My balls were tight and aching. Heavy with come.

“I didn’t send you to the Rift to punish you,” he said. “The Deepnight swallows more of Sithistra every day. Rolund is desperate for me to pull it back. I wanted to know just how desperate he really is. I got my answer—and his sister.”

The fog of desire lifted. I seized his wrist, stilling his hand. “At my expense.”

Irritation flitted through his eyes. “You insist on seeing it that way.”

“Because it *is* that way. You gambled with my life and set all of Ter Isir sneering behind my back. Rolund’s knights did it

to my face.” I shoved him away from me. He caught himself against the wall, and he should have looked ridiculous with his pants around his knees and his cock sticking out like a fire poker.

He didn’t, of course. Just one more blow in the volley he’d dealt me.

Heart thundering, I stepped close and gripped my shaft, bringing the tip perilously close to his. Fueled by anger, I jacked myself until my breath stuttered and my muscles seized. I came on a shout and then, and only then, did I break his stare. I dropped my gaze to his hips and watched my come spurt all over his dick. Thick ropes landed on his shaft and stomach and balls, until he was covered with my seed.

When I was spent, I yanked his pants up and stuffed his rigid cock inside. I pulled the laces tight, making him hiss. “Enjoy the princess, Laurent. I hope she keeps your bed warm, because I certainly won’t.” I turned and walked to the stairs, tucking my dick away as I went.

“You want her,” he called out.

I stopped. The hair on my nape lifted. Laurent wasn’t the swordsman I was, but his words could be sharper than any blade. He knew how to ferret out weakness. He dug under the skin with surgical precision, cutting through fat and sinew to get at the heart.

And he never hesitated to make the kill.

“You want to fuck Given of Sithistra, and it makes you furious. I won’t bite her or fuck her without you. I vow it. So I guess we’ll see how long my bed stays cold.”

I clenched my jaw.

“Won’t we, General?”

I left without another word.

CHAPTER
SIX

LAURENT

I leaned against the wall and listened to the sound of Varick's boots thumping down the spiral staircase. A few seconds later, a door slammed hard enough to shake the palace.

Or maybe that was just me he'd left shaken.

He was furious. I'd anticipated it. Nevertheless, the depth of his rage had come as a shock. But maybe that was just because I didn't like making him angry.

No. I didn't like *disappointing* him. He felt betrayed, and there wasn't anything I could do about it right now. There was no way to soothe him or take away the sting. Because Varick of Lar Keiren was a blunt instrument. He didn't dabble in the subtleties of court. He was either hot or cold, with no room for nuance.

I rubbed the heel of my hand over my aching, unfulfilled dick. Desire spiked, need sinking its claws into my gut. Pleasure-pain twisted through me. For a brief moment, I considered unlacing my pants and taking care of things. Almost as quickly, I discarded that idea. There was something to be said for delayed gratification. And if I had my way, Varick would finish what he started before the night was through.

Besides, I had a princess to meet.

Ten minutes later, I was cleaned up and dressed in my feast clothes. I hadn't been inside the queen's chamber since my

mother died. Not that I'd spent much time in it while she was alive.

The servants had done a good job airing it out. Colorful tapestries covered the walls. A fire danced in the hearth. There was a tub set up behind a screen. Someone had brought in a vanity table and stocked it with hairbrushes and tiny glass bottles.

The balcony doors were thrown open, and a female in a green gown stood at the railing with her back to me. White-blond hair fell to her waist. She had her head tilted back, her face turned up to the sun.

"It's not as warm here as it is in Sithistra," I said.

She spun with a gasp. Deep blue eyes widened as she took me in.

My spies hadn't exaggerated her beauty. She was tall, with long legs not even her heavy skirts could conceal. Her skin was like cream, her features delicate. But there was an air of seduction about her. It was her mouth, I decided. Her lips were pink and pouty. It wasn't hard to imagine how they'd look stretched around my cock.

She stared a second longer, then dropped into a curtsy. "Your Grace."

I listened for her heartbeat as I joined her on the balcony. The delicate sound sped up at my approach, and I hid a smile as I motioned for her to rise. She was only a couple of inches below my height, but so slender and indelibly feminine I felt like a brute beside her.

"You must be chilled," I said, gesturing to her gown, which was too thin for Nor Doru's climate. "The Deepnight saves us from burning, but it muzzles the sun. Nor Doru is a land of perpetual frost, I'm afraid." I smiled. "But you'll get used to it."

"I don't mind it, Your Grace."

"Call me Laurent when we're alone."

“Laurent,” she repeated obediently, her cheeks growing pink. She was lovely, the long column of her throat like poetry. Her pulse fluttered there, a little beat of temptation.

Later.

“Welcome to the Midnight Palace. Do you have everything you need?”

“Yes...thank you. The servants have been kind.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.” I turned my attention to the city, which sprawled before us in a grid of bustling streets and red-tiled rooftops. “What do you think of Lar Katerin?”

She followed my gaze. Her lips curved in a soft smile, and her voice went low with reverence. “It’s beautiful. The colors are so vivid.”

Her beauty was even more striking in profile, and her obvious awe loosened something inside me. I’d seen the city a thousand times. It held no mystery. But watching her admire it made me see it through new eyes. The neat and tidy houses. The golden domes of the banking district. In the distance, the obsidian columns of the Sanctum glittered in the evening light. Even the red-striped canopies that shielded the doorways of the brothels on Gate Street were inviting.

I leaned an elbow on the railing. “I always forget what it’s like seeing the world under the Deepnight after a spell in Sithistra. Your eyes will adjust in a day or two, and then the colors won’t be so overwhelming. You’ll grow accustomed to the cold, too.”

“You’ve been to Sithistra?”

“Plenty of times, although never so far south as Beldurn. Some official visits. Some not so official.” I smiled. “I’d prefer you avoid mentioning the not-so-official ones to your brother.”

Her expression turned frosty. “That won’t be a problem. I have nothing to say to him.”

Immediately, I reassessed my first impression of Given of Sithistra. There were thorns on this rose. It would be fun to

find out just how sharp they were.

My attention snagged on a faint bruise emerging on her chin. “What’s this?” I asked, pointing.

She startled, her fingers going to her face. “Nothing, sir.”

“It’s Laurent. And your heart sped up when you lied to me just now.” I touched my fingertips to her cheek briefly. “Don’t do it again, Princess. I’ll always know.”

She lowered her gaze, but not before I saw the flash of fear. Abruptly, I realized Rolund could have forced the issue of her journey over the Rift. It wouldn’t be the first time a guardian used violence to compel a ward’s obedience, but the thought of him harming her tightened my gut. “Tell me how you got that mark.”

The order came out sharper than I intended, and she stiffened as she said, “It was Lord Varick.”

Surprise jolted me. “That doesn’t sound like him.”

“I...tried to slap him.”

Ah. *That* sounded like him. “Varick is sensitive to touch. I wouldn’t try that again if I were you.”

“I won’t.”

Our exchange had stolen her smile. To my surprise, guilt wafted through me. I’d come to welcome her to court. So far, I’d done nothing but issue thinly veiled threats.

And damn, but I really wanted to see her smile again.

I sucked my thumb into my mouth.

Her eyes widened. Interest stirred in the blue depths.

Satisfaction spread in my mind. *Well, that’s a promising start.*

I nicked my thumb on my fang and pressed it to her lips. Startled, she opened on a gasp, and then gasped again when I caressed her tongue.

The bruise on her chin vanished.

Then her pupils dilated. She jerked and cried out, her cheeks turning a brilliant pink. The heady scent of female desire flooded my lungs. But it was too much. Too intense for the tiny amount of blood I'd given her.

She swayed.

Alarm jumped through me. I sprang into action, catching her against me just as her knees gave out.

She stared up at me with a mix of fear and lust in her eyes. "What did you...?" She moaned, her thick lashes fluttering against her flushed cheeks. The color spread down her throat and disappeared under the high neckline of her gown. Her heart beat quickly.

Too quickly.

Cursing under my breath, I swung her into my arms and carried her to the bed. I settled her on it and stroked the hair back from her forehead. She moaned again and arched off the mattress. Her eyes fluttered shut. Her arousal was thick in the air. If I rucked up her skirts and spread her thighs, I knew I'd find her wet and ready.

My cock stiffened, but my own lust was secondary to the anger that pumped hot in my veins. Potent as it was, a mere drop of my blood shouldn't have affected her this way.

But it had. Because she was *starving*. Rolund hadn't beat her, but he'd abused her all the same.

I sat near her hip and kept my senses trained on her heartbeat. With gentle fingers, I pushed her top lip off her teeth. Her little fangs were distended. It was a miracle she hadn't lunged for me out on the balcony. A hungry vampire was a dangerous thing.

Over the next few minutes, her heart rate returned to normal. I sat vigil next to her, silently cursing myself for putting her at risk. Depending on how infrequently she'd fed, it would take time for her to drink without succumbing to bloodlust.

She stirred. Slowly, she turned her head toward me on the pillow and blinked her eyes open. For a second, confusion

reigned. Then recognition flooded her gaze. With a little gasp of mortification, she tried to rise.

“No,” I said, pressing her down with a firm hand in the center of her chest. “Here.” I plumped pillows behind her so she was propped in a sitting position. “How long since you fed?”

She took a long time to settle against the pillows, which I assumed was due to embarrassment over her arousal. But she seemed to realize I wasn't going anywhere, because she eventually folded her hands and sighed. “It's been a few weeks.”

Anger surged. “How long since you took the vein?” Living blood was the most nutritious.

She didn't answer. Which was all I needed to know.

Rolund had much to answer for. I pushed her hair off her shoulders. The silky mass was the color of moonlight. I let it slide through my fingers again and again. “Let me guess, he limited you to animal blood.”

She watched me play with her hair. “Goats, mostly. The cook mixed it with wine.”

I pinched her chin gently, my thumb on the same spot where Varick had marked her. Her skin was just as soft as her hair. “Peasants drink from animals. They've done it for thousands of years, and they're used to it. Your bloodline is a noble one. It demands more than goats, Princess.” I stroked my thumb along her jawline. “Your hunger won't go unsatisfied in Nor Doru.”

She regarded me steadily, a hint of a challenge in her expression. “I thought I was here to satisfy *your* hunger.”

Sharper thorns than I thought. “You're here as my guest.”

Questions swam in her eyes, but she stayed silent as she studied me. When I didn't look away, the blush crept back into her cheeks. She didn't lower her gaze like most ladies would have, though. She hung on, and that assessing look grew, until it became obvious she wanted to say something.

“What?” I asked.

“Does it hurt?”

“Taking the vein?” Surely she’d done it before. If not, her situation was direr than I—

“The earring.”

My fingers went to the bar in my ear. “Yes,” I said simply. “It never stops hurting.”

Her nose scrunched up, and I realized it wasn’t from disgust. She was perplexed...and curious. It was an endearing expression. “Why pierce it, then? Your body will always try to heal it.”

Yes, and even more so than she probably realized. It was the curse of royal blood. I could heal just about any injury—even the ones I wanted to keep.

“It’s a reminder,” I said. “Some people are in pain all the time, even if we can’t see it. It influences their actions. I never want to forget that.”

Her curiosity faded, replaced with something soft and strangely disarming. Everything about this female was disarming. I hadn’t prepared for that.

Gold winked at her neckline, offering a welcome distraction from the energy building between us. I pulled a thin chain from the edge of her bodice, revealing a small mirrored pendant. I rubbed my thumb over my reflection. “You follow the teachings of the Brotherhood?”

“It’s hard not to in Sithistra.”

It wasn’t quite a lie. More like an omission, which was trickier to unravel. I didn’t care for the evasion, but I let it slide because it told me something honesty wouldn’t have. For all her innocent beauty and ladylike manners, Given of Sithistra knew something of the game of politics. Just how much remained to be seen.

“And what of the Sanctum?” I asked, referring to Lar Katerin’s temple. “What do you know of the gods of Nor Doru?” No vampire would ever put it that way, of course,

since the gods were the gods of all of Ter Isir. But Sithistrans preferred their mirrors and towers.

She hesitated. “Queen Amantha, my father’s first wife, was very devout. She didn’t permit any instruction about Nor Doruvian beliefs.”

“Would you like instruction?”

“If it pleases you.”

I smiled. “A diplomatic answer, Princess.” I eased the little mirror back under her dress. My knuckles brushed the tops of her breasts, and her breath caught in a way that went straight to my dick and made me silently curse Varick all over again. She didn’t release her breath until I stood. “If I send you another necklace, will you wear it to the feast tonight?”

She blinked, as if she was startled by the offer. “Of course, Your Grace.”

“Laurent.”

She gave a tiny shake of her head. “I’m sorry. It’s a habit.” Her chest rose and fell, lifting her breasts as her heart rate picked up once more. But it wasn’t from bloodlust this time.

“I’ll break you of it,” I said softly.

Her lips parted.

I inclined my head. “Until the feast, Given.” I left, and because my hearing was sharper than any other vampire’s alive, I heard her shaky “until then, Laurent” as I strode down the hall.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

GIVEN

Laurant sent me more than a necklace.

I fingered one of the heavy stones around my neck as I watched courtiers file into the palace's great hall. Several glanced in my direction, which made wings of panic flutter in my stomach. Of course they were curious. It wasn't every day the King of Sithistra pledged his own sister in service as a blood thrall.

But at least I'd been spared the indignity of sitting with the others. The human thralls gathered at their own table on the far side of the hall. Shame washed over me. By all rights, I should be with them. But the steward, Tibern, had seated me along one flank of the high table, which was really three tables arranged in a U-shape. Each one was draped in crimson cloth studded with diamonds.

I was draped in crimson and diamonds, too. For what felt like the hundredth time, I hunched my shoulders and tugged at my gown's neckline. Servants had brought the gown along with the necklace, explaining the king would be "pleased" to see me wear it. That was palace speak for "ordered." I didn't need to ask if there was another outfit available to me. Every servant who attended me wore the colors of Nor Doru. It was clear that appearing at the feast in Sithistran green was unacceptable.

The crimson gown was lovely, but it was easily the most scandalous garment I'd ever worn. The material clung to my body, and the neckline plunged so low it exposed the sides of my breasts and the top of my stomach. The design made

undergarments impossible, so my nipples poked against the fabric.

At first, I'd been angry, thinking Laurent sought to embarrass me before his court. But now that I saw the other ladies, my dress was almost tame by comparison. The females of Nor Doru flaunted their charms. More than one neckline revealed the crests of rouged nipples. Several women wore backless gowns that dipped all the way down to the curves of their asses. Some skirts were flowing, but others hugged the hips and thighs before flaring out.

“It’s different than Sithistra, isn’t it?”

A young woman pulled out the chair next to mine. She was vivaciously pretty, with chestnut hair and a heart-shaped face. She was also human. Her gown was the same creamy color as her skin and cut to show off impressive cleavage. She settled in her seat and smiled at me, revealing a deep dimple in her cheek. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness. I’m Rowena of Lar Kessa.”

A human wed to a vampire. It wasn’t unheard of, but it was rare. My surprise must have shown on my face because her dimple deepened. “Believe me, my marriage was the scandal of Vollefort for close to a year.”

That explained why I hadn’t heard of her. Vollefort was a remote town located in the middle of the Blacktop Mountains in the far south of Sithistra.

“You must miss home,” I said. The journey between Lar Katerin and Vollefort took weeks.

She waved a hand. “My father died years ago, and my uncle inherited. He’s a beastly man, so it’s no hardship to skip family gatherings. But Sir Harald—that’s my husband—sends me to Sithistra once a year. I stay in Beldurn and soak up the sun. Humans get sickly when they spend too much time in Nor Doru.” She put slim fingers on my arm. “Full-blooded humans. I doubt you’ll have that problem.”

“I—”

“To be honest, it’s Harald I miss when I go to Sithistra.” She leaned in. “Vampire males are incredible lovers. There’s a vein that runs down the inner thigh...” She shivered. “Well, let’s just say my lord husband knows how to please a woman. I practically run across the Bleak Pass when it’s time to return to him.”

My cheeks heated. “Is...he here now?”

“He’s patrolling along the Rift. It’s his usual assignment.” She sighed. “My hand aches from satisfying myself.”

Oh. This wasn’t the kind of conversation I was accustomed to having at dinner. Not that there was any sign of food. Musicians played stringed instruments in a gallery above the hall. Courtiers continued to stream into the cavernous space. Ladies in colorful gowns mingled with knights in evening clothes. On the other side of the room, a woman’s laughter lifted above the crowd. There was no sign of King Laurent.

Laurent.

He wasn’t at all what I’d expected, and not just because he’d told me to address him informally. He was handsome, yes, but he was so much more than that. He was...magnetic. Impossible to ignore. He was tall and lean, but there was an air of strength about him. His dark hair was almost black, and his eyes were the most arresting shade of silver. They’d darkened when he lifted Elissa’s necklace from my bodice. I was hardly experienced when it came to male desire, but only a blind woman would have missed the lust in his eyes.

“You must be nervous,” Rowena murmured.

I pulled my gaze from the crowd and found her watching me with a mix of curiosity and sympathy. Because I was in Nor Doru as a thrall, I thought with a sinking feeling. It wasn’t like I’d forgotten. But at the same time, my encounter with Laurent had left me confused about just what he wanted from me.

“*You’re here as my guest,*” he’d said in that low, raspy voice that stroked over my skin.

Was I? Because that wasn't what Rolund said before he sent me over the Rift.

Movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention, and Rowena and I both turned as a young man approached our table. I recognized him as the brother I'd seen emerging from the royal chambers when Varick escorted me to my room.

His cheeks were flushed as he pulled out the chair next to mine. He flashed me an apologetic look. "Tibern told me to sit here."

On the other side of me, Lady Rowena chuckled. "It's the human table." Her light-brown eyes twinkled. "Don't worry, Brother, you're welcome to sit with us."

His cheeks grew redder as he shuffled his chair closer to the table. He wasn't quite as young as I'd first thought. Early twenties, maybe. With his dark curls and thickly lashed blue eyes, he was attractive in a boyish, affable way. Despite our closeness in age, something about him made me want to take him under my wing.

"It's good to meet someone else from Sithistra," I said.

He smiled. "The Lord favors you, Your Highness."

"He favors us all, Brother."

"Please, call me Jordan. Jordan of Twyl."

Rowena clapped her hands together. "Ooh, you're not from Sithistra at all. You're from Wesyfedd!"

He gave a self-conscious laugh. "Born and raised. Although, I try my best to tone down the accent."

Now that I'd heard more of his lilting speech, there was no question he came from the small, independent kingdom nestled between Nor Doru and the Thicket. If it could truly be called a "kingdom." The people of Wesyfedd elected a new leader once every ten years. Although the Wesyfeddians called him "chieftan," people in the north and south gave him the disparaging title "the bandit king" since so many men in the territory made a living through smuggling and highway

robbery. The current chieftan was Rhys the Fair, who was rumored to steal hearts as well as wallets.

A servant approached. She placed goblets of wine before Rowena and Jordan. Then she curtsied to me and set a third goblet on the table. “From the king, Princess.”

“Thank you.”

She waited. “He said you should drink the whole thing, Your Highness.”

Another order disguised as pleasantries. On either side of me, Rowena and Jordan seemed to hold their breath. Just as I had no choice about my gown or necklace, I had no choice about this.

My hand was thankfully steady as I lifted the goblet and sipped. It was blood-wine, but spiced with something I didn't recognize. The taste was pleasant, the blood human. It hit my tongue like nectar and filled my stomach with a tingling warmth. I drained the goblet with no difficulty and immediately craved more. Still, it was irritating to be instructed this way—and to be monitored like a child. My face burned as I handed the servant the empty goblet.

She disappeared into the crowd.

Jordan picked up his wine and took a hearty gulp. The musicians switched to a fast, upbeat tune. The crowd cheered. Several couples moved into the center of the hall and began dancing. The rest of the courtiers formed a wide circle around them and clapped to the music. Servants wove among them, distributing wine.

No, *blood*-wine. I couldn't afford to forget where I was.

The feeling of being watched crept over me. I looked up, and my gaze collided with Lord Varick's. He leaned against a wall near the studded, arched doors, his arms folded over his broad chest. My face grew hotter. It was bad enough that Rowena and Jordan had seen me humbled. Knowing Varick had witnessed it made me wish the floor would open under my chair and swallow me. He'd probably enjoyed the spectacle.

I lifted my chin.

His expression remained inscrutable. He'd shed his armor, but he looked no less intimidating in black trousers and a black jacket. Black boots rose to his knees and hugged his calves. Even the hilt of the dagger at his hip was a matte black. The only colorful thing about him was his hair, which was the color of honey under the light of hundreds of candles hoisted high in the chandeliers.

Feminine laughter rang out again. As the music's tempo became even more raucous, a blond woman pulled a man into the center of the hall. They swept into a dance that sent her rippling mass of hair flying away from her head. She was lovely...and oddly familiar.

But there was no way I knew her. As she tossed her head back and laughed, the tips of her fangs showed.

"Oh no," Rowena murmured, "Lord Varick won't be happy."

He certainly didn't *look* happy. He watched the woman and her partner with a clenched jaw. Confusion swept me. Was he jealous? It didn't sound right—not if he preferred men.

"That's his sister," Rowena said under her breath. Several courtiers stomped their feet as the couple made another boisterous circuit around the hall. "Lady Evelina is betrothed to a male from the warrior class."

Now I realized why the woman looked so familiar. She resembled Lord Varick. They had the same golden hair. Evelina was also far taller than the average female.

I had to lean toward Rowena to make sure she heard me. "Is that her betrothed?" The male didn't look big enough to be a warrior.

Rowena laughed softly, which made her generous bosom tremble. "Gods, no. Evelina wouldn't be caught dead with a male she's supposed to marry."

Such a thing was unheard of in Sithistra. In Beldurn, a highborn lady only danced with her husband, father, or brother.

"She'll ruin herself," I said before I could think better of it.

“From what I hear, it’s too late for that. Evelina is twenty-one and she’s had twice as many suitors.” Rowena perked up. “I see a knight from my husband’s regiment. Maybe he has news from Harald. Excuse me.” She bustled off in a flurry of skirts, her reddish-brown curls bouncing.

Varick remained by the wall as Evelina and her partner spun and laughed. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I should wonder why he didn’t stop his sister. But the tingling warmth of the blood-wine had spread to my limbs, which felt relaxed and pleasantly heavy. Other couples joined in the dancing. The ladies’ dresses whirled away from their bodies in big arcs of color. The beat of the music pumped in my veins. I settled more comfortably in my chair, my gaze wandering. In a shadowy corner, a man kissed a woman against the wall. Her hands slid down his back and gripped his backside. Her jeweled rings winked in the candlelight.

Laurent wore rings like that. Heat snaked through me at the memory of his long, elegant fingers pulling Elissa’s mirror from my dress. He was shorter than Varick, his head almost level with mine when we spoke. It gave me a better view of his sensual mouth—and the wicked-looking fangs that made him look dangerous even when he was smiling. Especially when he was smiling.

“I thought the orgy thing was a myth,” Jordan muttered.

I turned my head and found him staring at the couple by the wall. “Hopefully it doesn’t get to that point,” I said, meaning it.

He startled. “You heard that?”

“I heard you just now.” My skin prickled. “You spoke about...myths.”

For a split second, he looked confused. Almost fearful. “I could have sworn I—” He shook his head. “Must be the wine.” He rubbed a hand absently over his clean-shaven jaw. “The Brotherhood sticks to water unless it’s a feast day, and then they water down the wine so much it might as well *be* water.”

As if his words had summoned her, a servant appeared and refilled his goblet. When she left, he grinned and took a hearty sip with more than a little swagger. “I could get used to this.”

The blood-wine loosened my tongue. “How does a member of the Brotherhood find himself in Nor Doru?”

His boyish features sobered.

“Forgive me,” I said quickly. “I didn’t mean to pry—”

“No, it’s all right. I can’t blame you for wondering.” He plucked at his robes. “These aren’t a common sight north of the Rift. I’m bound for Twyl, but King Laurent invited me to stay in Lar Katerin for a spell.” He cleared his throat. “I’m, uh, not welcome in the Brotherhood anymore.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise. “You’re not?”

“The brothers are strict about rules. I broke into the Forbidden Library in the Tower of the Mind one too many times.” He cast his gaze up, as if he was remembering something. “I believe the Prelate’s exact words were ‘show your face in Beldurn again and it’ll be the last thing you see.’ Which doesn’t really make sense, right? Because how would I see my *own* face?” He frowned. “Unless the Prelate meant I’d see it in his mirror.”

“Wait. They kicked you out for reading books?”

“These were pretty important books, Princess.”

“Call me Given.”

He shook his head, his cheeks growing pink again. “Oh, I couldn’t. Your mother was from House Lar Satha.”

I leaned forward, excitement bubbling. “You know of it?”

“Absolutely, I do.” He leaned forward, too, and now his blue eyes burned with an intensity that lifted the hair on my nape. “I think more people need to know about your family, Your Highness.”

“Why—?”

The music changed suddenly, shifting from strings to a low, steady drumbeat. It was loud and primitive. Wild and

unnerving. The floor under my slippers vibrated. The wine on the table shivered.

Tibern walked to the center of the hall. “All hail Laurent, King of Nor Doru and Vessel of the Sacred Blood.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

GIVEN

As one, the courtiers stopped what they were doing and faced the arched doorway. Those who were seated rose. With a wary glance at each other, Jordan and I did the same.

Laurent entered looking every inch a king. A black mantle rested over his shoulders and trailed on the floor behind him. Jewels winked on his fingers and the hilt of the dagger around his waist. A black crown circled his head. Night-blooming roses were engraved in the metal. Glittering rubies chased around the base. The black fur collar of his mantle framed his haughty, handsome face and brushed the metal bar in his ear.

“Some people are in pain all the time, even if we can’t see it.”

How badly was he hurting now? Whose pain did he never want to forget?

Vampires in black robes trailed him, their steps measured and sedate. I stifled a gasp. There were six males—three on each side of him. All were elderly, and each had a long beard that had obviously been stained by blood. The bristly hairs on their cheeks were white, but the long fall of hair from their chins to their chests was a dull, rusty red.

These could only be priests of the Sanctum, the temple in Lar Katerin where the vampires worshipped their pantheon of gods. And Laurent was a conduit for their prayers. Nor Doruvians believed the king possessed some kind of power over blood. The Brotherhood considered the vampire religion

a form of sacrilege, so I was wholly unfamiliar with its blood rites.

But it looked like I was about to see one firsthand.

Laurent stopped in the center of the hall. At precisely the same moment, the priests and the drumbeat stopped too. Everything was still, as if no one dared to breathe without the king's permission.

He stretched his hands wide like he meant to embrace the crowd. "We gather to celebrate life."

The spell broke. Like the ripple of a current, the courtiers stirred and shifted. Heads nodded and people smiled. An approving murmur filled the air.

Laurent brought his hands together. His tone turned indulgent, almost teasing. "Forgive my tardiness. I know you're all eager to celebrate. I could hear it from my rooms."

This was met with titters and guilty smiles.

For some reason, I flicked my gaze to Varick. He'd pushed away from the wall, but his arms were still crossed over his chest. His eyes were locked on Laurent. He didn't look happy.

"We begin," Laurent said.

The drumbeat started again. One of the priests glided toward the table where the thralls stood with various degrees of trepidation on their faces. Another priest turned to Laurent and held out a silver tray draped with red...ribbons? The ends dangled off either side.

The first priest guided the thralls to Laurent and made them form a single-file line.

My throat went dry as a desert. My heart throbbed in my chest, all traces of the blood-wine's lassitude gone. Apprehension tightened my muscles as I waited for the priest to summon me. Because that was going to happen, wasn't it? I'd been lucky so far. I'd been treated differently. Like I was special. But that special treatment had to stop sometime.

Now was that time. I waited for it, a little voice in my head wondering if I could actually go through with it—if I could

bow my head and let Laurent and his priests brand me a slave in front of his entire court.

With my gut twisting and my pulse pounding in my ears, I braced myself for Laurent to turn to me.

But it didn't happen.

As he had in my bedchamber, he sliced his thumb on his fang. Bright-red blood welled. Slowly, he touched his thumb to each ribbon. The priests around him chanted in unison, speaking a guttural, hissing language I didn't recognize. As their voices rose, the ribbons moved. It was just a twitch at first—so quick I wasn't sure I'd seen it.

Then the ribbons started to *writhe*.

My heart beat faster.

Like snakes, the ribbons curled sensuously, lifting and swaying like they'd been caught in a phantom breeze. The movements were mesmerizing and unsettling. Obviously, ribbon shouldn't move, but it was more than that. The strips of silk seemed sentient as they defied gravity. The priests' chanting swelled, and the ribbons danced and dipped parallel to the floor. Laurent tipped his head back and closed his eyes. His lips moved, but no sound emerged. In all black with blood dotting his bottom lip, he was just as captivating as the ribbons.

Energy ran through the crowd of courtiers, who watched with glowing eyes. Several hissed and bared their fangs. Some primitive part of my brain—the part I'd inherited from my human ancestors—recoiled. They were predators in fur-trimmed silk. Faster and stronger. *Vampires are mortal the same as men*. I clung to that thought as my heart beat faster.

One of the priests went to the line of thralls and guided a woman forward. Someone must have told her what to expect, because she extended her arms.

The priest lifted a length of ribbon and lay it across her upturned wrists. The strip of red shivered, parted in the middle, and slithered around her wrists. It formed itself into two perfect bracelets with no discernible seams. The priest

lifted another ribbon and held it to her throat. Her hair was piled on top of her head and fastened with combs. Abruptly, I realized all the females wore this style.

The ribbon wrapped around her throat.

Laurent's eyes snapped open. They glowed like polished metal. His beauty seemed sharper now.

And far more dangerous.

The music changed. The beat became faster and more insistent, like it sought to sweep everyone in the hall toward some inescapable crescendo. My heart thumped painfully. I leaned forward, the fingertips of one hand braced on the table.

Laurent brought the woman's wrist to his mouth. With a flash of white fangs, he bit her directly over the ribbon. Her eyelids fluttered, and she moaned. He sucked for a moment and released her.

Immediately, a priest took her arm and steered her away. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, her lips parted as her chest rose and fell rapidly.

The next thrall—a man—stepped forward. Like the others, he was young and attractive. He looked at Laurent with a mix of fear and awe...and more than a little interest.

Laurent smiled.

The priest placed the ribbons. Laurent slid his fingers gently through the man's hair. He tipped the man's head to the side and sank his fangs into the ribbon around the man's neck. The man's hoarse, needy cry echoed off the stone walls. When the priest led him away, there was a conspicuous bulge between the thrall's legs.

The pattern repeated. One by one, the thralls came forward. The priests wrapped their throats and wrists, and Laurent sampled their blood. He varied his bite. Sometimes he struck at the wrist. Other times, he buried his face in a thrall's neck. Through it all, the drum pounded and the priests chanted in their strange, sibilant tongue. The ceremony was simple but decadent. I couldn't look away. Couldn't tear my gaze from

the sensual sight of Laurent bending his dark head and drawing life straight from the vein.

My heart pounded in my chest and between my thighs, where I was damp and aching. My breasts ached, too, my nipples too hard, tingling points. Somewhere in my mind, a thought buzzed. *I should be afraid*. Laurent could turn to me at any moment. How could I go to him in such a state? If he put those ribbons around my throat and bit me, everyone would see my desire. They would *know*.

But I couldn't seem to care about that. All I could do was stand there with the drumbeat shaking the ground and the sweet scent of human blood soaking the air. When the priest escorted the last thrall away, Laurent lifted his hands once more. His mouth glistened with blood. He sucked on his lower lip and released it, leaving it wet and clean. I wanted to trace it with my tongue.

The drum stopped.

Laurent raised his voice. "We welcome these thralls as our honored guests. For one year, they will serve the court. We take only what we need. They give only what they choose."

Every vampire in the crowd bowed their head.

Except one.

Varick watched me from his spot near the wall. His golden gaze was like an arrow. It pierced the haze of desire that clouded my head, sapping the heat in my veins and leaving nothing but cold ash behind.

"—Princess Given of Sithistra."

At the sound of my name, I realized Laurent had continued speaking. And now he was walking to me. The whole court watched him round my table and come to my side.

My insides trembled as he took my hand.

He held my stare with his glowing eyes. The rubies in his crown glittered. "The princess has also joined our court. She is mine. No one touches her." He flicked a look over the crowd. "Is that understood?"

The vampires murmured their assent.

Laurent brought our joined hands to his mouth. I stiffened, but he merely brushed his lips over the veins at my wrist. “Then let us feast.”

The crowd cheered.

The musicians burst into song.

Laurent’s gaze moved boldly down my body, taking in my breasts and the long strip of skin exposed by the deep cut of my dress. “You look beautiful in red.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

He looked at Jordan. “Your cup is empty.”

Jordan stared at the goblet like he was surprised to see it. “Uh, y-yes, Your Grace.”

“You should go fill it.”

The brother made a hasty retreat.

Laurent released my hand at last, but he stayed by my side as the courtiers took their seats. Chatter rose, but I knew all eyes were on us. I couldn’t sit before the king did, so I was forced to remain as I was, waiting for his signal. He’d given his court permission to feast, but it seemed he had other plans for me. Servants streamed through the doors carrying giant platters of food.

I exhaled the breath I’d been holding.

Laurent’s lips twitched. “You thought it would be an orgy of blood?”

That was exactly what I’d thought, but I wasn’t about to tell him that. On the other side of the hall, a lord pulled a female thrall onto his lap and bit through the ribbon on her wrist. She shuddered and squirmed as servants placed bowls of food on the table. The lord thrust a hand down the front of her flimsy gown and cupped her breast. The thrall arched her back, a look of ecstasy on her face.

Laurent watched for a minute before turning to me. “You have questions in your eyes, Princess. Ask them.”

“What are the ribbons for?”

“Protection. One of our blood rites. The bindings prevent a vampire from taking too much.”

I looked him in the eye. “Will you bind me?”

“I don’t need to. No one will touch you unless I allow it.” He took my hand again. In front of everyone, he kissed my knuckles, tasting my skin with the tip of his tongue. Metal winked in his mouth.

His tongue was pierced, the same as his ear.

My breath caught. I tried to pull away, but he held me fast, his fingers tight around mine.

He met my gaze over the back of my hand. His warm breath teased the damp spot left behind by his tongue. “The same applies to me, Princess. I won’t bed you or take your vein if you don’t wish it. And I’ll never hurt you...unless you ask me to.”

I frowned. “I’ll never ask you to hurt me.”

His gray eyes burned with an emotion I couldn’t place. “You might one day,” he said softly. He dropped my hand and walked away, his mantle flowing behind him.

Leaving me standing at the table alone.

CHAPTER
NINE

VARICK

The feast lasted until the early hours of the morning. By that time, most of the thralls had disappeared with some lord or lady. Laurent had disappeared too. He'd eaten. He'd toasted the thralls and the gods and the army of Nor Doru with goblets of blood-wine. He'd laughed when a group of knights sang a drunken, filthy song about a Sithistran lord cuckolded by a merchant of Nor Doru. Then he'd retired for the evening—with Princess Given on his arm.

Now the hall was finally quieting down. Small groups of courtiers remained, but they were subdued as they finished drinks and made plans to take their revels to their chambers. A pair of lords carried an unconscious companion from the hall, the tip of his sword dragging over the flagstones.

The servants wouldn't start cleaning until dawn, so I settled at a table in the back and poured myself a glass of blood-wine from one of the pitchers that had miraculously remained upright. Light was just beginning to creep through the windows set high in the walls. I finished one goblet. Then another.

"My lord."

I registered the voice but it seemed to come from far away. Too far away to bother with.

"Lord Varick." Something nudged my shoulder.

I opened my eyes. *Shit*. I'd fallen asleep with my head propped on my fist. One of my knights stood over me wearing an uncertain expression.

“What is it, Sir Kellen?”

“Lady Evelina, my lord.”

He didn’t need to say anything else. “Where?”

“By the privy in the courtyard.”

“Gods,” I muttered. This day was never going to fucking end. “Stay here and make sure none of the stragglers give the serving girls a hard time.”

“Yes, my lord.”

I went to the moonlit courtyard, where I found my sister pressed against a wall by a knight who was doing his best to fit his whole head inside her mouth.

“That’s enough,” I growled, grabbing the male’s jacket in both hands and tossed him aside.

He stumbled, caught himself, and whirled around drunkenly. “What the fu—” He snapped his jaw shut as he saw who’d grabbed him. A brazier burned nearby, and the light from its flames danced over his panicked expression. “M-My lord.”

“See me in the morning,” I said through clenched teeth.

He paled.

“Go.”

He left, his booted steps quick on the fine gravel.

Evelina leaned against the wall. The tips of her fangs showed as she smirked at me. “Impressive, big brother. He was half your size.”

“Do you even know his name?”

“Does it matter?”

I stepped closer. “He had his tongue down your throat. I can guarantee Martin of Lar Plestes will hear of this. What do you think he’ll say?” Her betrothed was an honorable knight—and a male with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of patience—but it was only a matter of time before Evelina’s scandals soured him on the marriage contract I’d signed.

Her smirk disappeared. “Why don’t *you* ask him? You know him far better than I do.”

“And whose fault is that?”

She shrugged. Her long, golden hair was a tangled mess. She wore some kind of dark paint around her eyes. It made them bigger—and bluer. Looking at her, all I could see was the solemn little girl who’d traced bloody glyphs on my shield on the rare occasions I’d returned home after winning my knighthood. There were thirteen years between us. Even if I’d been able to tolerate sharing a roof with my father, Lina and I were never destined to be close.

But we were the only family either of us had left. She was my responsibility. I was determined to see her settled and wed—and away from the debauchery of court. I was tired of hearing her name on lips that had nothing kind to say about her.

“Straighten your clothes. I’m taking you to your room.”

She dropped the pretense of nonchalance, her tone becoming clipped. “Thank you, but no. I don’t need an escort.”

“Yes, you fucking do. Every time I turn my back you’re sullyng yourself for the whole court to see.”

She pushed off the wall. Her eyes flashed as she glared up at me. “*Sullyng* myself?”

“Did you mishear me, Sister? You’ve fucked your way through every skirt-chaser in Lar Katerin.”

“Why does it matter what I do—”

“Keep your voice down—”

“—when you’re just going to marry me off and forget about me?”

“If only I could forget,” I growled. I leaned toward her. “What I *should* do is send you to the cloister in the Wastes. Maybe some time with the priestesses will help you remember your duty.”

“Do it,” she spat. “Let all of Nor Doru see what a hypocrite you are.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Gods, she had nerve. As her guardian, I had full authority over her. I could keep her locked in her room on bread, blood, and water and no one would say a word about it.

“You judge me for taking pleasure where I can find it when you’ve been fucking the king for years.”

Fury vibrated inside me like a string plucked on a lute. I wasn’t a fool. I knew all of Nor Doru was aware of the nature of my relationship with Laurent. But it had been a long time since anyone dared to throw it in my face.

“Watch your mouth, Evelina.”

She tilted her head. “He has the Sithistran princess now. I saw him escort her to his chamber. That must be disappointing for you, Brother. But take heart. He still has a use for you. She might be able to give him what you can’t in bed, but she could never command his army.”

My temper snapped. I raised my hand but caught myself just before I let the blow fly.

She stood her ground, her eyes blazing with challenge. “Go ahead. Father never hesitated.”

All the air left my lungs. My hand dropped to my side. For a second, I stood numbly as the weight of her words settled over me. I didn’t want to believe them. I *couldn’t*. But the truth was in her gaze. “I thought...” My voice was so hoarse I had to clear my throat. “It was supposed to be me. Only me.”

Her smile was bitter. “Well, you didn’t come home much after you were knighted. He had to find another outlet for his anger.”

I swallowed thickly. The fire in the brazier popped—a delayed crescendo to our argument. “You never said anything. You should have told me.”

She hugged her middle. “No, I shouldn’t have. You would have tried to kill him, and he would have killed you.”

We fell silent. I wanted to argue, but she was right. I'd never been a match for our father—until I was, and then fate and circumstance had robbed me of the chance to settle the score between us.

She looked at the ground. “He died badly. It’s a small consolation, but it’s something.”

“Lina...”

“I’m going to bed.” She took a swift step backward. “I can make my own way there. Good night, Varick. And...I’m sorry about Laurent. I know you care for him.” She was gone before I could think of anything appropriate to say. Not that there was anything I could say to right all that was wrong between us.

And now I knew just how deeply I’d failed her. My whole life, the only useful thing I’d done was keep others safe. But as it turned out, I hadn’t even done that. Not for her, anyway. My own blood. The only member of my family I’d ever given a fuck about. I’d told myself I was being indulgent by allowing her a lengthy betrothal—by letting her dally at court. But really I’d just wanted to wash my hands of her so I could focus on my own life. She hadn’t needed parties and palaces. She’d needed me.

A shuffling sound interrupted my spiral of regret.

I snapped to instant attention, all thoughts of Evelina fleeing my head. Slowly, I drew my dagger.

The sound didn’t come again, but I didn’t need it to. Ten generations of predators surged through my veins as I strode to the privy set in an alcove. I wrenched the door open and seized the man inside. In a blur of movement, I slammed him against the wall and put my blade across his throat.

The little shit from the Brotherhood blinked at me with wide blue eyes.

I bared my fangs a hair’s breadth from his face. “Get an earful?”

“I-I wasn’t eavesdropping!” His heart pounded so hard I thought he might expire on the spot. He whimpered. “Please, I

swear it. Holy fu— Lord, you're big." He squeezed his eyes shut, as if he thought that might make me disappear.

I pressed the blade harder against his throat, drawing a trickle of blood. "How convenient for Sithistra to have one of its spies show up the same day as the princess."

"I'm not a spy! Please. I'm not even Sithistran."

He told the truth about that, at least. His blood held a whiff of magic—the pure, sizzling air that comes after a lightning strike. It wasn't much, but it was enough to distinguish him from humans who lived south of the Rift.

"Wesyfedd," I said. "You're lucky."

"L-Lucky?"

"I already fed this night. Otherwise, I'd drain you dry," I lied. "Your people make for good eating." The only thing that kept Wesyfedd independent was its geography. The territory nestled between the Thicket and Nor Doru. Its border of craggy mountains kept the Deepnight at bay and allowed humans to thrive there. The land was also honeycombed with caves, which gave the Wesyfeddans their real strategic advantage. They didn't have an army and they didn't need one. Their smugglers were formidable fighters when they were on their own turf. Knights in armor ended up trapped like rats in those caves.

But when Wesyfeddans ventured outside their lands...well, they were a rare delicacy.

The brother's gaze fixed on my fangs. Another whimper escaped him.

I shoved him harder against the wall. "What does the Brotherhood want with Nor Doru?"

"I don't know! Listen, I'm not a spy."

"So you keep saying—"

"He didn't take the princess to his chamber."

I stilled. "What?"

“The king.” The brother swallowed nervously. “The lady—your sister—was wrong about him. H-He summoned me after dinner. He wanted to speak about the histories of Ter Isir. He was alone. Maybe he escorted the princess to her room, but he didn’t enter.”

Silence stretched. The brother held his breath.

I stepped back and lowered my dagger.

He sagged against the wall.

“You’re certain of this?” I asked.

“Yes, my lord. Quite certain.”

I stared at him for another minute, then sheathed my dagger. “Which part?”

“My lord?”

“You spoke to the king about Ter Isir. Which part of the histories did you talk about?”

“Um, well...” He straightened to his full, unimpressive height. “My area of study lies in Eldenvalla.” He hesitated. “Specifically, the noble vampire families that intermarried with elves who escaped the destruction of Vai Seren.”

“Those are stories. Long since discredited.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You’d do better to study your own people. Sharing a border with Eldenvalla, some of that magic rubbed off.”

“Respectfully, my lord, it’s not the same. The more obscure histories claim some of the elves survived the rise of the Thicket...and then tried to hide their blood by breeding with vampires.”

I felt it then. The whisper of dark knowledge. Secrets that lifted the hair on my nape. Somehow, this unassuming young man possessed it. Or had, at the very least, brushed against it. If it was the latter, he probably didn’t realize how very stupid he was.

“Why would they need to hide?” I asked quietly.

His gaze was clear-eyed and steady. “I think you know, my lord.”

Challenge hung in the air. I spent a moment letting him feel the weight of my own gaze, wondering how long it would take for him to fold. Because he *wanted* to continue staring. Despite his fear, he wanted to push me. Curiosity burned like flames in his eyes. He was, most likely, the scholar he claimed to be.

But he was no warrior and, at last, he looked down.

The satisfaction I expected to feel didn't come. There was no pleasure in winning such an unbalanced contest. And there was something...wholesome about the brother. *Jordan*. Suddenly, I found myself hoping he wasn't a spy.

“The Brotherhood is an unusual place for someone from Wesyfedd to end up,” I said.

He jerked his head up, his expression startled. Like he hadn't expected me to continue the conversation.

“Uh...yeah, I guess it is. I never really felt at home in Sithistra. Then again, I never felt like I belonged in Wesyfedd, either. The Village of Twyl is duller than dishwater, as they say.” He smiled, his cheeks going pink in the first light of dawn. “I was happy to leave. I would have made a terrible smuggler.”

“Sounds like you made a terrible brother too. Considering the Brotherhood kicked you out.”

His smile faded. “Yes. They did.”

“Why?”

He swallowed. “I sought knowledge I wasn't supposed to have.”

“A pattern of behavior for you, it seems.”

He said nothing, but denial swam in his eyes. Perhaps being trapped in the privy on a feast night was punishment enough for his sins.

“A word of advice, Jordan,” I said, and his eyes widened at my use of his name. “Some stones are best left unturned. Those who insist on digging often end up disliking what they find.”

With a nod, I headed toward the hall. I was halfway across the courtyard when his voice stopped me again.

“Your family estate.”

I turned. “What of it?”

Dawn was fast approaching, and the courtyard was flooded with purple light. He’d stepped away from the wall, and his blue eyes burned again. “Lar Keiren borders Eldenvalla. Just like Wesyfedd.”

I wasn’t sure whether to warn him or tell him to fuck off. In the end, I settled for neither as I left the courtyard. I had better things to do than stop some snot-nosed ex-brother from Wesyfedd from being a fool. But as I made my way through the palace, I couldn’t stop his words from repeating in my head. *Lar Keiren borders Eldenvalla*. That part wasn’t what stuck out. Of course I knew my family estate bordered the dead elven kingdom.

No, it was what Jordan *hadn’t* said that I couldn’t stop thinking about. Just one other vampire estate sat that close to the border. It was insignificant. Half ruined. Unremarkable except for one thing...

It was Lar Satha. The ancestral home of Given of Sithistra.

CHAPTER
TEN

LAURENT

I didn't sense Varick until he wanted me to.

By the time I roused from the light sleep I'd slipped into, I knew he'd been in my room for a while. I lifted my head and saw him in a chair in the corner. He didn't just take up space. He *dominated* it. Purple light from the windows spilled over him, gilding his hair and catching in the blond scruff on his jaw. He wore his boots and pants but he'd removed his jacket. His soft white shirt was open, exposing his chest and abs. He wasn't wearing any weapons. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

I sat up, and the sheet fell to my lap. I was naked, as I always was when I slept. I drank in the sight of him and smiled. "Took you long enough."

He gave a soft, noncommittal grunt.

"You've been drinking." The scent of blood-wine clung to him.

"Never enough to get me drunk."

It was true—and a strength he sometimes lamented. Vampires of the warrior class burned through alcohol—and poisons—quickly. He could have probably consumed every pitcher of wine at the feast and barely felt it.

"Did you want to get drunk tonight?" I asked.

No answer. He just sprawled in his chair, his long legs spread and his thick arms folded. But his gaze took a slow journey down my bare chest.

Heat licked through me. “I didn’t think you were coming to bed.” He had his own room but he never used it when he was at court. I kept the servants’ pockets full, and they kept their mouths shut—and their heads attached to their necks. A winning arrangement all around.

His eyes continued their lazy path, moving over my hips and down my leg, which stuck out from under the sheet. He rubbed his fingers over his mouth.

I flung the sheet away and swung my legs over the side of the bed.

“No.”

The command was quiet, but it stopped me as swiftly as a shout. My dick, which had been at half-mast since I became aware of his presence, swelled.

His gaze went to it—and stayed there. The gold irises glowed just a bit in the predawn light.

I gave myself a leisurely stroke. When he didn’t order me to stop, I gave myself another. Perched on the edge of the mattress, I eased my thighs apart. I pulled one leg up and rested my heel on the featherbed. And then I continued working my dick with a slow, steady fist. I smoothed my other hand down my abs and cupped my balls.

“You didn’t bring her here,” he said, his focus on my slit, which was shiny with moisture.

My voice was surprisingly steady. “I said I wouldn’t. My bed stayed cold, like you wanted.”

His grunt of acknowledgment was soft. His expression was neutral as he watched me jerk for him. And it *was* for him. If he wanted me to stop, he would have ordered as much.

No, he wanted to see my thighs spread and my hand on my dick. He wanted to see the smooth sack and waxed hole underneath. That was for him, too. Another order. One he’d issued a long time ago.

He sat there and watched like I was a whore from the stews of Lar Katerin and he was a paying customer. “You

dressed her in your colors and draped your mother's jewels around her neck.”

“She's a princess...and half vampire.” Lust spiked, making my breath hitch. More precome spurted from my tip, and I squeezed my balls in a bid to slow my runaway desire. “I...*ah fuck*...honored her station.”

“Is that why you brought her here? To honor her?”

I worked my hand over my swollen cockhead and slicked moisture up my shaft. “I thought we could fuck her together. But I'll send her back if you wish it.”

His golden gaze flicked up to mine.

“Say the word. I'll send her over the Rift.”

A beat passed. He went back to watching me. But now one fang sank into his lower lip as he sucked it into his mouth.

I wanted to go to him. I wanted to straddle his lap and watch his composure shatter. But that wasn't how this worked. I wasn't even really sure what *this* was, and maybe he didn't either. I just knew I needed it the same way I needed to breathe.

My balls were drawn up and tight. The base of my spine tingled. My dick pulsed in my hand.

Varick's growl vibrated across the short distance between us. “You better not come.”

“Are you going to fuck me?” I huffed.

He tossed something onto the bed.

A vial of oil. The fucker had been warming it in his hand the whole time.

“Open yourself,” he rumbled. “Get your ass ready and then maybe I'll fuck it.”

“Maybe?”

He shrugged.

I snatched up the oil and flopped onto my back. “How long are you going to punish me?” I asked, dribbling oil onto my

fingers. I wasn't sure if I asked about the princess or the sexual tension brewing in the room. Maybe both.

"Legs up, I want to see. And keep your hands off your dick."

"Yes, General," I muttered. I put my feet flat on the bed and let my thighs fall wide. With an oil-coated fingertip, I teased my entrance, circling the outside over and over. The knowledge that he watched from mere feet away—that he could see this most vulnerable part of me—lit a fire in my veins. I let my eyes drift shut and pushed a single finger inside. My muscles clenched, and a thick wave of pleasure rolled through me.

And now I knew why he forbade me to touch my dick. It leapt against my abs, the tip wetting my skin. "*Ungh*," I groaned, fisting the sheet so I wouldn't reach for my cock. With my other hand, I continued playing with my ass, sinking two fingers as deep as I could get them. It would take a lot more to accommodate Varick's cock. "You could help me," I complained, my hips lifting.

"Give me a reason to."

Heat streaked through me. I knew what he wanted. So I obliged. I flipped to all fours with my ass pointed straight at him. Knees wide, I sank to one elbow and plunged my fingers back inside. "I'm pretending it's you," I said breathlessly as I finger-fucked my ass. I'd used plenty of oil, and the sound was loud in the quiet room. I sank lower and rolled my hips, lifting my ass high in invitation. "This is what I do when you're not here. When you're patrolling the Thicket with your men. When you leave me all alone in this big bed. I picture you in your armor behind me, spreading me wide and driving that thick cock into my hole."

Varick was quiet. But his gaze was like a brand on my skin.

"But you're here now." I thrust faster. My dick was an iron spike. I rocked my hips, and it swung like a pendulum between my legs. Every muscle was taut as I struggled to stave off my release. "So fuck me," I begged. "Please."

I didn't even hear him move.

The crack split the air a second before the sting of his hand registered. The blow on my ass jolted me forward. Before I could smash face-first into the bed, he seized me and spun me around. He hauled me up, and our mouths crashed together in a desperate, hungry kiss that tasted of wine and blood and *him*. His night beard scratched my chin, and I gripped his shirt and pulled him closer because I couldn't fucking get enough.

And he couldn't tolerate me being in charge for long. He plunged his tongue deep, overwhelming my senses. Filling my lungs with his scent and my ears with the sound of his harsh breaths that told me his nonchalance in the chair had been an act.

He gripped my ass where he'd struck me. "Such a slut," he growled between kisses. "Dripping wet for my cock." He captured my dick with his other hand and swiped a rough thumb over my slit, smearing moisture all around my cockhead. He pushed his thumb into the tiny opening, sending stinging pain straight up my dick.

I grabbed his shoulders and shoved hard. In the split second I managed to knock him back, I dropped down and nuzzled his cock through his pants. He had to be as close as I was. His hard length strained his laces. I licked him through the leather and pressed my face against his groin.

He speared his fingers through my hair and pulled me off. "Take it out and get it wet. All the way inside and don't move."

I ripped the laces open, thrilling at his sharp intake of breath. He was one of the biggest males in Nor Doru, but sometimes I liked to remind him I could hold my own. His thick cock filled my mouth, and we both groaned.

I took him straight to the back of my throat until my nose brushed the wiry golden hair beneath his rock-hard abs. Carefully, I swallowed, letting my throat close and open around his shaft. I held still as my eyes streamed and my body urged me to jerk away.

But I stayed put. In the quiet, I felt him *everywhere*—and not just because my mouth was stuffed with his cock. My ass tingled from his blow. My lips were swollen from his punishing kiss. The tip of my dick throbbed from his rough handling. All these things combined to make fire crackle just under my skin. I breathed him in, saliva slipping from my mouth to coat my chin. I stayed perfectly still. Because he'd told me to.

He stroked a hand over my hair, then cupped the back of my head as he eased his dick from my aching jaw, avoiding my fangs. He dropped his hand to my nape and kneaded the muscle there. "Good boy," he rasped. He trailed the tip of his dick through the mess on my chin before tapping it against my parted lips. "Now suck."

I went to work, sucking and licking. Cheeks hollowed, I bobbed up and down his dick, letting the spongy head nail the back of my throat. I covered every inch of him, swirling my tongue from his tip down to his heavy balls that swayed as he bucked his hips. I dragged the bar in my tongue up and down his length, and was rewarded with shots of salty precome. When I licked down the wrinkled seam of his sack, he leaned over and fingered my hole.

"You open enough for me?"

"Fuck yes." He speared me with two thick fingers. Curled them just so, hitting the spot that made me see stars. I gasped against his thigh. "If you keep doing that, I'm going to come."

He gripped my jaw one-handed and pulled me up. "No, you're not," he growled against my mouth. "Not until I taste you." He kissed me once, hard, then flung me roughly onto the bed.

I sprawled on my back and drank him in as he stripped out of his clothes. I spread my legs and arched shamelessly, writhing like the slut he'd called me. Because what else was I supposed to do when confronted by his broad, chiseled chest and thick biceps? The deep V-shaped cuts above his hips. His flat nipples on those round pecs, and the trail of golden hair that led straight to his monster of a dick. My fangs descended,

and I hissed at the sight of his strong hand gripping his dusky, veined shaft. It was so long and thick it curved upward.

“Give it to me,” I demanded, spreading wider.

Smoldering golden eyes narrowed. Nude now, he planted a knee on the bed and grabbed me around the thighs. He yanked me to him, then pushed my legs wide and rolled me up onto my shoulders. My spine curled and my knees touched the bed. The position left me splayed open. Completely at his mercy. I wrapped my arms around the backs of my knees to keep my balance.

He slapped his dick directly over my hole, which made me jump and bite my lip to keep from moaning. When he saw me holding back, he did it again...and again, until the room echoed with his wet *thwacks* and my pitiful begging. That must have satisfied him, because he stopped his wicked spanking and pushed my cheeks so wide cool air caressed the inside of my hole. “Thought I already told you how this is going to go. You’re not getting my dick until I get a taste of this ass.” Without breaking my stare, he lowered his head and licked up my crease.

“Fuck!” Fire sizzled over my skin, coalescing around my rim, which he stroked firmly with his tongue, copying the pattern I’d traced with my finger. He circled my hole for several moments before switching to long, sweeping caresses, kissing my opening as deeply and thoroughly as he kissed my mouth. In seconds, I was a breathless, babbling mess. He stayed quiet, his glittering gaze holding mine captive as he lapped and sucked. This was more than a taste. He was eating me whole. Opening me with his lips and tongue.

Each swipe was the most delicious torture. Every wet, decadent sound threatened to tip me over the edge. His stubble abraded my sensitive skin. My hole twitched and fluttered as I moaned helplessly. My heartbeat throbbed in my dick, which lay stiff and shiny against my heaving stomach.

He pulled back, spit into my pucker, and went back to his feast.

“Fuck me,” I pleaded, my thighs shaking. “Please, baby.”

In response, he threw a thick arm around my waist and jerked me closer, holding my ass to his face in a possessive grip. He buried his face deeper and speared me with his tongue. He drove it in and out, fucking me with it. Loud and filthy. His eyes peeking up at me from between my legs were slits of molten gold.

I threw my head back and unleashed a string of hoarse nonsense interspersed with profanity. He'd robbed me of coherent speech, which was perhaps his intention. Now I was nothing more than a trembling collection of needs and desires.

At last, he lifted his head. He swiped the back of his hand over his mouth and gripped his cock. His big fist squeezed, and a fat bead of moisture swelled at his slit. Gaze fierce, he touched it gently to my hole.

The muscle clamped reflexively. He'd soaked me. I could feel the moisture pooled at my opening.

He squeezed more precome into my hole—and I was so open I felt it drip inside my passage. Taunting. Maddening.

“All the gods, Varick,” I rasped through a throat sore from shouting. “If you don't fuck me right now, I'll—”

“You'll what?” He lowered my hips to the bed but kept my thighs pushed to my chest, folding me in half, my knees pinned to my shoulders and his big hands holding me open. With a sexy swivel of his hips, he dragged the tip of his cock around my quivering entrance, stirring the oil and saliva gathered there. “What will you do?”

Shivers coursed over my skin. The scant space between us was as thick and volatile as the air just before a storm. “I'll die,” I whispered, my voice sounding lost.

The look on his face was blistering. With agonizing slowness, he picked up the oil and drizzled a liberal amount on my hole. Just as slowly, he coated his shaft until his dick and hand were glistening. Then he lined himself up and leaned over me. “Well we can't have that,” he murmured, and pushed inside.

At last. At *fucking* last.

My head went back of its own accord. The sounds that left me were feral. Animalistic. His cock slid home, filling me with delicious pressure that lit up every nerve ending on the way in. He'd prepped me so thoroughly, the burn was next to nothing as he seated himself to the hilt, his heavy balls pressed snugly against my ass.

He stretched his big body over me, his chest brushing mine. I hooked my legs around his waist, part of me afraid he might pull out and start torturing me all over again.

But he didn't. He stayed inside me and, for a moment, the look in his eyes shifted.

There.

It was brief, but I knew him well enough to decipher it.

I touched his jaw to let him know I was all right.

He gave a subtle nod, then pushed my legs up so my ankles rested on his shoulders. He grabbed my wrists and stretched them above my head. He pinned me that way and began to move, circling his hips in a slow, sensual grind.

"Fuuuuck," I groaned, arching. "You're so fucking deep." No matter how many times we did this, I was always a little surprised at how big his dick was. Sex with Varick was an *experience*. Like galloping on a swift and powerful horse that could either kill you or give you an exhilarating ride.

"Take it." He withdrew a couple of inches, then slammed back home, forcing a grunt from my lungs. "Take every inch of this dick you wanted." Any reply I might have given was smothered by his mouth. He kissed me and fucked me, pumping his hips in a steady rhythm. His dick hit the exact spot where I needed him, making everything inside me melt and flow in an endless stream of pleasure. I couldn't move. Couldn't do anything but lie there and take my fucking. He swallowed my moans. His dick pummeled my ass while his tongue invaded my mouth, both stroking me from the inside out. The thick, wet sounds of his dick tunneling into me were insane.

He kept at it for several long moments, his grunts and the *slap slap* of his balls against my ass an erotic symphony that left me shuddering, my body balanced on a knife's edge of impending release. My ass clamped hard around his cock, as if my body was so impatient for satisfaction it decided to bypass my brain.

He broke off the kiss. Stared down at me with narrowed golden eyes. His big hands squeezed my wrists. He pumped faster, his rhythm ruthless. Sweat glistened on his shoulders as he gave me a savage look. "Something you need from me?"

"Let me come." I needed it so badly I was ready to do anything. Say anything. Be anything. "Fuck me, baby," I gasped, only half aware of what I was saying. "*Please.*"

Even railing my ass like he was, he still had enough control to lift an eyebrow. "Isn't that what I'm doing?" He thrust harder, the force of his movements making the ancient, heavy bed shudder. "I'm not fucking you?"

I struggled against his grip on my wrists. "I can't—"

"You can," he said firmly. He transferred my wrists to one big hand and clamped the other around my throat. He squeezed, and that was controlled too. His long fingers applied just enough pressure to stifle my intake of air but not enough to cut it off completely. Stars danced in my vision. An intense tingling started in my head and moved down my body, finally settling in my dick. Blood roared in my ears.

Blood.

My gaze latched onto the fat vein in his neck. In a flash, my fangs snapped down. Saliva flooded my mouth. "Want," I croaked, lightheaded and needy. Starving for everything this male had to give me.

"Come on then," he growled. He moved his hand from my wrists to my dick. At the same moment, he released his other hand from my throat.

And I flew apart.

He'd barely pumped my shaft once when I spurting all over my stomach, my orgasm hitting me like a battering ram. Air

filled my lungs in a thick rush. The dizziness in my head spiraled into euphoria as I shuddered and bucked, come spraying my chest and chin. Clumsy and half-blind, I flung my arms around his neck and pulled him down. I bared my fangs and struck hard, hitting his vein. I groaned as his delicious blood filled my mouth. My dick continued to pulse between us, my orgasm unending.

He pumped his hips a few more times, drilling hard before giving me one final, bed-shaking thrust. Heat flooded my ass, his seed pumping into me even as his blood pumped into my mouth. I'd given him everything he wanted, and now he gave everything in return. His come overflowed me and dripped down my crack in a hot slide.

When he finally stopped shuddering, I pulled my fangs from his neck and licked the wound, tasting the salt on his skin. I licked the last of him off my lips. We stayed like that, him sprawled on top of me with his forehead on my shoulder and his dick still buried inside me. Our hearts thundered against each other. My come was a sticky, hot mess between us but it was too much to bother with at the moment. Not when he'd forgiven me. After a minute, I smoothed my hand down his muscular back, feeling the bumpy edge of a scar.

He pulled out and flopped beside me, his gaze on the canopy above the bed. He lay there for a moment catching his breath. Then he left the bed without so much as a glance in my direction.

I lifted onto my elbow as he disappeared into the antechamber. A few seconds later, I heard him take a piss in the privy, followed by the sound of water splashing in the basin.

Unease drifted through me. I sat up and used the corner of the sheet to clean myself up. Then I strode around the corner.

Still nude, he stood at the basin with his back to me. Shafts of lavender predawn light slanted through the shutters and fell over his shoulders and broad back. It was a sight he allowed few people to see. For all I knew, I was the only one.

I crossed the room and faced him across the basin. There was enough water for two, so I grabbed a sponge and mopped at the traces of come on my chest. “You back to not speaking to me?”

He gave a Varick-like grunt. “We spoke. Just now. You don’t remember?”

My post-orgasm haze evaporated. I washed my dick and ass and tossed the sponge into the water. “Ah. But you’re still pissed off, is that right?”

“I’m curious.”

“About what,” I snapped, hearing the hard ‘T’ at the end. “Maybe I can enlighten you.”

“Maybe you can.”

We glared at each other over the basin.

“I’m waiting, General.”

He stabbed a finger at me. “That’s it right there. You expect me to lead your army and you won’t even tell me what’s so important about Given of Sithistra that you had to drag her across the Rift and parade her in front of the whole fucking court.”

I gripped the sides of the basin and looked at the ceiling. “We settled this,” I told no one in particular, “and yet it continues to come up.”

“So you’re not fucking her. Congratulations. Why the hell is she here? And don’t say it’s to embarrass Rolund. There are a thousand other ways you could have done that. You’re scheming and I want to know why.”

Anger punched through me, bright and spiky. “Careful, Varick. You overstep.”

“Even if she’s not spying for her brother, this could drag us into war.”

“She’s not a spy—”

“You imperil the realm.”

I shoved the basin, sloshing water. “I’m trying to *save* the realm!”

His eyes widened. Water droplets clung to his chest. Some had splattered as high as his cheeks. He ignored them. “What do you mean?”

I straightened. Scrubbed a hand over my face. When I lowered it, he still watched me. Waiting. He’d stand there forever. *Stubborn* didn’t begin to describe Varick.

We were alone, but I lowered my voice anyway. “I know you take the stories that come out of Wesyfedd seriously. You consider the Thicket our biggest threat. But there are other threats...bigger ones. Like the Deepnight.”

His brow furrowed. “The Deepnight is protection. Nor Doru’s greatest weapon.”

“It moves south.”

“A good thing,” he said, sounding like the soldier he was. “It puts Rolund on his heels. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“And what happens if it continues to shift? When the Sithistrans grow sickly from lack of sunlight? When their crops wither and die? If they run out of food, we run out of blood.”

“So pull it back. You’re the king.”

I said nothing. Water dripped from the wooden stand that held the basin. Immediately, the sound made me want to squirm. As swiftly as the thought entered my head, I heard my father’s voice growling at me to stand still. Could almost feel his fingers digging into my shoulder to hold me in place. I’d been thinking of him a lot more lately. I had the fucking Deepnight to thank for that too, I supposed.

“Laurent?” Varick prompted.

“I’ve tried everything,” I said quietly. “I’ve worked with the priests. Tried every rite. Prayed to every god.” I huffed a bitter laugh. “I’ve prayed to *all* the gods. The last time you were on patrol, I spent the night on my knees on the floor of the Sanctum.”

He looked like he'd seen a ghost. In a way, maybe he had. "What are you saying?" he asked.

"I've lost control of it." These were words I'd never said aloud to anyone—not even the handful of priests who were aware of my problem. "I've bled over every altar in the Sanctum. It won't fucking *move*, Varick. Controlling the Deepnight is the king's most sacred duty. And I can't do it anymore." *And I don't know what it means.*

But in the back of my mind, a little voice whispered that I knew all too well what it meant.

Varick knew too. For a brief moment, it showed on his face.

He covered it quickly. He gave his head a little shake, like he refused to accept what I was saying. "You bound the thralls. The whole court saw you perform the rite."

"My father performed rites too. Before—"

"No." He shook his head more firmly. "This is *not* that."

I drew a breath.

At the same moment, a woman's terrified scream split the air.

Varick and I froze. The sound was so close, it could have only come from the chamber next door.

"Given," I said.

Together, we raced into the bedroom and grabbed whatever clothes we could find. Then we were out the door.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

GIVEN

The man's hair was as long and pale as my own. It flowed down his back as he stood facing away from me. If it weren't for his broad shoulders, I might have mistaken him for a woman.

But I knew he was male.

Because I knew *him*. I'd seen him before, in this same place. Only this time I remembered it.

It was always the same. We stood in a clearing in an open field. Tall, fragrant grass surrounded us, but our space was flattened. The sky was a hazy blue, and the temperature was perfect. White blossoms drifted through the air. Somewhere in my mind, I knew that wasn't quite right. There were no trees to shed them. When the delicate petals neared the ground, they disappeared. That shouldn't have happened. But every time I tried to puzzle it out, the thoughts slipped away. It was easier not to think about it, so I didn't.

I focused on the man.

He was richly dressed. His dark-blue mantle was trimmed in silver embroidery worked into an intricate design. The heavy fabric fell to his ankles and caught on the grass. The blossoms drifted around him, their petals as white as his hair.

It was odd that he was just standing there.

I took a step forward. "Hello?"

He stiffened. Slowly, he turned. Our gazes met.

My breath caught. He was beautiful. Again, I knew this already. But he was so stunning, it was like I was seeing him for the first time. His skin was flawless, his features masculine but delicate in a way that threatened to break my heart. His eyes were the same clear blue as the sky above us. His ears curved to delicate points.

Elven.

Of course.

His lips moved, but his voice seemed to come from behind me. Like the petals, it was all wrong.

I turned but there was no one there.

The voice rose—and I recognized it. Just as I knew the man, I knew this voice. It spoke a strange, guttural language. Its tone dipped low before climbing unnaturally high.

My heart pounded. The fine hairs on my arms lifted.

The voice spoke directly in my ear.

I cried out and spun around, seeing nothing but an empty field. When I turned back, the man stood right in front of me with blood pouring from his mouth. It gushed down the front of his clothes and splattered in the grass.

A strangled scream ripped from my throat. I tried to run, but my feet were frozen in place.

The blood kept coming. It soaked the hem of my dress and climbed up my skirts.

“S-Stop!” I cried, slapping at the fabric like I was putting out flames. “Stop it!” His face was ashen. He was probably the only elf left in the world. I couldn’t let him die.

He’d stopped speaking, but *someone* was shouting. Desperate now, I let my fangs descend. I bit my wrist and held it to his lips. But he didn’t drink. He just stared straight ahead as if he looked right through me.

“Take it!” I screamed. Blood flowed down my arm. The ground under my slippers was soggy with it. Panic locked its jaws around me.

The shouting grew louder. Invisible claws sank into my arm.

The field and the man disintegrated. The claws turned into Laurent's fingers, and I found myself in the middle of my bed in the Midnight Palace.

"Given!" Laurent loomed over me, his slate-gray eyes wide.

He was the king. I knew I should rise and greet him, but I couldn't do either of those things. My head swam, and a great lassitude kept me pinned to the bed. A loud thumping noise filled the air. It was slow, like the beat of a drum.

"She's lost too much," he told someone. "She needs to feed."

On the other side of the bed, Varick moved into view.

Even in my floating, fuzzy state, I managed to frown. I didn't need his scorn, and I certainly didn't need his broad chest filling my vision.

His *bare* chest. The mounds of his pecs were lightly furred with golden hair. Flat, pink nipples peeked from among the dusting of curls. His jaw was tight, his lips compressed in a thin line as he bent over me and lifted my hand.

Fiery pain licked up my forearm. I hissed weakly and tried to free myself.

He held me fast—and that was when I got a good look at my arm.

My wrist was...shredded. A mess of meat and exposed bone. It looked like an animal had tried to chew my hand off. Nausea rose hot and thick. I whimpered and turned my head.

"No." Varick forced it back with a big hand on my jaw. "Face what you've done."

What I've done?

"My blood could kill her," Laurent said. "I'll summon a thrall."

“They’re tapped from the feast.” Silver flashed as Varick produced a dagger from somewhere. “I’ll do it myself.” He sliced his forearm like it was nothing. Then he slid his other hand under my shoulders and lifted me as he pressed the wound to my lips.

Blood touched my tongue.

Fire ripped through me. A wild, hitherto unknown beast within me lunged forward, jerking my body with it.

I latched onto his arm and sucked in greedy swallows, drawing his delectable blood in deep pulls. He tasted of raw power. With every mouthful, I felt my wrist knit back together. Bones slid back into place. Veins sizzled as they reconnected. His power flowed hot and rich through my veins. This—*this*—was a vampire’s strength, and I wanted *more*. With a growl, I clutched his arm to my mouth and sank my fangs deep.

At the same moment, desire slammed into me. Moisture surged between my legs. My inner muscles clenched, and my hips rolled hard. My thighs parted of their own accord. I moaned, grinding my ass into the bed as I struggled to find the friction I needed. Bliss hovered just out of reach, but I couldn’t grasp it. A frustrated sob broke from my throat.

And then Laurent was there. He slipped a hand under my nightdress and found my center with unerring accuracy. Strong fingers stroked the hot, pulsing nub between my folds. “Let go for me, Princess,” he said, his voice ringing with command.

The shimmering ball of bliss exploded. I came on a strangled scream, my whole body quaking. Dimly, I was aware of Varick’s big hand gripping the back of my hair and pulling me off his arm. My head hit the pillow, my spine arched, and my hips bucked against Laurent’s fingers. He worked magic against my wet, heated folds. Wave after wave of ecstasy crashed over me, until the currents receded and I couldn’t bear another crest.

Laurent knew it. With a final lingering stroke, he withdrew his hand, leaving me limp and panting. He pulled my nightdress down, and I realized it had ridden up and tangled around my waist, exposing me to both males.

They sat on either side of my hips, their gazes bright, fangs fully distended. The bed was a bloody mess, but that was the least of my concerns.

I'd just had the most powerful orgasm of my life in front of the King of Nor Doru and the commander of his army. Laurent had touched me where no man had ever touched me. There wasn't a word to adequately describe the depth of my humiliation. I scrambled upright, some wild part of me intent on fleeing.

"No, you don't," Varick growled, gripping my ankle before I even realized he'd moved. With his other hand, he seized my newly healed wrist.

"What?" I gasped. With his blood pumping through my veins, I felt like I could lift a boulder. I struggled against his hold, a growl brewing in my throat. "Let go of me!"

"Not bloody likely." He yanked me closer, and my nightdress rode up again. "You little fool. One trip across the Rift and you're ready to throw your life away."

My eyes bugged. "You think I hurt myself on purpose?"

"You severed every vein in your wrist."

"It wasn't me!" I squeezed my eyes shut briefly. "I mean it was, but I did it to save the man."

"Man?" This from Laurent, whose gaze sharpened. He glanced at the door.

"It was a dream," I said quickly, before he called for guards. "I've had it since I was a child." The details rushed back, the memory of the man's gaping, bloody mouth making me shudder. "This time was different, though. He s-spoke to me...or at least I think he did. His lips moved but it was like someone else was speaking. It was the same voice I heard at the—" I cut myself off. Maybe it was best to keep my experience at the Rift to myself.

But Varick wasn't having it. "The same voice you heard where?"

"I..."

He tightened his grip. “Answer me.”

Words stuck in my throat. With a snarl, he twisted my wrist. Pain streaked up my arm, and I cried out.

“Varick,” Laurent said softly.

Silent communication passed between the men. Varick released me, but he didn’t look thrilled about it. I tugged my bloody nightdress down my thighs. His golden gaze tracked my movements, reminding me he’d just watched me fly apart from the combination of his blood and Laurent’s fingers. That they’d done it together made the whole thing more shockingly intimate.

And now that my senses had returned, it was obvious they’d come to my bed directly from the one they shared. Laurent’s dark hair was tousled, and he wore a dressing gown loosely belted at his waist. He was clearly nude beneath it, his smooth chest visible between the deep V of black satin embroidered with night-blooming roses. Varick’s sole piece of clothing was a pair of leather pants. The laces had been ripped and clumsily retied. A prominent erection threatened to rip them open again. It was an inconvenient side effect of feeding me. It didn’t mean anything. But it startled me nevertheless. He was so controlled in everything else. It was a shock to learn he couldn’t control this.

I jerked my gaze away, but not before I heard his sharp intake of breath. Anger rolled off him in an icy blast. It was all I could do not to shiver.

“With your leave, Your Grace,” he said stiffly.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Laurent incline his head.

A gust of air was my only warning that Varick had left. One second, he sat on my bed, and the next he was gone. The door clicked shut, and I stared at it in disbelief. “I had no idea he could move that fast.” He could sneak up on anyone. Slit their throat before they even knew what hit them.

Laurent’s tone was light. “When he wants to, yes.”

Well, he’d wanted to. “He doesn’t like me.”

Humor glimmered in Laurent's eyes. "He likes you too much."

"I... You mean..." I trailed off as his meaning sank in. Laurent's attraction to me was unmistakable. But the general had been nothing but hostile. Now Laurent expected me to believe Varick's physical response was more than just a reaction to sharing his blood?

Laurent's expression turned contemplative, as if he was trying to decide how much to say. "Varick has a complicated relationship with women."

"But he...likes them?"

"He does." He picked up my hand and brushed my knuckles back and forth across his lips. A new kind of shiver scrabbled through me. There was no question *he* liked women. His silver gaze held mine over the back of my hand. "He likes them when I'm involved."

Such a simple statement, but it conjured all sorts of images. Like their hard, muscular bodies tangled together in a rumpled bed. In an instant, the image in my head changed, inserting me between them. Because that was what Laurent was saying. Varick slept with the king...and he slept with women with the king. Together. It was the kind of gossip Lidia's ladies would kill for, only it wasn't gossip right now. It was reality as the king himself teased my knuckles with his sensual mouth that did strange, fluttery things to my stomach.

"Your Grace..." I began.

"I told you to call me Laurent when we're alone. Keep disobeying me, Princess, and I'll have to punish you." He rose and gestured at me. "Stand up."

My gut clenched. "Wh-Why?" Was he going to punish me *right now*?

"You're covered in blood." He went to a wardrobe and returned with a clean nightdress and a bundle of bed linens. He dumped everything on the bed, then fetched a wet cloth from the washstand. My eyes widened as he came to me, grasped my chin in strong fingers, and cleaned the blood from my face.

Surprise kept me rooted to the floor. Cold water dripped down my throat, making my nipples pucker. The material was so thin it was almost see-through. There was no way he wouldn't notice.

He finished his work and released me, and judging from the glint in his eyes, he'd definitely noticed. "You're chilled. Change your gown while I build up the fire."

I waited until his back was turned before scrambling into the clean nightdress. He'd stroked me to an orgasm and now he was performing domestic chores. I wasn't sure what to expect from him next.

He threw more wood on the fire, and then crouched before it with a poker. The muscles in his back rippled as he stoked the flames as efficiently as any servant. The flames danced higher, picking out blue lights in his black hair. He was no less regal kneeling before the hearth in his dressing gown. Even in this humble position, power clung to him.

After a second, I realized I was staring. With nothing else to do, I started stripping the bed. He joined me a moment later, snapping out the new sheets and tucking them under the mattress.

He raised a brow at me from the other side of the bed. "Something wrong?"

"I never imagined a king knowing how to do these things."

"Rolund doesn't know how to make a bed?"

"I seriously doubt it."

"But you do."

My lips twitched. "I wasn't heir to the throne." My fledgling smile faded. "And my mother was a second wife." *And a vampire.*

He flicked the last of the bedding into place. "My mother was a priestess of the Sanctum. She believed everyone should humble themselves before the gods regardless of their station." His white teeth flashed in the firelight. "Thus, I know how to make a bed."

“I thought the priestesses never married.” As scant as my knowledge of the vampire religion was, I knew that much. The priests of Nor Doru took wives, but women who served the gods were supposedly celibate.

“They don’t,” Laurent said. “But my father wanted a pure bride. He didn’t trust the families at court to give him an untouched daughter, so he rode to the Frozen Wastes and took his pick from the priestesses with noble blood. My mother wasn’t flattered by the attention.”

“So it wasn’t a love match.”

He gave me a mild look. Rather than answering, he rounded the bed and took my hand. Bewildered and a little nervous, I let him pull me to one of the colorful tapestries that decorated the walls. He pulled the tapestry back, revealing a doorway that had been bricked over.

“My mother was more interested in prayer than being queen. But that didn’t stop my father from forcing the issue.”

I stared at the wall. It was obviously a connecting door that, once upon a time, had led to another chamber. When I looked at him, he was watching me.

“She bricked this up shortly after I was born,” he said. “She told my father she’d given him an heir and that if he wanted anything more from her he could use the same door as everyone else. This wall is a fitting symbol for their relationship...or lack of it, I suppose.”

He didn’t sound like it bothered him. But maybe he was good at hiding his feelings. Anyone who spent time at court quickly learned that emotion was a liability. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Royal marriages rarely involve love. Although, your parents proved that particular maxim wrong.”

“Maybe for a while, but their love ended in tragedy.”

He brushed a knuckle along my jawline. “All love is a tragedy. We’ve all got bricked-up doors inside us, Princess. Loving someone means tearing all that down and leaving ourselves open. Make yourself that vulnerable and you give the ones you love the power to hurt you. And they always do.”

I swallowed. Standing barefoot with him, his body heat caressing my skin through the thin nightdress, it felt like we weren't talking about other people anymore. "I wouldn't know."

"Maybe you will one day. If the right person comes along." His knuckles continued skimming my jaw. In a rush of embarrassment, I realized he used the same hand he'd buried between my legs. My arousal had dried on his fingers.

And now he spoke of royal marriages. Yet he'd come to me with his lover in tow. I'd spent my whole life watching what happened when three people shared a bed. Just what did the King of Nor Doru want from me?

I stepped back, out of his reach. "You're not alone, Your Gra— Laurent. You have Lord Varick. Sithistra buzzes with speculation about your relationship. After tonight, I know the stories are true."

He didn't respond. He studied me, his expression unreadable. Panic gripped me. I'd been too bold. Borderline insulting. I opened my mouth to apologize, but he cut me off.

"Distaste for the marriage bed wasn't the only reason my mother bricked up this door. By the time I was ten years old, my father was mad."

Shock tripped through me. Rolund had spies in the north. My brother put a lot of effort into knowing his enemy. But this particular news had never leaked south. Laurent's family must have guarded the secret closely.

He spoke in a low, clipped voice, doling out the story like he wanted to devote as little time to it as possible. "His advisers hid it well. He'd always been paranoid, seeing enemies around every corner. When he threw petty criminals into the Rift, people called him harsh but fair. When he began tossing nobles into the chasm, the lowpeople assumed they were traitors deserving of their fate. My mother had the Sanctum on her side. She knew my claim to the throne would be in jeopardy if my father was deposed. So she made sure the priests looked the other way. The few who didn't joined the nobles in the Rift."

My throat went dry. I wanted to move away from the bricked-over door, but I didn't dare. I stood still and braced myself for whatever came next.

“No one wants to deal with an insane king. You don't get a lot of volunteers willing to put a knife between the ribs of a madman with absolute power. It's easier to pretend everything is normal. To continue following orders. So when my father's delusions convinced him I was trying to steal his throne, he ordered his general to kill me.”

My eyes went wide. That general would have been...

“Varick's father,” Laurent said with a nod. “I was nineteen years old when Valen of Lar Keiren put a sword to my neck. Varick stopped him.” His silver eyes pierced the dim morning light. More silver winked in his earlobe. “I became king that night, on the shore of the Bitter Sea at Lar Keiren. Varick crowned me. It was the worst night of my life...and the best.”

The fire popped, making me jump. Laurent stayed totally still, his gaze never leaving mine. His eyes gleamed like the blade of a sword, sharp and deadly. *Vampires are mortal the same as men.* But he'd never looked more frightening. More alien.

I swallowed. “I...didn't know.”

“Well you couldn't.” His voice was as hard as his eyes. “You've only heard speculation. Stories.”

My lips parted, but no sound emerged. What could I say?

“Here's another story for you, Princess. Varick saved my life, and then I returned the favor. All on the same night. He's more to me than speculation. I don't give a fuck what anyone in Ter Isir thinks of my *relationship*.” It was clear he included me in his definition of “anyone.”

Apologies formed in my mouth, but the words were big and bulky. Awkward on my tongue. Anything I said was certain to be inadequate.

“Get some rest. I'll tell the servants not to disturb you.” He glided to the door, moving in his graceful, seductive way. I

expected him to turn back before he left. To leave me with some other kind of acknowledgment. But he didn't.

And as I stood alone next to the tapestry and watched the door shut, I realized something that made me brace a hand against the wall. By his own admission, few in Nor Doru knew the truth about his father. It was almost certain Rolund didn't know. But Laurent had told me. Which meant he had no intention of letting me go home.

Whatever his plans for me, I would never see Sithistra again.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

VARICK

“E njoying the view?”

At the sound of my voice, Given jumped and whirled from the tower balcony where she'd been watching my men train in the practice yard below. It was evening the next day and I'd been watching *her* undetected for the past ten minutes.

“General,” she said, a hint of warmth in her voice. She even dipped a shallow curtsy. Her gaze flicked to the shadows behind me.

“I'm alone.” I walked to her, removing my gloves as I went. Despite the chilly air, I was sweating under the fitted leather armor I wore for training. I stopped at the railing and peered over it before meeting her blue gaze. “It's a long drop to the ground. Are you afraid of heights?”

“I...no.”

“Lie.” I slapped my gloves against my palm. “You forget your lessons already.”

Her lips pursed with disapproval. It was hardly surprising that Laurent wanted her. She was immaculate in the light of the setting sun, her white-blond hair spilling over the shoulders of a black velvet gown. The stark color suited her icy beauty. She should have looked tired after the feast and her unsettled night. Instead, she glowed, flush with the blood she'd taken from me. Maybe she'd orchestrated the whole thing—the “dream” and the shredded wrist and the feeding.

The orgasm that followed. She'd drawn Laurent from my bed to hers.

Her gaze searched mine. "You want me to be afraid of you." She seemed genuinely surprised by that, her blue eyes wide and guileless. Had she stood before a mirror practicing that expression? It probably worked on Laurent.

I ran a dismissive look down her body. "You didn't seem afraid last night when you spread your legs and soaked your bed with your fangs in my arm. A performance worthy of the brothels of Gate Street. My apologies, Princess, I should have left a coin on your pillow."

Her nostrils flared. All pretense of friendliness dropped from her face. Now, she looked like she'd gladly toss me over the railing. "Judging from your reaction to my *performance*, General, you enjoyed yourself."

"A normal response to feeding. Meaningless."

"Is that why you ran away with your tail tucked between your legs?" She tilted her head. "Or maybe you just needed to replace the laces in your pants."

It was a vicious retort, delivered with the polite poison of someone raised in a royal court. In two sentences, she'd told me she knew I'd been unsettled by my arousal and that Laurent and I had fucked before coming to her aid.

But the latter didn't bother her. On the contrary, her body temperature had gone up as she spoke of it. Pink tinged her cheeks. *Interesting*.

So the ice princess wasn't as prim and proper as she appeared. It didn't make her presence in Nor Doru any less irritating.

"What do you want." I didn't make it a question. The Serenity Tower was the oldest part of the palace. The whimsical name was something of a misnomer. The tower was the tallest, and men-at-arms used it as a lookout. At the first sign of an enemy approach, they would alert Lar Katerin's defenses. My knights lived and trained in the tower's lower

levels. No courtiers ever came here. I'd bet half of them didn't know how to find it.

Which meant the princess had sought me out, probably without Laurent's knowledge or permission. He wouldn't want his prize wandering among soldiers without an escort.

From the look on her face, she wanted to fire back an equally abrupt reply. But then her features smoothed. "We don't have to be enemies." She paused, clearly waiting for me to agree. When I didn't, she plowed ahead. "I have no designs on the king. He said he won't take me into his bed unless I ask, and I have no intention of asking. I'm no threat to you."

I tucked my gloves in my sword belt. Then I stepped into her so she was forced to back up. I didn't stop, which meant she couldn't either. Not if she wanted to stay on her feet. Fear bloomed in her gaze. She shuffled backward until her shoulders bumped rough stone. I'd backed her to a wall without touching her, but now I took her chin between my thumb and forefinger.

"D-Don't." Her throat worked as she swallowed.

I tipped her chin up so she was forced to look at me. I leaned in until my mouth nearly brushed hers, and her fluttery little breaths ghosted over my lips. "I've known Laurent since before you were born. I've been fucking him since you were in diapers. You don't have to reassure me that you're not a threat, little girl. I know you're not." My sentence ended in a quick intake of breath.

Because, suddenly, she was gripping my cock through my pants.

And I was as hard as the stone at her back.

I released her chin and seized the wrist she'd plunged between my legs. I gave her a warning squeeze and felt her bones grind together.

She squeezed back—and, fuck, she was stronger than she'd been when we tussled at the Rift. It surprised us both, apparently, because her sapphire eyes widened before filling with triumph. Her fangs flashed. "I know you don't like to be

touched, General, but if you put your hands on me again, I *will* return the favor.”

Anger bloomed hot in my chest. Laurent was the only person who could have given her that information. He'd *discussed* me with her, just the two of them. That was its own kind of betrayal.

But at the moment, she had my dick in a vise. I couldn't blame my erection on a feeding this time. No, this was all her. She stared up at me with glowing eyes. Her breath caressed my lips. Cloves and forest. Something raw and untamed stirred deep in my chest. Slowly, it lifted its head.

A faint frown line appeared between Given's eyebrows. Confusion danced in her eyes. She stared at me like she was just seeing me for the first time.

Against my will, I looked at her mouth. The wild, untamed thing inside me unfurled itself and stretched. My heart thumped so hard it threatened to knock against my leather breastplate.

“You want to fuck Given of Sithistra, and it makes you furious.”

Yes, this was fury. But not the kind that made a man want to kill. This was far more dangerous. It was a storm gathering, air pressure dipping and lightning flashing in the distance. It was the ominous sound of a shutter buffeting the side of the castle wall as the wind picked up. It was the scent of rain on the wind, the rumble of thunder right before the tempest descended.

It was because Laurent wanted her. That was all it was. She was the alabaster princess he'd ordered me to fetch from across the Rift. The poor, underfed halfling raised in neglect. Undoubtedly, the idea of playing protector to such a creature appealed to Laurent. He loved pretty, pitiful things. He'd enjoy saving her and then unraveling her. Dirtying her up. Yes, something about this female made a man want to ruin her.

In the back of my mind, another explanation for my desire clamored for my attention. I shoved it away.

Given's grip was ruthless, but I still had a free hand at my disposal. And turnabout was fair play.

I cupped one plump breast through the velvet. I squeezed, stopping at the narrow barrier between pleasure and pain. She gasped, and I rubbed my thumb over her already-stiffening nipple. I leaned in until our lips were almost touching. Our breath mingled, and the scent of cloves filled my senses. "How does it feel?"

She whimpered. Her fingers on my dick loosened ever so slightly. Her deep blue eyes were a mix of anger and desire. "What?" she asked, her tone bewildered and a little distant.

"Having my blood inside you."

Her mouth slackened, along with her grip.

I tilted my head. Let my lips hover just over hers. "Make no mistake, Princess, if I decide to be inside you in other ways, it *will* happen."

Her eyes widened as she registered my twist on her threat.

I knocked her hand aside and stepped back. "I have knights to train." I turned and stalked away.

"You're the liar," she called out, stopping me cold.

Slowly, I faced her, and I knew my expression was the one that caused seasoned knights to quake in their boots. "Say that again, Princess."

She stayed slumped against the wall, but her eyes remained defiant. "The man in my dream wasn't a man at all. He was an elf. He spoke with the same voice from the Rift. I heard it when I crossed, and I know you did too."

Jordan's face formed in my mind, his steady, slightly challenging expression as clear as a bell. "*I think you know, my lord.*"

Given watched me, the same challenge in her gaze. Fucking Sithistrans. Nor Doru was a much more peaceful place without them.

“You’re mistaken,” I said. “I merely stopped you from falling over the edge of the Pass.”

She shook her head. “I might believe that if it wasn’t for your reaction after my dream. There was panic in your eyes when you asked me about the voice. You heard it at the Rift, General. And something tells me that wasn’t the first time.”

For a moment, I almost indulged the urge to return to her and do...something. Kiss the self-assurance off her face. Take her vein and find out if she tasted as sweet as she smelled. Feel those firm breasts pressed against my chest. Toss up her skirts and fuck her against the wall to get her out of my system.

Instead, I pulled on my gloves and walked to the tower steps. Just before I descended, I looked back at her. “You should be careful, Princess. Nothing good happens to people who hear voices. Someone might decide you’re dangerous and lock you up.”



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, I WAS TUGGING MY GLOVES OFF again as I made my way to the palace library. My encounter with Given had left me in no mood to return to the noise and sweat of the training yard. But I had other, quieter tasks to tend to. The Midnight Palace was a place of revelry, not scholarship. The library was always empty. No one would disturb me there.

When I entered, I immediately stopped short. Jordan of Twyl sat at one of the big tables with dozens of books spread before him.

“So much for that idea,” I muttered.

“My lord?” He scrambled to his feet. “Uh, the Lord favors you—”

“None of that shit,” I said curtly.

He cast his eyes down and bit his lip. “Sorry.” A broad shaft of sunlight fell just behind him, picking up the chocolate highlights threaded among his dark curls.

An awkward silence settled between us. Eventually, he lifted his gaze. “Are you...here for a book, my lord?”

“Is this where they keep them?”

His blush could have heated the great hall. “I d-didn’t mean it like that. I just...didn’t take you for a reader.”

“You have a rare talent for giving compliments, Brother Jordan.” I walked to his table and spun one of the thick books around. “*The Heraldry of House Lar Satha*,” I read aloud. I snorted. “I see warnings have no effect on you.”

His cheeks turned a deeper shade of red, but his tone was steady. “I’ve never been able to stop myself from reading, my lord. It’s a character flaw, I’m afraid.”

It was a polite way of telling me to fuck off with my warning. On the one hand, I could respect his determination. I swept my gaze over the assortment of books. Whatever knowledge was in there, he wanted it badly enough to make an enemy of the Brotherhood—and now me. It was a brave stance to take.

On the other hand, “brave” and “stupid” weren’t mutually exclusive traits. On the battlefield, for example, they could often be found together.

I went to a wooden cabinet and opened it with a key from my belt. Scrolls of every size and shape were stuffed into small compartments. Wax seals attached to ribbons dangled off most of the documents. As I began my search, I could see Jordan studying me out of the corner of my eye. His gaze bounced between his books and me before finally settling on me.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” I asked.

He jumped slightly. In my peripheral vision, he surveyed the sea of books on the table. “Oh... Well, yes and no. I mean, vampire historians are much more thorough than their Sithistran counterparts. Which makes sense.” His regard fell on me again. “Are you...looking for something?”

I answered without pausing my search. “Is it that obvious?”

He lapsed into another awkward silence. He tugged one of his books close and, for a moment, appeared to read it. But his gaze strayed to me again and again, and he watched with undisguised curiosity as I carried a scroll to the table next to his.

I ignored him as I spread the parchment open. The damn thing tried to curl back up. I looked around for a heavy book. When I turned back empty-handed, he was there. He pressed the top two corners flat against the wood and held them in place.

“Thanks,” I said gruffly.

“No problem.”

“You move quietly.”

His smile was almost apologetic. “It’s the robes.”

I looked him over. He wasn’t wearing his mirror pendant today, but he was still swathed in the dark gray robes of the Brotherhood. Now that I didn’t have him pinned to a wall by the throat, I could see he was taller than most Wesyfeddians, who tended to be short. There was a hint of strength in his shoulders...

And wariness in his blue eyes because I was staring.

I turned my attention to the parchment. Several seals, including Laurent’s, were stitched to the bottom of the parchment. Everything was intact. Good.

“This is a betrothal contract,” Jordan said.

I straightened. “My sister’s, yes.” It was hardly a secret. Evelina probably held the record for Nor Doru’s longest betrothal.

His gaze landed on the tangle of seals. “Are you going to dissolve it?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“I...” He licked his pink lips. “It’s not. It’s just...I couldn’t help overhearing last night. Lady Evelina said she didn’t want to marry.”

I tugged on the parchment, and he released it, sending it flapping back toward me. I picked it up and rolled it into a tight scroll. “My sister doesn’t want to do anything I want her to do. It’s her whole personality. If I told her she couldn’t marry Martin of Lar Plestes she would have already eloped.” Immediately, I regretted saying so much. All of Nor Doru knew of Evelina’s antics. There was no need to give the gossips more fodder. And I wasn’t entirely convinced Jordan of Twyl wasn’t a spy. Even if he wasn’t, he probably couldn’t give a shit about my domestic problems.

But his smile was sympathetic. “Sisters,” he said, as if that explained everything. In a way, it did.

“You have one?”

“Three.”

“Gods.” A shiver went down my spine. “I don’t know what I’d do.”

I must have looked genuinely horrified, because he laughed, displaying a dimple in one cheek. “It’s not so bad. They’re all a lot older, and they wed years ago. My biggest problem when I return home is getting swarmed by nieces and nephews. It’s hard to keep everyone’s names straight.”

He didn’t sound like it was a problem. If the soft smile curving his lips was any indication, he loved it.

“It sounds nice,” I said, and I found myself looking for that damn dimple again. I’d never noticed it before. *Because he’d never laughed in front of me.* I certainly hadn’t given him a reason to.

“It is.” His smile faded, but the warmth lingered in his eyes.

I tucked the contract under my arm and fetched my gloves. Instead of pulling them on, I slapped them gently against the cover of the nearest book on his table. “You waste your time with this. Lar Satha is an impoverished estate whittled down to a patch of infertile land and a crumbling tower. Scholars have researched the rumors of elven blood and found the evidence

lacking. It's a house of no import. There's nothing remarkable about it."

"King Baylen of Sithistra defied his council and his First Queen to wed Vessa of Lar Satha. He put his crown at risk to take a vampire with no money and hardly any station to wife. You don't find that remarkable, my lord?"

"Vessa of Lar Satha was the greatest beauty in Ter Isir. Men will do a lot of stupid things for pussy."

He flinched at my bluntness...but then he swallowed. "Not all men," he said softly.

A beat passed. "No," I said just as softly, "not all men."

An understanding passed between us—one I'd recognized since I was twelve years old and knew I wasn't quite like everyone else, or at least the mix of squires and lords' sons who trained at court. They talked endlessly of pussy, and I found plenty to interest me in the soft curves and sweet-smelling hair of the serving maids they chased after. But I was also plagued by images of hard muscles and tight asses. Sometimes, I didn't want soft or sweet-smelling. Alone in my narrow cot in the squires' quarters, I yearned for masculine sweat and rough skin...

I'd fought those forbidden desires to no avail. Ran as far from them as I could, but it was never far enough. Then Laurent had come along and showed me why. He knew things like that, just as he knew Jordan of Twyl would welcome my advances.

And in another life, I might have pursued the earnest, oddly charming ex-brother. He offered something safer and easier than what I had with Laurent, which was complicated and often difficult. At times, I hated it. More often, I hated myself for needing it. But I was also addicted to it. No matter how much trouble it brought, I knew I'd never give it up.

I'd resisted that reality for a time, but now I faced it unflinchingly. I was good at that—at accepting things I'd rather not acknowledge. It was how I survived. How I made sure Laurent survived.

And this problem with the Deepnight... There were no coincidences. I could ignore Jordan of Twyl all I wanted, but he kept popping up. He spoke of elven blood and secrets at the same time Given of Sithistra had crossed the Rift and claimed to hear voices she shouldn't be hearing.

I looked Jordan square in the eye. "I serve the king."

"Yes. Of course." Any disappointment I thought I glimpsed on his face was covered quickly. "We are all his servants."

"It's my job to protect the crown from threats."

"Yes, my lord. I know that."

I went to the library doors and bolted them shut. Then I returned to Jordan's table and sat. Silently, I motioned for him to do the same.

Fear reigned on his face, but he sank into his seat without protest.

"What do you know about House Lar Keiren?" I asked. "And if you know anything, you already know vampires of the warrior class can sense lies, especially at close range."

For a moment, he was quiet. "I know what you're really asking, my lord, and that's what do I know about you."

I allowed a small smile to touch my lips.

"I know you're a Child of Prophecy," he continued, "as your father was before you. And that, like your father, you took command of the Nor Doruvian army at a young age." He drew a deep breath. "I know he was cruel and...powerful. More powerful than even a vampire of the warrior class should be."

I waited, knowing I should kill him for what he was about to say next.

"I know he possessed unusual abilities...and that you share them."

I held his stare. "*Like the power to speak in a person's mind?*" I asked in his head.

He paled. His mouth worked as he tried to answer, eventually managing only a whispered “yes.”

“You dug too deep in the Brotherhood’s towers,” I said aloud. And those corrupt fuckers had been doing far more than just predicting births.

“I know, my lord.”

“They won’t rest until you’re dead.”

“I know that too.”

I sat back, and he sucked in a sharp breath, no doubt expecting a weapon to fly at his throat. When I merely settled more deeply in my chair, his swallow was an audible gulp.

“I assume you don’t wish to die, Jordan of Twyl.”

“No, my lord,” he choked out. “I very much want to stay alive.”

“You’ll have to pledge your loyalty to me. Completely.”

“You have it, Lord Varick.”

“You’ll serve me as my sworn man.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“If you break your oath, I’ll kill you. It won’t be a quick or easy death.”

His eyes closed briefly. “I understand.”

The blade of my dagger thunked into the table in front of him, making him yelp and clutch at the front of his robes. His gaze bounced between my hand and the quivering hilt, like he couldn’t quite believe I’d moved without him seeing it.

“Swear it,” I said, resettling in my chair.

“I...”

“Grip the blade and swear it on your blood.”

Wincing, he curled his fingers around the dagger. With a grimace, he squeezed until blood trickled between his fingers. “I swear it,” he rasped. “I pledge my complete loyalty to you, General Lord Varick of Lar Keiren, Commander of the Army

of Nor Doru. I am at your service, for whatever you require. I swear it on my blood.”

Not bad for a human.

“The knowledge of my ancestry—and my gift of Voice—doesn’t leave this room.”

“It won’t.”

I nodded. “Now, tell me everything you’re not supposed to know about House Lar Satha.”

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

GIVEN

“Anything else, Princess?”

I looked at the serving girl who had just finished hanging up all my freshly laundered gowns. I had dozens of them now.

Gowns, not serving girls. Although Laurent had supplied me with plenty of the latter too. He'd given me everything—attendants, jewels, beautiful clothes, blood-wine fortified with herbs prepared by his personal physician. In fact, the only thing he hadn't given me lately was *himself*.

A week had passed since our talk after my dream, and I hadn't caught so much as a glimpse of him. When I asked the servants, they demurred, saying only that “the king is busy” and “the king has many obligations.”

I couldn't argue with these excuses. Rolund was never around either.

But this was different. I'd offended Laurent, perhaps beyond repair. It shouldn't have mattered, especially now that I knew he was never going to let me go. That realization should have bothered me a lot more than it did...but maybe I'd known it from the start. From the moment he first appeared on my balcony and looked out at the city with me, I'd known I was in Nor Doru for good.

And now I was at odds with the king who held my fate—my very life—in his hands. Regret was like a stone around my neck, weighing me down and dragging my steps as I paced my room—his *mother's* room. Was there significance in his

putting me in her chamber? I might never know. Speculation—that word that had landed me in so much trouble—dominated my thoughts.

Before the dream, Laurent had been attentive...and obviously attracted to me. He broke tradition and flirted with war by insisting Rolund send me over the Rift as a thrall. He'd treated me with respect. Stroked between my legs until I orgasmed all over his hand.

And now there was nothing but silence. Undoubtedly, he'd been keeping company with Lord Varick, who was probably pleased with this turn of events. I hadn't seen the general, either—not since my clumsy attempt at making peace on the Serenity Tower.

But that encounter had also left me more confused than ever. Any time I was near Varick, it was like sparks shot between us. I wanted to keep my distance, but I also wanted to get as close to him as possible. Despite his harsh words and cold looks, he'd been rock-hard in my hand. And I didn't need a warrior's superior senses to know he'd meant every word of his threat.

At the memory of it, heat flooded my face. I bore some of the blame for provoking him. After all, Laurent had warned me Varick didn't like to be touched. I had no idea what possessed me to touch him *there*. It wasn't the sort of thing ladies did. My boldness was another mystery on top of a growing mountain of them.

Maybe my isolation was for the best. I was a prisoner in Nor Doru. A bird in a cage and uncertain of my fate. The less I saw of my captors, the better.

The servant cleared her throat, and I realized I was staring into space as she waited for my reply.

“Nothing else, Seda. Thank you.”

She curtsied and started for the door.

“Have you seen the king?” I called out before I could stop myself.

“I haven’t, Your Highness. I could leave a message if you —”

“No no. That’s not necessary.” It would only make me appear desperate. And what if Laurent ignored it?

Once Seda left, I wandered onto the balcony. It had only grown colder since I arrived, but I didn’t mind the chill. Sithistra had always felt overly warm, and now I knew why. I was meant for a colder climate. Every day in Lar Katerin, I felt stronger. Like I could run forever without growing tired.

But it wasn’t just the cooler air that lent me strength. It was the blood-wine. The *human* blood Rolund had denied me all these years. I’d gone without it for so long I never knew how much I needed it. How powerful I would feel consuming a steady diet of it.

But my newfound energy left me restless...and frightened. It burned like fire in my veins, waking me in the middle of the night. Although, if I was honest with myself, other things woke me too. And they weren’t nightmares this time. There had been no repeat of the strange elf with the bloody mouth and the voice from the Rift.

No, these were dreams. *Detailed* dreams.

Dreams in which Laurent and Varick were back in my bed and watching me scream my release. Except in my dreams, they both fed me. Touched me. Put their fingers inside me and stroked until I writhed and sobbed.

More than once over the past week, I’d woken with my nightdress twisted around my hips and my thighs spread wide. I’d been so wet and aching between my legs I’d stroked my swollen flesh as those forbidden images paraded through my mind.

It was wrong, but I couldn’t stop it. When the maids entered my room in the morning, I worried they could tell. That maybe something in my face or body gave it away.

Fortunately, Laurent hadn’t locked me in my room. If I’d been cooped up with only a bed and my dreams, I might have gone crazy. But I was free to roam the palace as I pleased. A

guard trailed me whenever I left, but he never stopped me from wandering. Not that I wandered far. I was too much of a curiosity to feel comfortable among the courtiers. Although they were polite when I encountered them, their stares followed me. Rowena and Jordan were the only other humans I'd met, and I hadn't seen either of them all week.

A sigh rose in my chest as I gripped the balcony railing. No matter which side of the Rift I was on, it seemed I was destined to be alone.

“Found you.”

I spun at the sound of Laurent's voice, barely managing to muffle a squeak of surprise. I pressed a hand to my chest. “You startled me.”

His smile wasn't the least bit sorry. “I wanted to see if I can still sneak up on you. I thought maybe your hearing would improve now that you're drinking human blood regularly.”

“It has.” Now that my initial shock had worn off, reality rushed back in. The rift between us was as wide as the one between our kingdoms.

He came to me and rested a hand on the railing. “I apologize for the way we parted the last time we spoke.”

My heart skipped a beat. “There's nothing to apologize for. It was my fault.”

“You were merely repeating what you heard.” He lifted a shoulder. “And the stories are mostly true. My reaction was based on things from the past, not anything you said. No one would dare speak to me that way, but Varick has endured his share of taunts. I can be overly protective of him at times.”

There was something touching about that. Almost sweet. It was hard to imagine Varick needing protection, but maybe Laurent knew a softer side of him. What were they like together when they were alone? Did they...love each other? They must. No wonder Varick had grown so angry when I claimed I wasn't a threat.

Memories of my illicit dreams filtered through my mind. I lowered my head so Laurent wouldn't see the guilt in my eyes.

“I’ve neglected you,” he said. “My duties kept me preoccupied these past few days. I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

The endearment stroked over my skin, leaving heat in its wake. No one had ever called me that before. “It’s all right. I know you’re busy.”

“Let me make it up to you. Ride with me today.”

“Like...leave the palace?”

“Yes, just the two of us.”

I hesitated. After everything that had happened, maybe that wasn’t the best idea. “Lord Varick—”

“Is training his men.” He caught my chin on his finger. “And anyway, Princess, I wasn’t asking. There are riding clothes on your bed. I’ll fetch you in ten minutes.”



TEN MINUTES LATER, I HELD LAURENT’S HAND AS HE GUIDED me through a series of tunnels. The only source of light was a torch he held in his free hand. We were deep underground. Water trickled down the rough stone walls, and we had to duck to keep our heads from scraping the ceiling. We both wore dark cloaks that covered our clothes and kept out the damp.

“Where are we going?” I whispered. Even so, my voice echoed.

His expression was mischievous in the torchlight as he glanced back at me. “You’ll see.”

Apprehension tightened my stomach. I trusted him, but the tunnels were so cramped...and obviously very old. What if the ceiling caved in? We’d be buried.

“Are you taking me to your dungeon?”

His soft laugh bounced off the walls. “I don’t have one, sweetheart.” He glanced back at me with a raised brow. “In Nor Doru, we throw criminals in the Rift.”

“Right,” I said weakly. That didn’t make me feel better. The story of his father tossing his enemies into the chasm rose in my mind. Laurent had been king for a long time. There were no reports of him being bloodthirsty or unstable. Still, the Nor Doruvian method of execution never failed to make my stomach churn.

Just as my worries threatened to spiral into full-blown panic, daylight punctured the inky blackness. A moment later, he pulled me into an open field. Two horses stood a short distance away, both saddled and grazing on clumps of grass.

For a moment, I was completely disoriented. Then I realized we stood *outside* Lar Katerin. The city wall rose thick and high above us. Beyond it, the obsidian towers of the Midnight Palace pierced the sky.

“It’s an escape tunnel,” Laurent said, gesturing to the wooden door we’d just come through. “In case the palace is ever under siege.” He led the horses over and unhobbled them. “I assume you’re a competent rider.”

“Yes. Do I get to know where we’re going?”

He winked. “Let me be mysterious a little bit longer.”

I tried to frown but my smile broke through. After a week of thinking he never wanted to see me again, I had his undivided attention. I wasn’t going to think too hard about why that pleased me so much.

He helped me mount, then vaulted into his own saddle and adjusted his sword. “Ready?” he asked with challenge sparking in his eyes.

I gripped my reins. “I think so?”

With a grin, he reached over and slapped my horse’s rump. The beast lurched forward, and we were off, racing away from the city and over the sun-speckled field with our cloaks streaming behind us.

It was exhilarating, riding in the daytime without worrying about protecting my skin. I didn’t need gloves or a hood. The Deepnight blocked the harsh rays of the sun and made the whole world sparkle. For the first time in my life, I galloped

with my hair loose and wind whistling past my ears. Laurent's horse was bigger and undoubtedly faster, but he held the beast in check, and we sprinted together. He was darkly handsome in black leather, his silver eyes twinkling with the same mischief he'd displayed in the tunnels. Wherever he was taking me, it was clear he expected me to enjoy our final destination.

So I stopped worrying about it and let myself revel in the wonderful, novel feeling of total freedom. Out here, away from the city, we weren't royals. He wasn't a king and I wasn't a captive princess unsure of my standing. There was no protocol. No burdens or expectations.

We rode like that for about a half hour before slowing to a trot. We traveled for another hour or so, stopping only to water the horses and stretch our legs. My stomach started to rumble with hunger, and I'd just turned to Laurent to ask about food when I saw it.

The Thicket.

The wall of trees stretched across the horizon, blocking out the balmy blue sky.

I tugged on my reins as foreboding fell over me like a dark cloud. If we were near the Thicket, the Rift had to be close. Why would Laurent bring me here? My heart thumped as I looked around, searching for the edge of the chasm.

Laurent brought his horse next to mine, and his thigh brushed my skirts. His tone was soothing. "The Rift is about a mile off. We won't even see it."

That was a relief, but the Thicket still rose dark and angry above us. Without warning, a flock of birds burst from the tops of the trees and screeched into the sky.

I tensed, inadvertently tugging on my horse's reins. The beast tossed its head, ready to bolt.

Laurent moved quickly. "Whoa," he said, placing his palm on the beast's neck. He murmured something foreign under his breath. At once, the horse stilled, its big head drooping.

“What did you do?” He’d spoken in the same sibilant tongue he and the priests used at the feast.

“Lowered his heart rate.”

I blinked. “You can do that?”

He studied me, as if trying to decide how to answer. “I can. The gift runs in my bloodline. It’s what made my ancestors kings.”

Surprise jolted me, although maybe it shouldn’t have. Even Sithistran schoolchildren knew the ruler of Nor Doru possessed some kind of pull over blood—or at least pretended to. But now I knew it wasn’t pretense at all. I’d seen Laurent bring the thralls’ ribbons to life. And he’d controlled my spooked horse with nothing more than a touch and a few whispered words. The tiniest drop of his blood had set me on *fire*.

“It’s easy to see why,” I said. “It’s a powerful ability.”

The briefest smile touched his lips. “In ancient times, we were worshipped as gods, but my forebears discouraged the practice. When the lowpeople can’t find an explanation for a drought or a plague, the gods are the first ones they blame.” He stared into the distance, his expression more somber than I’d ever seen it. “But the crown and the faith are still intertwined.”

“It must help that your mother was a priestess.”

He met my gaze. “Sometimes, yes. Other times, I’m afraid the gods are indifferent to my heritage. Come, Princess. We’ve reached our destination.”

The change of subject was so abrupt, it took a second for the second part of his statement to sink in. I looked around, confusion assailing me. “What do you mean?”

“Take a closer look.” Gently, he took my reins and looped them with his. He led our horses at a walk, taking us closer to the Thicket. As we neared the trees, an old tower house came into view. It was a blunt, square design built for defense rather than style. Its stone was stained so dark that, from a distance, it blended into the forest behind it.

But now that we were close, I could see glass in the windows. The tower was old, but someone had taken pains to repair it. The work was recent.

My skin prickled with awareness.

“It’s Lar Satha,” Laurent said. “Welcome home, Given.”

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

LAURENT

Given was quiet as we entered the tower house. She looked around with wide eyes, taking in the great hall with its raised dais and wooden chandeliers. The Lar Satha coat of arms—a crescent moon tipped horizontally over a tree set aflame—was carved into the stone high on the wall. Traces of gold paint remained on the moon

She stopped and looked up at it, her platinum hair flowing down her back. She was exquisite in a tight-fitting riding dress the same color as her eyes. It was one of just a handful of gowns I'd ordered for her that weren't the black or crimson of Nor Doru. I preferred her in my colors.

Although, I'd prefer her in nothing at all.

"Your mother inherited this in her own right," I said, strolling forward until I stood beside her. "That means you hold her lands and title."

She turned to me with startled eyes. "Really?"

"You didn't know that?"

She shook her head. "Queen Amantha punished the servants if they even uttered my mother's name. My nurse told me a few things here and there, but it was safer to say nothing. Then Rolund came into power and there weren't any servants left who had known my mother."

Anger flooded me. "He could have hired some. Instead, he allowed you to starve, depriving you of both blood and knowledge."

“He was busy running the kingdom.” Her cheeks colored slightly. “And trying for an heir. His failure in that regard has slowly consumed him.” She flashed me a guilty smile. “I probably shouldn’t tell you that, but I’m guessing you already know.”

Gods, she was lovely. I couldn’t resist touching her. I untied her cloak and draped it over my arm. “I do. But I don’t need spies to tell me of your brother’s struggles. No matter how powerful he is, every king feels the pressure to sire an heir.” I tucked a pale strand of hair behind her ear. “My Lady of Lar Satha.”

The blush in her cheeks deepened. Without the cloak, her breasts pushed firmly against her bodice. She cleared her throat. “Did you order all these repairs?”

“Yes. I wanted you to see where you came from.” I tangled my fingers with hers and pulled her toward the stairs. “Come see the living quarters.”

We climbed the narrow spiral staircase, which smelled of fresh timber because it was. It had taken quite a bit of bribery to convince craftsmen from Lar Katerin to work in the shadow of the Thicket. The forest wasn’t as close as it looked upon approach, but the trees were near enough to make even the toughest males squeamish.

The second floor held two large bedchambers. As I pushed open the door to one, she let out a happy gasp.

“It’s furnished!” She went to the bed and sat on the mattress, bouncing once like a child before standing and continuing to explore. She trailed her fingertips over a chest of drawers and bent to sniff at a vase of wildflowers.

I pointed. “That bench is original to the estate. We found it in the attic.” *We* was a bit of an exaggeration. The servants I’d sent to clean the place had reported back with a list of salvageable furniture, and I’d ordered them to distribute it among the rooms.

But when she turned a broad, delighted smile on me, I was fully prepared to take all the credit. She came to me, rose on

tiptoe, and kissed my cheek. “Thank you, Your Grace. This is so much more than I ever expected.”

I eased an arm around her waist. “I’m pleased you like it. We can station men-at-arms here if you wish. It would only take a few servants tending the fields to make the estate profitable again.”

Her breath caught. “You mean it?”

“I never say anything I don’t mean, Princess.” I smiled. “Like when I promised to punish you when you use my title instead of my name, I definitely meant that.”

The tiniest hint of fear sparked in her eyes. “Laurent—”

“Wed me.”

The charming blush drained from her cheeks. “What?” she whispered.

“Be my wife. My queen.” I traced my thumb over her bottom lip, pressing just hard enough to make her open and reveal the tips of her little fangs. “Embrace who you are, Given. You aren’t meant for the south.”

“You can’t...” Her smooth brow furrowed. “You don’t mean it.”

I laughed softly. “Didn’t I just get done saying I always say what I mean? You’re a princess with royal blood. Rolund of Sithistra’s sister. What better way to cement an alliance between our two countries?”

For a moment she just stared at me in frozen disbelief. Then she came alive, pushing at my chest until I released her. “I can’t marry without my brother’s permission.”

I’d anticipated this argument. She was right, after all. No sister of mine would have wed against my wishes. But I didn’t have a sister. I had someone else’s—and he’d been a fool to give her to me in the first place.

“You’re in Nor Doru,” I told her. “Rolund is all the way across the Rift. He can’t stop you from marrying me. But he can make your life miserable if you go home. Return to

Sithistra and you'll always be a thrall. You're deluded if you think otherwise."

Her delicate brows pulled together. The air between us shifted. Tension sprang up, turning us into adversaries who faced off across the small chamber.

"I'm not deluded," she said. "A wife is still a thrall, Your Grace. Whether it's a ribbon around my wrist or a ring on my finger, you would own me either way. Marriage is just another kind of slavery."

Gods, she was cute. And so easy to rile. I wanted to fuck her while she was angry and hissing like a cat. But I also wanted her soft and purring. Mostly, I just wanted her. Maybe it was time to make that clear.

After all, I was running out of time.

"Marriage is a contract, Princess. Fucking is a different matter entirely. I want the first from you, yes, but I want a lot more of the second." I ran a languid gaze down her body, lingering on her fantastic tits and her nip of a waist. "Trust me, you'll enjoy being a slave in my bed."

She made a huffy little sound, and it was obvious she *thought* she should be angry, but she was mostly aroused. She tried to hide the latter by scowling, which only made her look more appealing. But her scent gave her away. Her desire bloomed like a flower in the little room. Her nipples poked hard against the front of her gown, and her pulse fluttered rapidly in the long column of her neck.

But she refused to give up. "If I marry you without my brother's permission it could lead to war."

"Doubtful. Rolund might not fear the north, but his soldiers do. Human eyes can't pierce the Deepnight. Men hate fighting monsters they can't see."

"And you consider yourself a monster?"

I smiled. "If I'm a monster, then so are you, sweetheart. Or at least half of one. You just told me the Sithistran First Queen banned your mother's name. Why not wed me and live in a

kingdom where you're revered instead of reviled? Take advantage of the opportunity to make your own choices."

Her chin went up a notch. "Do I have a choice now?"

The question caught me off guard. Not because she expected an answer, but because she already knew it. Her deep blue eyes—which normally lent her an air of innocence—were assessing. Calculating. She was politically savvy enough to know I'd already decided to wed her, and that my asking for her hand was merely a courtesy.

It only made me more determined to have her.

"What choices await you in Sithistra?" I walked a slow circle around her, and she turned with me, following me with wary eyes. "Do Rolund's wives seem happy?" Her mouth tightened, and I knew my spies' reports were accurate. "Don't think for a minute he'll make an exception to Sithistran polygamy for you. He'll sell you to whichever lord offers him the most gold, and he won't spare a single thought for your opinion on the matter. You're a halfling, and human prejudice is thicker than Baylen's blood in your veins."

Doubt flickered in her eyes. I could sense her resolve weakening. Could scent her oh-so-responsive pussy growing wetter by the second. She'd spent time imagining herself in my bed. I'd wager my crown on it.

I kept circling her. "You could end up as a second wife. Is that a risk you're willing to take? To spend your life in the shadow of another woman who resents your pedigree and your beauty?" I lowered my voice. "You would follow in your mother's footsteps."

The doubt turned to pain. Victory hovered within my reach.

I stopped. The bed was steps behind her, which was precisely where I wanted it. "You'll never compete for my affection. Nor Doru has one queen. I want it to be you, Given. Marry me. Rule with me."

Emotions raced through her eyes, one after another. There was doubt and hope and lust—and, finally, the sharp curve of

the thorns I'd glimpsed in her gaze on occasion. "What does Lord Varick think of your proposal?"

Oh, she was going to make a magnificent queen. I let a smile touch my lips as I advanced toward her. "Leave the general to me."

She took a cautious step back. "If I wed you, would you continue to—"

"Fuck him?" She sucked in a breath as I took her elbow and steered her around the end of the bed. I stepped into her, using my height and bulk to send her tumbling onto the bed. She went down with a delightful little gasp, and I pressed my advantage, sliding a knee between her thighs and letting my mouth hover above hers. I slid my knee higher, until it pressed firmly against her mound. I dug in, grinding over her pussy.

"*Oh.*" Her eyes darkened with lust, and I almost laughed out loud. She was so fucking ripe for it. I'd taken a gamble leaving her alone for a week. But my instincts had been correct. This was going to be too easy.

She arched slightly, seeking more friction. Even with the layers of skirts between us, her heat seared my skin. The memory of her perfect, pink clit glistening between her slick folds had dominated my thoughts over the past week. *Sorry, Mother*, but I would have made a terrible priest. Because while I'd knelt in the Sanctum and beseeched the gods to halt the Deepnight, my mind had returned again and again to Given of Sithistra's cunt. She'd come so prettily on my fingers. I could only imagine how gorgeous she'd look coming around my dick.

I ran a hand up her leg, dragging her skirts up as I went. I bent her knee and propped the heel of her riding boot on the bed, exposing her silky white stocking and the creamy skin of her thigh. I eased back and took a moment to admire her. Fuck, that was pretty, her voluminous skirts bunched around her hips and her legs splayed open. I found the slit in her lacy drawers and pushed one finger into her silky heat.

Her wide blue eyes locked with mine. She made a low, kittenish sound that went straight to my cock.

“Soaking wet,” I growled, inhaling her scent. “But I need you even wetter, sweetheart.” She was tight as a fist. Untested. I liked to think of myself as enlightened, especially when it came to sex. A female’s value had nothing to do with her virginity. But knowing I was the first man to touch her this way raised something raw and primal inside me. I withdrew my finger slightly, then pushed it back in, sinking deeper. I hooked it, stroking over that elusive spot guaranteed to drive her crazy. “You like the idea of me fucking Varick, don’t you, Princess?” I gave her tight little cunt a few pumps, drawing forth delicious sounds that made my dick ache. She moaned again, her eyelids fluttering. I put my lips against her ear. “I’ll tell you a secret about the general, beautiful girl. *He fucks me.* Never the other way around.”

Her white-blond hair spilled across the bed, framing her blushing face. At my revelation, her pussy rewarded me with more slick heat, and I chuckled and pushed another finger inside her, gliding easily. I moved my fingers apart, carefully stretching her. “Oh Princess, you’re a naughty little thing, aren’t you?” Fingers deep in her drenched pussy, I stroked my thumb in light circles over her clit. She whimpered, her soft breath puffing over my face. “You want to watch Varick fuck me?” I pressed my thumb harder, and she made a sound that bordered on a squeal. “Or maybe you want me to fuck you while he fucks my ass. We could do that, you know. We could do a lot of things, the three of us. Just imagine it, two men in bed with you. Two sets of lips on this gorgeous body, on your nipples and your sweet, juicy pussy. Two cocks filling you. Stretching you. Making you come.”

“Laurent...” Her cheeks were a brilliant pink, and I knew she would have turned her head away if she thought I’d let her get away with it. She settled for closing her eyes, her silky lashes like fans on her heated cheeks. “You can’t...*oh...*” Her hips lifted as I fondled her clit again. Such a delicate little nub, so tiny and sweet. She was soft everywhere, so different from a man. And I was a greedy bastard because I wanted all of it. The hard and the soft. I’d always been that way, finding equal heat in a woman’s curves and the firm roundness of a man’s

shoulder. I liked to fuck. I liked to be fucked. It was as simple as that.

Given's scent filled my lungs. She was perfect. And so fucking responsive. Gods, I wouldn't need oil with this woman. Her pussy juiced like a fountain.

"I need to taste you," I murmured. Her eyes flew open as I trailed open-mouthed kisses down her chest and stomach. I didn't give her time to think about what was happening. With a quick tug, I ripped her drawers open and pressed my mouth to her glistening pussy. I pushed her thighs wide and rolled the bar in my tongue right over her clit.

She went rigid in the best way, her hands grabbing fistfuls of my hair. When I chanced a look up, she stared at me with that pouty, sexy mouth open on a breathy cry of wonder.

"You taste as sweet as I imagined," I told her. I reached up and pushed on her stomach until she flopped back down. "Now lie back and let me make you come." I spread her open with my thumbs and speared her with my tongue. *Honey*. Her arousal was like the sweetest honey. Intoxicating. My fangs throbbed with the need to take even more from her. To mix all that honey with the rich blood that filled her clit and her slick, puffy folds. It would be so easy to bite her right over her plump mound. The sight of her red blood on her pale skin would be exquisite.

But she wasn't ready. A week of blood-wine and medicines mixed by the Sanctum's priests wasn't enough. And while she was absolutely made for sex, she was still innocent. Better to ease her into all the pleasures I had planned for her. We were going to do everything. I was sure of it. I was going to know Given of Sithistra inside and out.

I held her open and dragged my tongue ring down her folds while her soft cries drifted around my ears. Her thighs trembled as I sucked her clit into my mouth and pulsed the metal bar against it, flicking and fluttering the delicate point. Her skirts rustled and the bed squeaked softly. Her cries turned to moans, and she ground her pussy against my face, smearing her juices over my nose and mouth. She kept one hand in my

hair and flung the other above her head, where she gathered the sheet in a tight fist.

“You like this,” I told her between damp kisses, just in case she hadn’t figured it out. “You like having your pussy eaten, sweetheart.” I pulled back long enough to wink at her. “Good thing I’ve got an insatiable appetite.” I nipped at her inner thigh and went back to licking her.

She squirmed, tugging at my hair. Her juices smeared her mound and dripped down her crack. With a growl, I followed the path with my tongue. She shook above me, her mouth open on a wild cry. Fucking gorgeous. I gripped her thigh and pinned it flat to hold her still. “Hang on, Princess. Let’s get you there.” I thrust two fingers all the way inside her and worked my tongue furiously over her clit.

She arched, her breathless, broken string of *ah-ah-ahs* a sweet accompaniment to the juices flooding my tongue.

I spoke as I licked, praising her and eating her and watching her tits heave and her cute little fangs sink into her plump bottom lip. “Good girl, Princess, making all this nectar for your king. Open wider, sweetheart.” I pushed her legs up, spreading her until her entrance gaped and her clit stood up like a shiny rosebud. “That’s what I want, beautiful. Let me see that gorgeous pussy. I want you to come on my face. Can you do that for me like a good girl?” Unable to resist, I dipped to her tiny pink asshole and licked there too.

Her hips shot off the bed. “*Oh my...*” Her words climbed to a tangled, breathless scream as she flew apart. Her body stiffened. I gripped her ass in both hands and worked my tongue as fast as possible over her clit. I took her through it as she shrieked and bucked and soaked my face.

When the tension left her limbs, I slowed things down, tonguing her with barely-there kisses. Eventually, I climbed back up her body and took her mouth, giving her a taste of herself. I angled my hips away so she wouldn’t feel my dick, which was ready to rip through my pants. When I made her mine for good, it wasn’t going to be in a borrowed bed in

some tumbledown tower house. I had a reputation for irreverence when it came to royal traditions. It was partly true.

Maybe mostly true.

But in this I was resolute. In some cases, all those trappings and ceremonies mattered. This was one of them. If I took a halfling to wife, the people needed to accept her as queen. Anything less could be ruinous. The stakes were so much higher than anyone knew.

I lifted my head. She stared up at me, her mouth swollen and her eyes hazy with desire. Then her expression shifted. The first inklings of panic gathered.

“Don’t,” I said, placing a damp finger over her lips. “I don’t want an answer right now. Think about what I said. Think about the kind of life you want.”

Some of her earlier fire flared back to life. “You mean the life *you* want.”

Slowly, deliberately, I straightened her stockings and pulled her skirts down her legs. She shivered, little aftershocks rippling through her. I helped her sit up, and she blushed furiously when I used the sheet to wipe her come off my face. I tossed it aside and stood, extending my hand in a courtly gesture like I hadn’t just devoured her cunt.

She let me pull her to her feet, and I steadied her and kissed her knuckles. “Perhaps, Princess, but the past few minutes lead me to believe we want the same things.”

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

VARICK

I leaned against the wall in the Rose Room with my arms folded over my chest.

Waiting.

The only sound was the occasional sputtering of a candle.

Memories tugged at me. They were everywhere—the bed, the floor, the top of the stairs. I used to think they might fade. After so many years, I assumed they would grow foggy, or at least overlap. Tangle together. But each one remained distinct and whole. All the times I'd been with Laurent, in this place where the outside world couldn't reach us.

The very first memory was the best one.

"You're not scared, are you, Varick? You can tell me if you are."

"No, my prince. I'm not scared of anything."

He'd faced me on the pillow, dark-haired and beautiful. *"You can't lie to me. I'll always know."*

"I'm— Maybe I am scared...a little."

His smile was as beautiful as the rest of him. *"There's no reason to be. Let me show you."*

And he did. And after, when we lay on our sides in the big bed, our faces inches apart and sweat cooling on our skin, he made us swear a vow. *"We'll always have each other's backs. Not just here, but everywhere. And we can tell each other anything. No matter what."*

He meant it. When duty lifted him even higher above me, I could still tell him anything. And he told me things he didn't share with anyone else. In the secret room at the top of the stairs, we showed the hidden parts of ourselves to each other.

But there were words he'd never said. Words I wanted to hear more than anything.

The door downstairs clicked, pulling me from my memories and into the present. Laurent's footsteps rang out. He appeared a second later, dressed in black with crimson night-blooming roses embroidered on his jacket. His hair was damp. He was as beautiful now as he'd been at sixteen.

We stared at each other. I didn't move from the wall.

"Well?" he asked.

"You weren't at the Sanctum today." He'd spent most of the past week there, rising before dawn and returning to the palace well after midnight. He'd fallen into bed, dead to the world, space and silence on the mattress between us.

He unbuttoned his jacket. "You know where I was." He shrugged out of the costly garment and let it drop to the floor. Then he went to work on his shirt. "You had men tailing me the moment Given and I left the city." His shirt landed next to the jacket. "But our horses were faster. Your knights are slow in all that armor. I'm surprised you didn't think of that."

"Stupid of you to leave the palace without an escort. Foolish. Reckless."

He held my gaze as he toed off his boots and reached for his laces. "Did it make you angry?" he asked, his voice low and silky. His skin glowed in the candlelight, his abs flexing as he worked his pants open.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on with the Deepnight, or are we just never going to talk about it?"

He pushed his pants down his hips, and I braced myself for a nude Laurent. But that's not what I got...

He wore the loincloth some knights wore to keep from chafing—a pouch that held his dick and balls. Except this was

black leather instead of cloth. He must have had it made. The pouch hugged his cock and sack tight to his body, bundling him up. There was a wide leather strap around his waist. I knew if he turned, I'd see two more straps running under his taut buttocks. I'd see his whole ass available and framed in leather. An unmistakable invitation.

He came to me, all lean muscle and long lines. "Is that what you want to do, General? Talk?" He sank to his knees.

I sprang off the wall. In a quick tussle, I had him on his feet with one wrist pinned in the small of his back, our chests pressed together. I pulled his wrist up, forcing him onto his toes. He sucked in a quick, pained breath.

"You think it's going to be that easy?" I growled. "You don't speak to me all fucking week and now you show up with your ass out and think I'm going to fuck it?"

"Yes," he hissed in my face, fangs fully descended. "That's exactly what I think. Because you can't get enough of my ass. Any chance you get you're fingering it and eating it. Biting and fucking it. You want inside all the time, baby. You never stop thinking about all the things you want to do to it."

I spun him and marched him to the bed. "The only thing I'm going to do to it right now is turn it red." I shoved him down. When he tried to come back up, I climbed onto the mattress and put a knee between his shoulder blades. I leaned hard, giving him most of my weight. He squirmed on his stomach, one hand trapped beneath him. His face was in profile, his fangs bared and his face flushed. His ass was insane with the leather straps running under his cheeks. Round and tight. Two perfect globes begging to be split apart and fucked. He was right. I wanted inside.

"Spread your legs," I ordered. When he didn't immediately obey, I forced my hand between his thighs and squeezed his balls hard through the pouch.

"Ahh...fuck!" He moved his legs apart, showing me the shadow between his cheeks. A tantalizing glimpse of his tight, pink asshole.

“Wide.”

He splayed himself open.

“Not good enough.” I struck his ass, the sharp slap echoing off the stone walls. “Get your knees under you and stay wide.” I didn’t wait for him to comply. I rained blows while he scrambled to his knees and tilted his ass up. I continued hitting him when he got into position. I kept it up, wailing on his ass and staring hard at where the thin black straps met over his smooth taint. He grunted and then cried out, his puckered hole clenching with every blow. I put my shoulder into the swats, shoving his body forward each time my palm landed. Rocking him forward so the side of his face smashed deep into the featherbed and his muscled cheeks jiggled.

Soon he was yelling, his shouts and curses almost as loud as the smacks I delivered to his ass and thighs. He was a mouthy fucker in bed, and he gave me an earful, bitching and yelping and threatening retribution. I spanked his balls a few times, which shut him up. His skin turned pink, then red. His buttocks trembled and his grunts grew hoarse. Finally, he growled and craned his neck, trying to catch my eye. “Fuck you, you’ve made your point.” He flung a hand back, trying to cover his ass.

I snagged his wrist and pinned it below my knee, just a bit too high in the middle of his back.

A warning.

He made a tight sound, not quite a whimper. Because he couldn’t best me. I’d let him go if he really wanted it, but he’d never break my grip if I decided to keep him down. He had to trust I wouldn’t really hurt him. His surrender was part of the give and take between us.

I leaned over him. “Stop pretending you aren’t dying for this. All this whining and squealing would be a lot more convincing if you weren’t thrusting your hole at me like the filthiest whore on Gate Street.”

His voice scraped from his throat. “Want you to fuck me.”

I squeezed his wrist. “You don’t get to decide when that happens.”

He winced.

“Do you?” I prompted.

“No.”

“Who gets to decide?”

He swallowed. “You do.”

“Good boy.”

I went back to roasting his ass. He cursed and gritted his teeth. I angled my hand so the blows were sharper and louder. Faster and meaner. I worked up and down, falling into a rhythm that made the rounded, mouthwatering muscle bounce. So fucking sexy to watch. My hand stung. The leather pouch swayed between his legs.

I stopped spanking him and cupped him roughly through the pouch. “You going to come in these leather panties?”

He whimpered and thrust against my hand, his rigid dick stretching the leather away from his body.

“No, you’re not,” I answered for him. I traced my fingers along one of the straps under his cheek. I lifted it and let it snap sharply. “You’ll keep these panties clean until I’m filling up your hungry little hole.”

“*Fuck,*” he gasped against the sheets, rocking and spreading wider. He lifted his ass and whimpered. “You have to fuck me. Please, baby, I need it so badly. Fuck my ass, Varick.”

I smacked him hard. “Beg me.”

“Please! Please, I’m beg—”

“Not with your mouth.”

He released a low, needy groan. He squeezed his asshole tight, giving me a lewd wink.

I wound the strap at his waist around my fist and jerked his hips higher. I sucked the index finger of my other hand into

my mouth, then released it with a pop. I pushed it all the way inside his ass.

“Gods, Varick!” He shuddered and clenched hard, bearing down. He moved as much as he could, wriggling and fucking himself on my finger.

I let him go like that for a minute before I pulled out. Now he gaped a bit, and I had to take a few deep breaths to wrestle back my control. “Beg me. Show me how much you want it.”

With a desperate cry, he squeezed his hole again...and again, grasping at air. The crinkled, pink opening glistened with my saliva. His ass cheeks gleamed red. Candlelight danced over his skin, which was sheened with a fine layer of sweat.

I sucked my finger and pushed back inside. Getting him wetter. Loose and messy. We were both breathing heavily.

He squeezed hard around my finger and whimpered, a high-pitched mix of entreaty and desperation. I pulled my finger out, and he released a frustrated sob. He thrust his ass higher and begged with his hole, clenching and winking, his balls and dick trapped in the swaying pouch.

I squeezed one cherry-red cheek, and he sucked in a sharp breath. “Don’t fucking move.” I left him there, head down and ass up, as I rose and stripped. Nude, I lay on my back with my head and shoulders propped on the mound of pillows. He stayed in position at the foot of the bed, his face turned away and his back rising and falling with his rapid breaths. It was a big bed, but I was big too. My legs were long enough to reach him. I ran my foot up his inner thigh and prodded the pouch. Dug my toes into the strap between his legs and let it snap against his taint.

He jerked. “Varick...” My name came out as a groan. The pouch swung gently.

“Get up here.”

The order was barely past my lips and he was straddling me, his thighs spread wide over my hips. He was a wicked

dream come true with that leather strap around his waist and his balls and dick straining against the pouch.

I cupped him through the leather. He was hot and heavy against my hand. “Mmmm, I like you all wrapped up for me.” I slipped a finger under the leather and stroked his sack. “Swollen. You hurting?”

He nodded, his bottom lip caught between his teeth like he was too wound up to speak. He sat atop my dick, which lay flat against my stomach. The length lodged between his cheeks, and he rocked on it, undulating his hips in a slow, sizzling wave. “I want to ride you,” he said hoarsely, his eyes two silver slits. “I want your dick buried so deep inside me. Want you to stretch me out and then fill me all the way up. Make me drip for days. When I look at you from across the room, you’ll know I’m still feeling your cock. Leaking your come. I’ll be wet all the time, baby. Ready for you.”

Fuck, the things he said. His mouth was as filthy as the rest of him. Every time I dipped into dirty talk, he inevitably came back at me with something nastier, like it was a contest. But it was one I was willing to lose, since I made out pretty nicely either way.

I ran my fingers back to his asshole. “You want me to make you feel good?” I teased his rim, then slipped underneath the strap and stroked the velvety skin between his balls and his hole.

“I do.” He pinched my nipples lightly, sending little sparks of lust dancing over my chest. “And only you can do it.”

It didn’t seem possible, but my cock got even harder. I reached around him with both hands and squeezed his ass, making him hiss as I kneaded the flesh I’d just punished. I dug my fingers into the muscle and spread him open. “Whose hole is this?”

“Yours, baby,” he breathed. “It’s all yours.” His muscles rippled as he worked his hips back and forth over my dick.

“I want the rest of you too.” I pulled the pouch aside. His cock popped free, the head purple and swollen and covered in

precome. I gathered some on my finger and lifted it to his mouth.

He closed his lips around my finger and sucked in slow, heavy pulls, his eyes heavy-lidded and full of sensual promise. When he'd cleaned himself off my finger, he slid the bar in his tongue along my skin. All the while, he dragged his ass over my shaft, his hips rolling in a sexy grind. His cock stuck straight out, his slit dripping onto my stomach.

Heat blistered through me as I reached behind me and pulled a bottle of oil from underneath the pillows. I slicked my fingers quickly and slipped my hand under his balls so I could get him ready.

“Not too much,” he said. “Open me with your dick.”

A growl rumbled in my chest as I fingered him, sliding in and out of his tight channel while he rocked and moaned and clenched around me.

After a minute, he rose up. “Enough, baby. Fuck me.”

I freed my dick from underneath him and got myself nice and slick. I gripped my base and held my dick steady for him. “Sit the fuck down,” I said gruffly. “Take that ride you wanted.”

He took over, grabbing my dick and getting himself into position. Eyes locked with mine, he sank down slowly.

Heat. Pressure. Perfection. I groaned deep in my throat as his ass swallowed me up. Inch by inch, he took me, opening so sweetly for my dick, his breath hitching as he relaxed into the stretch. He was so fucking good at this. He made it look easy when it was anything but. I drank him in greedily, running my gaze up and down his tight, toned body. Smooth everywhere because that was the way I liked him.

When his buttocks met my thighs, he tipped his head back and groaned. “Mmmm, that’s my fucking spot.” He lifted up slightly and slid back down, scooping his hips in a slow sweep—a simple, carnal move that sent sparks shooting down my spine. “*Fuck*, baby, that’s my spot. Love your big dick so much.”

“Use it,” I ordered. “Make yourself come.”

He rode me, and I let him set the pace. He reached back and braced himself with one hand on my thigh. He fell into a sexy, steady rhythm, his ass slapping my thighs and his dick bobbing wildly in the space between us. So gorgeous. Spine arched, he bounced ruthlessly, driving his ass onto my cock over and over, curses and cries falling from his lips. He ran a hand through his hair and held it there, the jewels on his fingers winking among the inky black strands. The firm curve of his bicep made my mouth water. I skimmed my palms up his thighs to his waist, my gaze running a path from his taut pecs to his heavy dick smacking back and forth between our stomachs. He was everything I’d ever wanted.

“Look at me,” I growled.

Silver eyes met mine. Held. He swiveled his hips, his hole clamping hard around me and his big cock swinging in a sexy arc.

“Fuck,” I grunted, and I knew I wasn’t going to last. I wanted to take him in every position. Flip him around and watch him fuck himself on my dick. Roll him under me and spread him wide and pound him into the bed. Put him on his hands and knees and make him yell until they could hear him in the streets of Lar Katerin. But after a week of sleeping beside him without touching him, I couldn’t wait any longer.

And I was done letting him lead. I dug my fingers into his waist and snapped my hips, thrusting hard. Bouncing him on my dick until his teeth clicked together. I pumped up and up, battering his hole. I set a bruising pace, my jaw clenched and my heart trying to pound from my chest. Sweat poured off both of us.

“Touch yourself,” I grunted. “Do it now.”

He grabbed his flailing dick and began to jerk. “Fuck! Oh baby, I’m coming. Fuck. *Fuck!*” His hand flew, his movements desperate and disjointed. With a fierce growl, he shot all over my chest. Thick, creamy ropes painted my stomach and pecs. A few drops splattered my chin.

I dug my heels into the bed and surged up, thrusting through the fucking ceiling, a wave of pleasure building high and then crashing over me. It sucked me under, drowning me in bliss. I slammed him onto my dick and came on a bellow, pumping my hot release into his ass.

When I caught my breath, I pulled him down and kissed him. Hot and feral. Our chests slid against each other, sweat and come and pounding hearts between us. Even sweaty and sticky and covered in me, he still smelled like cinnamon. Good enough to eat. I hitched one of his thighs higher on my hip. My softened dick slipped out of him, and I smoothed a hand down his back to his ass. I delved between his cheeks and stroked gently around his rim. He was loose and open, his hole quivering at my touch. My come seeped out of him. I caught it on a finger and pushed it back in. Scooped more off his balls and pushed that inside too. He moaned softly, a shiver rippling through him.

“You all right here?” I murmured, tracing a slow fingertip around his entrance.

He huffed against my mouth. “I can handle your dick.”

I kissed him and played with his ass for a few more minutes, until he sighed against my lips and then rolled off me and onto his back. We lay side by side, sweat cooling on our skin.

“What happened in the Sanctum this week?” I asked quietly.

Just as quietly, he said, “More blood rites than most people will see in their lifetime. I thought I knew every bit of blood magic there is to know, but Petru had some surprises up his sleeve.”

Unease crept through me. The High Priest of the Sanctum was something of a mysterious figure. Some whispered that he followed the Old Ways which, among other things, involved drinking prey to death and practicing live sacrifice during rites. Things that had led to wars in the past. Similar rumors had swirled around Laurent’s mother while she was alive. She’d denied them, of course. But she’d also been close with

Petru. Had raised him up from a lowborn farmer's son to High Priest of the Sanctum—an unprecedented climb.

Laurent turned his head on the pillow and looked at me. One corner of his mouth lifted. “Nothing like what you’re thinking.”

“Did any of it work?”

The humor in his expression faded. He faced the ceiling again and closed his eyes on a sigh. “I’ll keep trying.”

His thick, dark lashes brushed his cheeks. The skin under his eyes was smudged with purple. How had I not noticed before?

In my defense, I’d been...occupied.

“You need to feed. You’ve been neglecting yourself.”

He smiled without opening his eyes. “Are you the commander of my army or my nursemaid?”

I rolled. Grabbed him and rearranged us so his face was in my neck. Palmed the back of his head and held him there. “Drink.”

“Bossy,” he whispered, but he nuzzled closer and bit me.

The first tug of his mouth drew a grunt from me. Desire kindled. I was too spent to get it up again, so lust became something slower. Easier. Instead of a fire, it was a lazy smolder. His stubble scratched my neck, his jaw working against my shoulder as he took his fill.

I ran my hand down his flank to his hip. Tugged one of his thighs between mine until our cocks met. He sighed and drank and rutted against me a bit. Sithistrans assumed all vampires embraced the sexual component of feeding. Those assumptions were wrong, especially when it came to drinking from the same gender. Females were a little more liberal with their desires. It wasn’t unheard of for ladies at court to invite a favorite serving girl into their beds. Males were different. Some wouldn’t feed from other males at all. Others viewed arousal as an inconvenient side effect. It had confused the fuck out of me when I was young.

“You’re not scared, are you, Varick?”

Not anymore.

Laurent licked my neck and eased back. His hair was adorably mussed, and he looked softer. Younger. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I would have done more for him. I would have held him against me and soothed all the stings I’d caused. Would have carried him downstairs and put him in a bath and sprinkled herbs over the water just like his servants did. But that would have pushed him too far. He could tolerate me taking him apart. But he never let me put him back together the way I wanted. So I took what I could get and was grateful for it.

“Have dinner with me and Given tonight,” he said.

The hazy aftermath of his feeding evaporated. I pulled back, putting more space between us. Although, it had been there all along. The Deepnight wasn’t the only thing that had brought us here, to this secret place where we spoke our minds no matter what. We’d both known it from the moment he climbed the stairs. Had felt it growing in our bed over the past week. One good, hard fuck wasn’t going to close that gap.

But we’d tried. Because neither of us could help ourselves.

I sat up. “You took her to Lar Satha.” It came out like an accusation. Probably because it was one.

He left the bed and started gathering his clothes. “It’s her birthright.”

“That’s not why you did it.”

He pulled his pants over his hips. “Oh, are we done pretending you don’t believe she has eleven ancestry?”

Anger burned my gut. “Did you get what you hoped for? Did she charm flowers out of thin air? Summon animals from the forest with her singing voice?”

“I can’t tell if you’re jealous or just being a prick.”

“Jealous? Of you or her?”

He snorted. “Please.”

“She’s a beautiful woman. You think you can compete?”

He retrieved the loincloth from the floor and let it dangle from one finger. A dark eyebrow went up. His expression was a resounding *yes*.

“I’m not fucking *jealous*. And I still don’t trust her.”

“She’s not a spy.”

My temper snapped. I squeezed the sheet in a tight fist. “No, she’s something much worse. And you’re playing with fire.”

He drew himself up, authority settling back over him like a mantle. “I’ll see you at dinner. That’s an order, General.” He went to the stairs, scooping up his shirt and boots as he went. At the landing, he paused and looked over his shoulder. His eyes softened. For a moment, it seemed like he might say more—tell me something to explain all the distance he’d put between us. But all he said was, “Trust me a little, baby.” And then he was gone.

Part of me wanted to hurl that *baby* at his back. But I held my tongue. It was my weakness—that endearment. He was generous with it, saying it all sorts of ways depending on the conversation. When he said it during sex, it was rough and filthy. When he teased me, it was slow and a little exasperated. When he was serious, as he’d been just now, it was quiet. Tender.

That one. That was my favorite. It almost made up for the words he never said but that I wanted to hear more than anything.

But they were words I couldn’t tell him to say. They had to come from him.

So I didn’t shout after him. I got up and dressed. I blew out the candles and descended the steps. But I left part of myself at the top of the stairs in the secret room.

Waiting.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

GIVEN

I could never look Laurent in the eye again. Which was a problem, because a servant had just delivered a message from him requesting my presence at dinner. And kings didn't really make requests. When they "requested" something, that was just a polite command. Yes, my experience with kings was limited to my father and Rolund, and Laurent was cut from a different kind of cloth than the men in my family. But I knew without asking that, in this regard, he was very much a traditionalist.

I paced my chamber, my heavy skirts dragging along the floor. The dress was the finest I owned. Not that I truly owned anything in Nor Doru. I wore what Laurent provided. And now I knew he wanted my situation to stay that way. North or south, a wife in Ter Isir didn't own property. Everything belonged to her husband.

Except maybe Lar Satha. If Laurent was telling the truth, my mother's estate was mine no matter what. But would he really allow me to live there? If I refused his offer, would he let me set up a farm with my own servants to work the land? My own men-at-arms to safeguard the tower house?

It was a humble property. Far more modest than what I was used to, but it was *mine*. I'd wanted to explore it top to bottom today.

Instead, Laurent had explored me. *Also top to bottom*, my mind supplied.

Face flaming, I threw open the balcony doors and went to the railing. A light snow fell—the first of the season, according to the servants. It wouldn't stop for months. Nor Doru's summer was over.

I didn't feel the cold. I didn't see the city, either. As I gazed over the snow-covered streets, all I could see was a pair of silver eyes peering at me from between my legs. Even now, I felt a phantom tongue stroking between my thighs...a warm, hard piece of metal prodding and teasing. Gods, how could I have allowed him to do that? And so easily, putting up the minimal amount of resistance. I'd let him push me onto the bed, flip up my skirts, and lick me everywhere.

Everywhere.

I sucked in the chilly air, letting it burn my lungs as fat snowflakes drifted around me. They fell on my gown and disappeared, melting into the cloth. I'd soaked in a hot tub when I returned to the palace, but I could still smell Laurent's scent. It was as if he'd branded me somehow. Left his mark on me. I ached between my legs where he'd pressed his tongue against my most intimate places. If his mouth stayed with me this long, what would it feel like if I accepted his offer and joined him in bed?

A *crowded* bed. He'd made that abundantly clear. If I became queen, our marriage bed would include the general. My whole life, I'd dreaded Sithistran marriage. I never wanted to be one of two wives always competing for a husband's time and affection.

What Laurent proposed turned that arrangement on its head. If I married him, I wouldn't be one of two wives. I'd have two husbands—or at least two men in my life.

"We could do a lot of things, the three of us."

I shivered. Laurent's tongue was a weapon...in more ways than one. The dirty, forbidden things he'd whispered in my ear weren't the sort of things ladies were supposed to contemplate, let alone talk about. Elissa would have been outraged. Disgusted. Of course, she would have been disgusted at the idea of Laurent and Varick together, let alone the two of them

sharing a bed with me But when I thought about it, disgust was the farthest thing from my mind. On the contrary, my body buzzed with curiosity.

With heat.

Laurent's talented tongue had set me on fire, but his words had lit the match. And he was right: I wanted to watch him with Varick. Gods help me, I wanted to see their hard bodies twined together. Those firm, stubbled jaws locked in a kiss. I wanted to watch things I couldn't even imagine, but my mind did its best to fill in the blanks.

I should have denied it. I should have slapped him and demanded he escort me to Lar Katerin at once. But I hadn't, of course. I'd let him put his wicked mouth between my legs and make me writhe like the most wanton whore in Beldurn's brothels.

I couldn't possibly marry him...could I? It was all but ensure Rolund never spoke to me again. It might very well plunge the two kingdoms into war, ending five hundred years of peace. And what of Varick? Laurent spoke of the three of us like it was a settled thing. But the last time Varick and I spoke, he looked like he wanted to murder me.

Right after he almost kissed me.

Heat crept over my nape. He clearly hated my guts...or at least distrusted me. I certainly didn't like him. So why did it feel like we were always two seconds away from reaching for each other? I hadn't imagined that look in his eyes on the tower. Or at the feast. Or when we faced off at the Rift. It was like there was a current between us—some powerful tug of the tides not visible on the surface.

No, this was deeper. Hidden.

The chamber door opened behind me. Footsteps followed. Time had run out. Like it or not, I had to face Laurent—and try to think of something other than what passed between us today.

I left the balcony. When I stepped into the chamber, my eyes widened. "Rowena?"

She looked different than she had at the feast. Her brown, high-necked gown would be the height of fashion in Sithistra. In Nor Doru, it was plain, even dowdy. She came to me and put a hand on my forearm. “I wanted to speak to you alone.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Is something wrong? I haven’t seen you all week, and I wondered...” I trailed off as apprehension lifted the hairs on my nape. The charming, lighthearted woman from the feast was gone. Now, her expression was somber.

She spoke below a whisper. “I need to give you something. A gift.” She lifted a bundle she’d kept hidden in her skirts. Whatever it was, it was wrapped in a silk cloth.

“A gift?” It had to be from Laurent.

She pressed it into my hand. “Open this when you’re alone, all right?” She lowered her voice, her lips barely moving. “The south is with you.”

“What?” I whispered. Discomfort twisted through me. My skin felt cold, then hot, then both at the same time.

“I’m so scared. If they hurt Harald...”

My breath caught. Because she’d just spoken. Clear as a bell. Unmistakable.

But not out loud.

I’d heard her in my head.

My own voice froze in my throat. Before I could gather it, she spun in a whirl of brown skirts and left.

My knees loosened. I stumbled to the bed and sat heavily, my dress bunching around my hips. It was like in my dreams, when the elven male spoke. But this wasn’t a dream. Rowena was real.

Her words spun in my head. Why was she scared? Harald was her husband, I remembered. The vampire warrior she’d spoken of so lovingly at the feast. Who would hurt him?

With shaking hands, I unwrapped the bundle. A dagger lay on the silk, its blade unsheathed and gleaming.

I touched it.

Pain shot up my fingertips. I hissed and jerked my hand away.

Blood pounded in my ears. This wasn't just any dagger. It was solstone. Rare and difficult to mine, it was found in just one place in all of Ter Isir: the Blacktop Mountains in Sithistra. Weapons forged from solstone were deadly to vampires, who couldn't heal the wounds they inflicted.

Now that I looked more closely, I could see the faint ripples of yellow in the silver, like waves of sunlight melting down the blade. Solstone would burn a full-blooded vampire. I wasn't as sensitive, but holding it without gloves was uncomfortable. I'd never cut myself with it. I was far too careful, since I wasn't certain how much protection my human blood lent me.

It was dangerous to have such a weapon in Nor Doru—in the palace of all places. My heart beat faster. My chamber was steps away from Laurent's. If anyone discovered the dagger, I shuddered to think what might happen to me.

"The south is with you."

Rowena was human. Sithistran. Her husband sent her to Beldurn once a year so she didn't wither away under the Deepnight. Was she a spy? It was the only explanation that made sense. But what of her husband?

"He's patrolling along the Rift. It's his usual assignment." She'd told me that my first night in Nor Doru. The night of the feast. If Sir Harald was stationed at the Rift, it would be easy for Sithistrans to target him.

"The south is with you."

Rolund represented the south. He *was* the south. If my brother wanted Laurent dead, one way to do it was to make sure a solstone weapon found its way into my hands. If I'd been armed with the dagger today at Lar Satha, I could have killed Laurent.

My stomach did a queasy flip. I wrapped up the dagger with shaking hands. Without really knowing what I was doing,

I stood and looked around for a place to hide it—at least until I could get rid of it for good. My gaze landed on a basket next to the fireplace. The servants used it to store extra wood.

Footsteps sounded outside.

Swallowing a gasp, I rushed to the basket and tucked the dagger inside. The door opened as I straightened.

A servant curtsied on the threshold. “The king awaits, Your Highness.”

I smoothed my skirts, hoping her senses weren’t sharp enough to hear my heart knocking around my chest like a bird trying to escape a cage. “I’m ready.”

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

GIVEN

An hour later, the solstone dagger was the least of my problems. I'd arrived in Laurent's chambers to find Varick already present.

"You don't mind if the general joins us, do you, Princess?" Laurent had asked.

"No, of course not," I'd murmured, which was the only acceptable answer. Because once again, it wasn't really a request.

Laurent had started dinner by summoning a thrall. A beautiful, red-haired woman had appeared, and my cheeks had burned as he pulled her onto his lap and fed from her wrist, biting through the red ribbon he'd affixed the night of the feast. She'd worn a Nor Doruvian gown—low-cut and clinging. Her plump breasts had quivered as he sucked, and she'd gasped when he licked her wrist, sealing her wound.

Then Varick had fed, his golden eyes glowing as he sipped from the thrall's wrist. She'd trembled on his lap...until he stroked a big hand down her hair, soothing her like she was a frightened animal. It should have been insulting.

It wasn't. Heat had built between my legs as I watched him handle her, his big hand sweeping through the thick, red waves. The woman had left, a dreamy smile on her face, and Laurent had turned to me.

"Will you feed, Princess? I can summon another thrall."

Face flaming, I'd fought the urge to squirm in my chair. *"No, Your Grace. Blood-wine will suffice."* I'd yet to feed

from the thralls, and I wondered if it would ever appeal to me. In Rolund's court, taking straight from the vein was akin to cannibalism.

But seeing it up close, the sensuality of it was undeniable. And that was its own problem.

Now, the three of us sat around the table with the remains of our meal littering plates made from hammered silver. The snow fell heavier outside, thick flakes swirling past the darkened window. A fire crackled merrily in the hearth, but it did nothing to ease the chill that had wrapped around me ever since I sat down. Both men had been polite, if a little formal. They spoke of the cooling weather and the latest training Varick had undertaken with his knights. The conversation turned to a marketplace on the western side of the city that was in need of repair. Some of Lar Katerin's wealthier merchants had put forth a petition asking the crown to provide the funds. These were surface-level discussions. Nothing contentious.

But the air seemed to vibrate with a strange energy.

At first, I'd blamed it on the dagger and Rowena's likely treason. But with every course the servants placed in front of me, the air thickened. Grew more volatile. Something was going to happen. The certainty swirled around me just like the snow racing past the window—a chaotic force of nature I couldn't control and had no hope of stopping.

Varick stretched a long arm across the table, snaring my attention. "Do you mind?"

It took me a moment to realize he wanted the salt.

I pushed the bowl toward him. "Not at all, General." My voice emerged as a croak. I sipped my water and longed for a hole to open under my chair and swallow me. Anything to take me away from the dinner and my guilty conscience. Although, what did I have to be guilty about? I didn't ask Rowena for that dagger. She dumped it on me, claiming it was a *gift*.

And then she spoke in my mind.

"You've barely eaten, Princess."

Laurent's voice made me jump. He watched me from the head of the table. One hand rested on the surface, his long, beringed fingers lightly drumming the wood.

For a second, I couldn't tear my eyes away. He'd held me open with those fingers. Had put them *inside* me as he licked me like I was his favorite dessert. "I'm not—" I had to clear my throat. "I'm not that hungry, Your Grace."

Varick's voice was as piercing as an arrow. "Nonsense, Princess. You must be exhausted from your travels today."

My pulse leapt. I looked to Laurent for help, but he stared at Varick with a little smile that didn't reach his eyes. Immediately, I knew he felt the awful tension too. Had been braced for it as I was.

Varick's stare bored into me. "Or perhaps the king's attentions wore you out."

My whole body became instantly hot. *Varick knows*. Obviously, he knew Laurent had taken me to Lar Satha. But it seemed he was also aware of what happened in the tower house. I squeezed my thighs together under the table, as if he might dive under looking for evidence to prove it.

"Varick." Laurent's voice held a sharp edge of warning.

Varick ignored him. He kept his attention on me, his expression as cold and arrogant as the day he escorted me across the Rift. "If you wed him, you'll plunge all of Ter Isir into war."

"That's enough, General."

Varick shoved his chair back. He stood and put both big hands on the table. Pale white scars crossed his knuckles. *Sword marks*, I realized. From battle or sparring. He wasn't a warrior in name only. He was the real thing, and he was terrifying in his anger. It rolled off him as he turned glowing eyes to Laurent.

"You can't go through with this, and I'm done hoping you'll realize why it *will not work*."

“Sit down,” Laurent said calmly. “You and I can discuss this in private.”

“Why? I thought this was what you wanted. The three of us *sharing* everything.”

“Sit down.”

Varick bared his fangs. With a growl, he turned and headed for the door.

Laurent was out of his chair and at the door in a blur of movement. He dragged his thumb from the door to the frame in a horizontal line, leaving a smear of red. He dropped his voice to a hiss. “*Hesseth.*”

Light streaked around the perimeter of the room. When he turned around, his eyes glowed even brighter than they had the night of the feast. His fangs extended past his lower lip, and he moved with a dark, elegant grace that lifted the hair on my nape. He was beautiful—and utterly terrifying.

Fear gripped me as he returned to the table. My instincts screamed at me to run, to flee the danger that sparked all around me. I darted a look at the door, trying to gauge the distance.

“Don’t even try,” Varick said, following my gaze. His smile was pure venom. “Laurent is as much a priest as he is a king, Princess. You haven’t figured that out by now? He set a blood ward. You won’t leave this room until he breaks it.”

“Neither will you,” Laurent said, taking his seat. His eyes flashed. “Now sit down.”

They stared at one other, both eerily quiet. The tension ratcheted so high, the air seemed to crackle. They looked ready to murder each other. Or lunge for each other.

Slowly, Varick sat. He pulled a dagger from somewhere. Its hilt was set with blood-red stones that winked in the firelight. The blade was an odd color—dark gray that seemed to shift to black as he flipped it around in his hand. “I can leave,” he said quietly, his deep voice rumbling the table and the floor under my chair. He pulled his sleeve to his elbow and exposed his forearm. “You can hold the living, Laurent, but

you can't hold the dead." In a swift movement, he sliced his arm from wrist to elbow. Then he grabbed the bowl of salt and dumped it in the wound.

I clapped my hand over my mouth, a muffled scream escaping between my fingers. Salt would hold his injury open and prevent his body from healing. The cut was deep. Purplish bone was visible between the layers of meat. Blood gushed down his arm and splattered the floor, the sound like rain on a roof. It wouldn't take long for him to bleed out.

Laurent stood so quickly his chair toppled behind him. "Varick—"

"Hold," Varick said savagely. He placed the tip of the dagger under his own chin. "Take your seat, my king, or I'll finish it right here and now."

I kept my hand pressed over my mouth. Blood continued to stream down Varick's arm. The rich scent filled the room, making my stomach twist with hunger and revulsion in equal parts.

Laurent's eyes blazed with fury. His nostrils were flared, his jaw clenched tight. He righted his chair and sat. "Clear it," he growled, his gaze flicking to Varick's arm. "Right fucking now."

Varick addressed me without taking his eyes off Laurent. "Princess Given, go kneel before our king and take out his cock."

Laurent growled, his eyes flashing as brightly as the dagger's blade. "Varick..."

Varick twisted the dagger. He grunted as blood ran down his neck.

"N-No!" I scrambled to my feet. "I'll do it! Please...just stop." I clung to the table, my gaze bouncing between the men. "Please stop this."

Varick was growing pale. Sweat beaded his forehead.

"Please," I whispered.

The men continued their stare down for a few more strained seconds. Eventually, Laurent extended a hand in my direction. As soon as I moved to his side, he snarled at Varick. “Clear it.”

Varick took a pitcher of blood-wine from the table and poured it down his arm. The wine mixed with the blood and the foaming salt, creating a red sludge that slid to the floor with sickening *plops*. He breathed heavily as the wound began to knit back together.

I released a shaky breath.

His golden eyes lifted to mine. “We’re not done here, Princess. Get on your knees.”

My breath hitched. He was big and menacing in his chair, which was pushed back and angled enough to offer a full view of his body. For the first time, I truly understood what it meant for a vampire to hail from the warrior class. Varick of Lar Keiren was a beast of a male, but his cold, flat eyes were more terrifying than his size. He sat there, soaked in blood, ready to take his own life with a chilling nonchalance.

And he would absolutely do it. I stood frozen with my hand in Laurent’s, not even daring to breathe.

Laurent pulled my wrist to his lips. His silver gaze burned as he placed a soft kiss over my veins. “Let me make this easier,” he murmured, then sank his fangs into my flesh.

Heat flashed straight to my sex. My mouth opened on a soundless gasp as he fed from me. In an instant, I was wet and aching between my legs. My nipples tightened, and my breasts felt heavier. It was like a cord ran from his mouth to my nipples and my throbbing center. With every mouthful he took, the cord tugged, stoking my arousal higher.

Still sucking at my wrist, he put his other hand on my waist and guided me down until I was on my knees between his legs.

Varick’s deep voice rumbled. “Turn your chair sideways, Your Grace. I want to see how well the princess takes it.”

His words stirred anger in my gut, but they were nothing compared to the desire that flooded me. The anger settled like a layer of oil atop water. It couldn't penetrate that deep sea of need.

And, gods help me, knowing Varick watched made everything inside me burn hotter. It was all kinds of wrong, but I couldn't control it. My body leapt for what it wanted, and it wanted his gaze on me. I could see him out of the corner of my eye, big and golden and brimming with rage barely held in check. He was volatile. Dangerous. All that tense emotion was like dry kindling tossed on the fire searing my veins. Anticipation coiled around me like a snake.

Laurent licked my wrist and gazed down at me with eyes that reflected my desire. His strong hands gripped my shoulders, and he turned us, moving his chair so we were in profile to Varick. I knelt between his spread thighs, my skirts puddled around me. The thick bulge of his manhood strained his laces inches from my face.

He cupped my cheek. "You'll be a good girl for me. Won't you, Given?"

"Yes," I said in a voice scraped from the back of my throat.

"And me," Varick said, and when I looked at him, I knew I wasn't going to like what he had planned. But something was very, very wrong with me, because the coil didn't spring open.

It tightened.

"You'll be a good girl for me, too."

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

LAURENT

Given's blood was almost as sweet as her pussy. And there was a surplus of magic in her veins.

But of course Varick knew that already. Otherwise, he wouldn't be demanding this little performance—as well as putting on his own with the dagger and salt. I wasn't entirely certain the latter was an act, which was the only thing stopping me from calling his bluff.

He'd chosen that particular blade for a specific reason. The betrayal cut deeper than the furrow he'd carved into his arm.

I didn't temper the bite in my voice as I locked eyes with him. "You've got us where you want us, General. What comes next?" If he wanted a fucking show so badly, he was going to work for it.

His eyes glowed. "Command her."

My shoulders tensed. Because he didn't mean it in the usual sense. No, he wanted me to *command* her—to infuse my order with blood magic. Disobedience would cause her significant pain. Sustained refusal could kill her.

Varick waited, his chest covered in blood and the dagger at the ready. "Do it. Command her."

Jaw tight, I nicked my thumb and held it to her lips.

She frowned, no doubt remembering the last time she tasted my blood.

"Go on," I murmured. "You're not as sensitive as you used to be."

She licked the drop.

“*Sabet*,” I said, and her frown deepened. Hardly surprising. She knew so little about her vampire heritage. Why should she know this? For the moment, her ignorance offered her a small measure of bliss. But it wouldn’t last. She’d feel nothing until I issued the next command. When that happened, pain would strike like a hot iron. Resisting the power word for *command* could bring a full-blooded male vampire to his knees.

Varick wasted no time giving commands of his own. “Take his cock out, Princess. Undo his pants and get your hand on him.”

I braced myself for a battle, but she did as she was told, her slim fingers trembling as she worked open my laces. My erection sprang free, and her eyes went wide. And didn’t that just make my cock twitch like a stallion scenting a mare. It jutted from my hips, the slit leaking precome. When her pink tongue darted out and moistened her lips, I groaned deep in my throat. Blood and obedience and a ready tongue. Three of my favorite things.

“Suck him,” Varick ordered. “Hold him at the base and take him into your mouth.”

She hesitated, her eyes lifting to mine like she sought approval. Or perhaps a reprieve.

His voice went deeper. “I’m in charge here, Princess. And I’m not in the habit of repeating myself.”

Her pouty lips compressed in a tight, disapproving line. But she shivered, and her tits rose and fell faster as her breathing picked up.

Naughty princess. It was one thing for her to come while I ate her pussy in the tower house, quite another for her to enjoy being put on her knees and bossed around. But I knew arousal when I saw it. Her blue eyes darkened with lust, and her nipples poked hard against her bodice. She stared at the bead of moisture on my tip like it was the most fascinating thing in

the world. At last, she curled tentative fingers around my shaft. “Like this?” she whispered.

“You can hold me tighter.” I placed my hand over hers and helped her give me a slow stroke. “You won’t hurt me, beautiful, no matter how hard you squeeze.”

Apparently eager to test it, she tightened her grip and pumped her fist up and down my cock. More precome seeped from my slit. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, looking for all the world like she was struggling to keep her tongue to herself.

“Do you like that?” I asked her. “You like my dick getting all wet for you, Princess?”

Her lips parted, and her luscious tits rose and fell faster. She nodded. The same wonder she’d displayed at Lar Satha entered her eyes. She grew bolder, swiping her fingers through the moisture and smoothing it over my shaft. A rosy flush spread over her cheeks. One little fang nibbled at her bottom lip as she fell into a tentative rhythm.

My hips jerked, and I suppressed another groan. Fuck, she was a fast learner. The wonder in her eyes shifted to admiration. She slid her hand up and down my length like she adored it. Well, we had that in common. There was something deeply appealing about soft skin pulled tight over a rock-hard cock. Velvet and steel. A fat, spongy head and a drooling slit.

“That’s it,” I rasped, watching her slender fingers slick me. “That’s a very good girl.”

Varick’s voice struck like a whip. “I told you to suck him.”

She stiffened. Started to turn her head.

I caught her chin, and those sapphire eyes skidded up to mine. “Do as he says.”

Power flared—a static charge that brushed my skin. It hit her, too, making her wince. Now two points connected us, and between them stretched an invisible leash. Until I released her, she was at my command. And because I’d told her to obey Varick, she was ultimately under his. She almost certainly

didn't understand what had happened. All I could do was spare her as much pain as possible.

I put my thumb on her plump bottom lip and pressed until she opened. I slid the fingers of my free hand into her silky hair and guided her forward.

I didn't give her a chance to balk. Palming the back of her head, I pulled her onto my dick. I slid between her gorgeous lips and directly into her hot, wet mouth. She moaned softly, and it was a struggle not to thrust. I wanted all the way inside that warm paradise, but I forced myself to go slow. I kept my eyes on hers and rolled my hips forward, eager to fill her mouth.

"Just the tip," Varick said, ruining all my plans. "Close your lips around the head and keep him there. No, don't stroke him. Yes...just like that."

I breathed easier as she obeyed to the letter, her hot mouth pulsing around my cockhead while her tiny fist gripped my base. It was exquisite torture, and Varick knew it.

"Suck," he ordered, "but don't let him go any deeper. Roll your tongue around the head."

She complied, nursing at my cock with pulses that went straight to my balls. I hissed and spread my legs wider, torn between wanting just *this* and wanting a whole lot more. Her eyes fluttered shut. She moaned, her cheeks hollowing as she made a seal around my tip with her mouth and sucked hard.

I gripped the arms of the chair. Varick sat motionless in his, the dagger resting on his thigh. We'd played this game many times in the past, him watching me with a female. Giving direction while she sucked me or rode my dick. He liked to drag it out, to make me be good for him.

But he watched Given now, his eyes lightened to pale yellow. His lips were parted, his fangs showing. His erection formed a thick bulge between his legs.

"More," he said. "Take him deeper."

Given opened her eyes, revealing pupils blown wide with lust. Her mouth was a perfect O around me, those full, pink

lips framing my dick so beautifully. She took me deeper. Heat sizzled up my shaft and into my balls.

“Use your tongue,” Varick demanded.

She complied immediately, licking the underside of my shaft. Her efforts were unskilled and a little clumsy, but she made up for it with her quick obedience. Mouth wide, she bobbed her head, her hot little tongue working up and down my dick. She swiped a bit too ambitiously, and she gagged, her eyes watering.

I pulled back, letting her recover.

Varick was unsympathetic, barking out orders like he was directing knights in the training yard. “Relax your jaw. Use your hand. Move it up and down as you suck. Slower. He likes it that way.”

I covered her hand again, showing her what he meant. She was never going to suck me like he did. Smaller mouth, smaller hands. She could only take me about halfway. But she was so sweet on her knees as she tried to obey. Between her hand and her mouth, she worked me with increasing skill.

“This is how it will be,” Varick rumbled, “if you become his queen. You’ll give him your mouth whenever he wants it. On your knees or all fours. He’ll snap his fingers and you’ll offer up any hole that pleases him. You’ll spread and bend for me, too, Princess. We’ll take you together, front and back. You’ll wear your crown and nothing else.”

At last, he’d pushed her too far. She lost her rhythm, my glistening dick slipping from her mouth.

“I didn’t tell you to stop,” he said.

Face flushed, she tossed him a glare. “I don’t—”

Power snapped. She yelped and rounded her shoulders. I tangled a hand in her hair and forced her mouth back onto my cock before she could challenge him again. Her brows pulled together, and she gurgled a protest. Anger filled her eyes, along with fear and confusion.

I held her fast, my hips flexing as I resumed fucking her mouth. “Varick’s in charge. He didn’t tell you to stop. So you won’t. Understand?”

Her moan vibrated around my dick. She resisted a little, tugging at my grip on her hair.

Power snapped again, harder this time. My cock absorbed her cry of pain.

“Do you understand?” I pressed, my hand tight in her hair. “You don’t want to hurt, sweetheart, so be a good girl and obey.” I held her head still and gave her steady, even thrusts. Not enough to gag her, but more than enough to keep her attention. She turned her anger to me now, her blue eyes blazing as I pumped my cock into her mouth. And, oh, she was a dream like that—spitting mad and sopping wet and trapped on my dick.

“She understands,” Varick answered for her. “She’ll do whatever she’s told.”

“*Mmph,*” was all she managed with her mouth full of my cock. Judging from the way her eyes shot sparks, she disagreed. But she didn’t dare try to get away, and the scent of her arousal grew stronger.

Varick continued. “How much do you really know about your vampire half, Princess? Do you know what it means to be Queen of Nor Doru?”

Her eyes watered. She was growing tired. I rubbed my thumb over the hinge of her jaw to ease the ache she was probably feeling.

“What’s your point, Varick?” I snapped. But I knew. As my hips jerked and pressure built in my balls, I knew what he was doing. But we were locked into this now, the three of us. He was barreling toward a conclusion and none of us could stop until he reached it.

“With all due respect, Your Grace, I asked the princess.” He paused as if he awaited her answer. When he received nothing but the wet, fleshy sounds of my cock tunneling in and out of her mouth, he kept going. “The king’s bloodline must

stay pure. The favored of the gods. The ruler of the sacred blood. There can never be any question that his heir is the rightful prince. Because if the king's bloodline falters, the whole kingdom falls. That means the queen must be above reproach. She eats only from his hand. Drinks only from his vein. Obeys his every command."

Drizzle coated her chin and slipped down her neck, traveling that smooth column I'd admired on her balcony.

"His *every* command," Varick stressed. "If he tells you to strip, you'll do it. If he wants you on your knees as you are now, then that's what you'll do. And if he wants you to suck his dick while I watch, you'll say *yes, my lord* and open your fucking mouth."

Her angry moan warred with the sound of my harsh breathing. I was so close. My skin felt feverish and tight like it didn't quite fit over my bones. Varick continued speaking like he was making casual conversation during dinner in the great hall.

"Most of his blood is in his cock right now," he said. "Can you feel it, Princess? A thousand years of the gods' favor with every beat of his heart. But that's only half of Laurent's bloodline. His mother's line is more ancient. Twelve centuries of the priesthood run through his veins. If he wasn't king he'd be High Priest of the Sanctum." He met my gaze, something both reverent and taunting in his. "The darling of the gods, dripping power from his fingertips. Do you want to taste power, Princess?"

No. Oh no. No, he fucking wasn't. *This* I hadn't anticipated. I bared my fangs, ready to shove Given away so I could launch myself at him. "Varick—"

"Bite him, Princess. Sink your fangs into his cock and drink from your king."

She struck. White-hot pleasure-pain sizzled up my dick. Seared my veins like liquid lightning.

I came on a strangled cry, thrusting hard as I emptied into her mouth. My release triggered hers, and she screamed

around my dick as her orgasm slammed into her. She might have pulled off when my come shot into her mouth, but her fangs were buried in my cock, so she had to either swallow or choke. She swallowed reflexively, her throat closing around my pulsing dick. The repetitive clasp of warm, wet tissue made sparks dance across my vision. I hissed, slicing my bottom lip with my own fangs. It was too fucking much—her mouth and my come and the taste of what flowed through her veins. A sinful triumvirate of sex and blood and power.

She coughed and pulled her head away, a mix of blood and creamy white semen spilling from the corners of her mouth. The sight was enough to make me bellow and shoot another ribbon of come. It landed on her heaving breasts in a thick stripe. She sagged, mouth open, her fangs stained with blood. We both struggled to catch our breath.

Varick's voice was hard. "You thought you were under your brother's thumb in Sithistra, Princess, but you have no idea what it means to truly wed yourself to power. If you marry Laurent, you *will* obey him. Because if you don't, he can boil the blood in your veins. He can stop your heart with a word."

Her pale head lowered like a flower drooping on a stem.

"Power words," he continued, "a language only the most powerful priests can speak."

"Enough," I growled, standing and tucking my dick away. I stepped around her and went to Varick. He didn't resist when I snatched the dagger from his hand.

He stayed silent, his gaze unflinching. But his eyes said multitudes. There were entire paragraphs within those golden depths. Accusations I deserved. Indictments I didn't have answers for. No good ones, anyway.

I stood there a moment, still breathing heavily. "I want to talk to you. Alone." *Now* was on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't leave Given slumped on the floor.

"I'm at your service, Your Grace."

It wasn't insolence. Varick didn't do petty.

I glanced at the door. “*Rem.*”

Around the chamber, locks clicked in unison.

Varick kept quiet, his silence louder than a shout.

I returned to Given, gathered her in my arms, and swept from the room.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

GIVEN

Laurent deposited me on my bed like I was made of glass. But I didn't feel particularly fragile—or willing to let him tuck me in and leave without answering the questions buzzing angrily in my head.

In fact, I felt strong, like I had boundless energy. Varick had spoken of Laurent's power. Now his blood ran through my veins like a fiery river. It was more potent than Varick's, or anything I'd tasted before. Colors were sharper. Sounds clearer. I slid from the bed as he went to the wardrobe, and I heard each individual layer of my skirts falling into place.

He turned with a nightdress in his hands.

"I'm not tired," I said.

For a brief moment, he seemed uncertain, and it was jarring to see him not in control. But he recovered quickly. He strolled to the bed and draped the nightdress across the foot, laying it out as carefully as a maidservant. Anyone observing him now might find it difficult to believe he was capable of bending people to his will with nothing more than a drop of his blood and a few foreign-sounding words.

But he'd done exactly that. The burst of agony I'd felt every time I resisted his orders lingered like a bruise. He'd had this power all along—at every moment we'd spent together. In Lar Satha, he could have done whatever he wanted to me, and I would have been powerless to resist him.

I shivered as he continued moving about the room. He crossed to the washstand and wrung out a cloth. When that

was done, he went to a tall dresser and poured a cup of water from a silver carafe. He brought both of these things to me and extended the cloth.

“For your chest.”

I looked down. Sure enough, he'd...released on my cleavage. I snatched the cloth from him and scrubbed the tops of my breasts. My scalp ached where he'd gripped my hair. And I ached between my thighs, even though he hadn't touched me there. But he hadn't needed to. The combination of his blood and Varick's voice and rapt gaze had shoved me over that edge I normally had to chase. My errant desire was almost as terrifying as the knowledge that Laurent could override my will any time he chose.

He took the cloth from me and held out the water.

“What will happen if I don't drink it?” I asked.

He pulled it back. Waited a moment and then went to the table next to the bed and set it down. He moved to the end of the bed and leaned against one of the posts with his arms folded. A casual pose. I wasn't fooled for a second.

“I'm not a villain,” he said. “I think you know that already.”

“Do I, Your Grace? You told me your mother was a priestess. You neglected to mention you're a priest who can force people to do whatever you want and then punish them when they don't.”

“Varick set that in motion. I'll speak to him.”

“But the words came from *you*. Do all vampires have that ability?”

Emotions flickered through his eyes. His mouth tightened slightly.

“Do they?” I pressed.

“Not all, no.”

“Just priests. Ones who practice dark blood magic.”

His eyes glinted, his casual posture more menacing for it. “Careful, Given. You’re not in Sithistra.”

“Oh, I’m well aware, Your Grace.” The air crackled, or maybe that was just the anger rolling off me. “I know I’m in Nor Doru, but that’s about all I know. Because you’ve kept me in the dark about what you have planned for me. Until today.” I tilted my head. “But I’m still confused. You say you want to make me your queen. *Rule by my side*, you said. *Be revered*. And now your general says being your queen means eating from your hand.”

“Ancient tradition. One he exaggerated.”

The energy in the air seethed, licking over me. “And sucking your dick until you spurt down my throat? Is that another ancient tradition?”

Heat—and maybe surprise—flashed in his eyes. “Your complaints would be a lot more compelling if you hadn’t come so hard you almost passed out...” He leaned toward me. “Princess,” he added softly. Deliberately.

I sucked in a breath.

The door opened abruptly. Two maidservants entered, both carrying steaming pitchers of water. They stumbled to a halt at the sight of Laurent.

“Your Grace!” the taller one exclaimed. “We came to ready the princess’s bath.” Her gaze darted to me. “We didn’t mean to disturb you...”

“We can return,” the other woman said, dipping a curtsy.

Laurent waved it off. “No need to make more work for yourselves. The water is hot, and I’m sure the princess wants to bathe before bed.” He gestured to the screen that concealed the tub. “Please go about your preparations. I know those pitchers are heavy.”

They curtsied again, then bustled to the screen. Seconds later, water splashed softly.

A range of emotions moved through Laurent’s eyes. It was obvious he wanted to say more, but he straightened. “We’ll

Speak in the morning.”

I couldn't argue, not with the maids listening to everything. The mere mention of Varick's name would breed all sorts of gossip. I lifted my chin. “Goodnight, Your Grace.”

He stared at me for a long moment. Then he stepped close, his voice more breath than sound. “I'll tell you anything you want to know in the morning. No more secrets between us.”

He left with that promise hanging in the air—and before I could point out that he was the only one with secrets. Although, that wasn't really true. The solstone blade remained in my room. Rowena was somewhere in the palace, and I had no idea where her loyalties lay.

Or how I'd heard her voice in my head.

“The bath is ready, Your Highness.”

I turned to find both maidservants watching me with wary expressions. Forget spurring rumors with Varick's name, I was providing plenty of gossip fodder with my crumpled gown and disheveled hair.

“Thank you,” I said. “I can handle it on my own.”

The taller one frowned. “Are you certain? We could—”

“Quite certain.” I pasted a smile on my face. “Go to your dinners. I'll soak for a bit and then fall asleep.”

Mentioning dinner did the trick. They left in a flurry of curtsies and murmured thanks, and then I was finally alone.

But that also meant I was alone with my thoughts, which tumbled around my head, each one weightier than the last. My heart raced, and my blood still sizzled with borrowed power.

I ended up on the balcony, where the night air cooled my heated skin. Snow fell around me in fat, lazy flakes. I tilted my head back and let them settle on my cheeks and forehead, each one a kiss of icy clarity. It rarely snowed in Sithistra and never in Beldurn. I lowered my head and stared out at the city, finding the spot on the horizon where the lights ended and the countryside began. The Rift wasn't too far beyond it.

But more than the chasm separated Nor Doru and Sithistra. I thought I'd known that before, but now those differences were clearer than ever. Like Varick's arm, they had been laid open and exposed to the root. And I didn't belong in either place. All my life, I'd felt like a rift passed through me, too. It cleaved me in half, leaving an emptiness I'd longed to fill up with something... Knowledge, maybe.

No more secrets.

I curled my hands around the frigid railing, letting the frost sink into my skin until my fingers were numb. Rolund and Laurent had a lot more in common than they thought. Both withheld truth like it was some priceless treasure to be doled out to only the most worthy—and I clearly didn't meet that definition in either of their minds. Nevertheless, they were both willing to use me to get what they wanted.

But what did Rolund want? My brother was no fool...and he had spies in the north.

Fear sluiced through me. Rolund was the only one with the resources to place Rowena in the middle of Laurent's court. So just what was he playing at, putting that dagger in my hand?

"The South is with you."

I squeezed the railing. My heart pumped faster, sending Laurent's power-laced blood singing through my veins. *What do you want me to do, Rolund?* If only I could talk to my brother. I wanted to see his face when I asked him if he was responsible for the solstone. If I was caught with it, my life could be forfeit. Shivers coursed over my skin, the cold finally getting to me.

Except...no, it wasn't the cold. I frowned.

The tremors came from *inside* me, like an earthquake starting deep underground and then screaming to the surface. I gripped the railing. The whole balcony seemed to rock. Gasping, I stumbled backward, flailing—

My back slammed into a wall.

The shaking stopped.

But I wasn't in my room. Instead of a balcony, a dimly lit hallway stretched before me, torches lining its walls. I knew it well. Had raced down it countless times, making the flames dance as I passed. My father's advisors had scolded me for making too much noise.

Because this was Castle Beldurn, and the hallway led straight to the king's study.

Cold sweat broke out across my body. My knees loosened, threatening to send me crashing to the ground. Was I...dead? I darted my gaze about, my heart trying to beat from my chest. I couldn't be dead if my heart was beating. An idea sprang into my head, and I rushed forward and held my hand over one of the torches.

Pain lanced my fingers. I jerked my hand back.

Not dead. Dead people didn't feel pain. This had to be some kind of magic. Another blood rite. Maybe Laurent had sent me home? Was that even possible?

Masculine voices drifted down the hall. "...what has to be done, Your Grace."

Rolund.

I rushed toward the study. The voices grew louder, the words clearer. Rolund's deep baritone spilled through a crack in the study door. "I understand, Crasor, but I want to be absolutely certain."

My breath caught, and I sank into the shadows of the stone arch carved around the thick door. Rolund was speaking to the Prelate of the Brotherhood. Crasor never left the Tower of the Mind. Except for tonight, apparently.

"Respectfully, Your Grace, the time to put doubt to rest has passed. This is the outcome we wanted. You put her in Laurent's path, and he took the bait."

"What if she can't get that close to him?"

A low bark of laughter. "Not to be indelicate, Your Grace, but according to the reports we've received at the Towers, the princess is already quite close to the king."

My stomach clenched. I pressed my knuckles to my lips before I could make a sound.

“We don’t need her to kill him,” Crasor continued. “Stabbing him with the solstone will be enough. Laurent will brand her a spy and order her execution.”

All the fine hairs on my body lifted as dread drew an icy finger down my spine. I waited for Rolund to protest. To call for the guards to drag the Prelate away for even suggesting I might be executed. But my brother was silent.

The Prelate’s voice took on a peculiar cadence, as if he recited something. “The savior of the realm will be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift.”

The words held no special significance for me. Nevertheless, they seared themselves into my mind.

Rolund’s voice was low and strained. “If there was any other way—”

“There isn’t.” There was a shuffling sound, and then Crasor’s tone grew more intense. “You are a king, Rolund. We are all called to serve this realm, but you most of all. And you have a solemn duty to send those devils to the Fir where they belong. The way to do it has been foretold. Now it’s up to you to act.”

There was a long pause.

“So be it,” Rolund rumbled.

Footsteps echoed behind me. Someone was coming, and quickly. I turned from the door just as a pair of men-at-arms rounded the corner.

I was caught. I stood frozen in the doorway, my heart thumping so hard I felt lightheaded.

The men-at-arms marched straight past me...like I wasn’t there at all. They disappeared down the hallway, the torches shivering in their wake.

Tears burned my eyes. I *wasn’t* dead. This was some sort of rite or dark magic. I had to get back to Laurent. He was the only one who could undo this. With a final glance at the study

door, I moved swiftly down the hall, swinging my gaze from side to side in case I ran across anyone else. But I saw no one as I made my way outside. Stars scattered overhead—the same sky that stretched over Nor Doru. I had to get back.

I turned slowly, using the stars to orient myself so I faced north. I squeezed my fists at my sides and stared at the horizon until my vision went blurry. *Please help me*, I said silently to anyone who might be listening.

Please.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

LAURENT

“**W**hat the fuck was that?” I demanded the second I entered Varick’s chamber. Despite never using it, he looked at home in the space. The stone walls were whitewashed, with only candle sconces for decoration. The heavy furniture was carved with clean lines. Nothing fussy, just functional. But I saw none of it as I stalked through the room. I only had eyes for the hulking figure sitting before the fireplace with an infuriatingly calm expression on his face.

Varick was quiet as I stopped in front of him. I pulled his dagger from my pocket and stabbed it into the wooden arm of his chair. The hilt shuddered, the bloodstones winking in the firelight.

He didn’t look at it. Just rested his head against the back of the chair, his thick fingers laced over his midsection.

“Nothing to say?” I demanded.

“I said everything I wanted to say at dinner.”

I pointed to the dagger. “You swore an oath on that blade. You promised me...” A tangle of emotions welled up. Anger and frustration and fear. A toxic mix that threatened to choke me.

“Maybe you should sit down,” he said, like I was being unreasonable. Like he hadn’t just drained himself all over the fucking floor before ordering Given to her knees and forcing me to use a *bly’ad* on her.

For one blazing second, white covered my vision. It was, I realized, possible to be blinded by rage. The depth of it scared

me a little. *Is this how it starts?* The shaking and lack of control? Blacking out and then, oops, tossing a few nobles into the Rift? Sweat broke out across my skin.

Wood creaked. “Laurent,” Varick said, the detached tone gone from his voice. A warm hand gripped my bicep. Steered me to a chair and pressed me down. I leaned an elbow on the padded arm and buried my face in my hand.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Just give me a minute.”

He hovered. From under my lashes, I saw his hands twitch at his sides. Then his boots scuffed against the floor as he returned to his chair.

Eventually, my blood cooled. When I lifted my head, he was watching me. The fire popped and hissed, warding off the creeping chill. But it couldn’t do much about the coolness between us.

My fault. I’d put it there. But, gods, he didn’t help.

“Would you have done it?” I asked.

“I didn’t.”

I swore viciously under my breath. “If you were trying to scare her off, it won’t work. I can’t send her back to Sithistra.”

“I know.”

“Then why do it? You sliced your arm open and threatened to kill yourself because you don’t want me to marry? I’m thirty-four years old, Varick. Marriage was always going to be a necessity, and it was always going to be political. I need an heir.”

“Yes, but not from her. Thanks for telling me you were going to propose, by the way.”

“Oh, because you would have supported it?”

A muscle leapt in his jaw. He glanced at the door, then stared at me intently. I knew what was coming but I still winced as his voice flowed into my head. *“You can’t wed an elven-born. If you cross your bloodline with hers, you could unleash a monster on all of Ter Isir.”*

We couldn't have this conversation out loud. I stood and went to him. Climbed into his lap and straddled his thighs. I put my lips next to his ear and spoke several degrees below a whisper. "You are not your father. Neither is Given. You have these suspicions, and they're wrong."

His heart thumped against my chest. One big hand settled on my thigh, the other on my back. He didn't need to pull me into him to answer, but he did it anyway. "*Everyone with roots in Eldenvalla is dangerous. Nothing good came out of the Thicket. Nothing.*"

I shook my head, my lips scraping his stubble. "Valen hurt you because he was a murderous tyrant. Because you didn't fit his vision of what a perfect son should be."

Varick gripped my neck. He turned my head and spoke aloud in my ear, his raspy voice tinged with impatience. "He hurt me long before he knew I liked to fuck men. He hurt everyone, all the time. Because he could. Because it was in his blood. You saw it yourself." He squeezed my nape, and his growl rumbled in my ear and right down to my chest. "Gods, Laurent, open your eyes. If I hadn't stopped him that night by the Bitter Sea, he would have killed you. You are more powerful than any priest in the Sanctum and even *your* blood rites failed to contain him. Because he *could not be bound*."

I pulled back, a realization stealing over me. "You wanted to know if I can bind her. You set tonight in motion the moment I asked you to come to dinner. You tried to make her angry, to make her snap and break the blood binding." Anger twisted through me. I climbed off him, and for one tense, terrifying second, I wanted to hurt him.

He saw it. Something that might have been regret flashed in his eyes. "Laurent—"

"Be silent," I hissed. I glared down at him with my heart pounding and my memory supplying me with images of his blood mixing with the ocean tide. His pale body lying broken on a beach. "You put on that whole farce. You let me think you were going to kill yourself after you fucking *swore* on an elven

blade that you would never try that shit again. Do I have that right?”

His gaze was steady.

My anger burned hotter—searing claws that sank into my flesh. “Stand the fuck up and answer me.”

Slowly, he got to his feet. His big chest expanded as he drew a breath and let it out. He loomed over me, but his posture was deferent. In this moment, there was no confusion about which one of us was in charge. Even so, I took no pleasure in his submission. I didn’t want it to be necessary. And the fact that he’d made it necessary with his actions stoked my anger that much higher.

“Answer your king!” I growled.

“It’s right enough, Your Grace,” he said quietly.

“And?” I snapped. “She did everything you said. You must be satisfied.”

Silence. He was a whole wall of it, and I wanted to scream.

But we weren’t in the Rose Room. The walls in the palace had eyes...and ears. So I stepped into him and dropped my voice to a furious snarl. “You’re never going to be satisfied, are you? You made up your mind to fight this, and you’re so fucking stubborn you can’t let yourself budge even a little.”

“You can have any female in Nor Doru. Probably any woman in all of Ter Isir. And yet you insist on *her*.”

Suddenly, I had his shirt in both fists and my face in his. “Because I don’t have a fucking choice,” I said in a furious whisper. “The Deepnight isn’t just moving south. It’s disappearing.”

His pupils blew wide. He pushed me away but kept a grip on my shoulder. “What are you saying?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. Spots of it are burning away, shriveling up, whatever you want to call it.”

“You’re certain?”

My stomach clenched. “I only wish I had doubts. It started in the Wastes. Now it’s spreading south, disappearing in pockets. It’s happening slowly, but it’s happening.”

“How long have you known this?”

I didn’t answer right away. His gaze searched mine, and I knew the truth was already written on my face. “A year,” I said.

His expression darkened. His fingers dug into my shoulder. “You kept this from me for a *year*?”

I pulled out of his grasp. I didn’t have a good response for him, except that I wished I could have kept it from everyone. But my secret wouldn’t stay concealed forever. Literally, it revealed itself day by day. Eventually, someone would notice. A farmer would feel the unveiled sun on his neck. A merchant in some far-flung city would squint at the sky and never see anything else again. The lowpeople wouldn’t survive Nor Doru without the Deepnight. If the canopy disappeared, I would end up ruling a kingdom of ash and bone.

“Who else knows?” Varick demanded.

I swallowed the bile that burned my throat. “Petru. A handful of other priests from the Sanctum. They’ll keep their mouths shut.”

Varick’s face was an accusation, his mouth pinched tight and his eyes cutting me deeper than any blade ever could.

“The facts are these,” I said. “The Deepnight is receding from the north. If it continues shifting south, we’ll have no choice but to invade Sithistra. I have the opportunity to wed a halfling princess. No conqueror has ever succeeded without winning hearts and minds. Rolund doesn’t have an heir, and my spies report his First Queen is probably going to miscarry the child she carries. If I wed Given, I can promise the Sithistrans that Baylen’s grandson—a child with human blood—will sit on the southern throne someday. It’s the only way our people can survive.”

Varick’s face didn’t soften. For a long time, the crackling fire was the only sound in the room. At last, he pulled the

elven blade from the chair's arm. He kept his eyes downcast as he sheathed it, disapproval rolling off him in waves. "You should have told me."

"I'm telling you now."

He didn't look up. Just stood there and braced his hands on his hips and stared at the floor like it might offer up answers to the problems boiling between us. He blew out a gust of air. Lifted his head only to tip it back and gaze at the ceiling.

I pitched my voice low. "If there was any other way, I would—" I cut the sentence short. "We could make this work. You're not indifferent to her. We've shared women before. We'll share a wife."

He huffed a laugh at the ceiling. "So you get everything you want."

"You think I want this? You think I want a war? Yes, my people will burn under a naked sun, but at least I'll get some pussy, is that right?"

He looked at me. "We could have handled this together. If you had trusted me enough to talk to me, I could have helped you. But you kept this to yourself for a year. The Sanctum has no fucking clue what's happening at the Thicket—"

"Gods, not this again." I spun away from him and put my hands on top of my head.

He raised his voice. "I grew up on the edge of the barrier. I've patrolled it since I earned my spurs." He grabbed at me. Caught my arm and forced me around. We faced off in front of the fireplace, the flames casting ominous shadows over his face. "Something in that forest has *changed*, Laurent. You're so focused on the problem in front of you, you're blind to the one at your back."

I jabbed a finger at him. "You're supposed to have my back! But you haven't, because you're obsessed with the Thicket. You spend weeks away from Lar Katerin so you can ride up and down a line of trees. You skip Council meetings. When I need you, you're *not here*. So yes, I'm focused. I'm trying to save a kingdom. I can do that by wedding Given."

Anger contorted his features. “Your perfect princess carries the taint of Eldenvalla in her veins. Putting more elven-born into the world isn’t the brilliant solution you think it is. Use your brain, Laurent, not your dick.”

“Oh fuck you. Your father was an asshole, not the dark heir to a forgotten kingdom. You’re desperate to believe you carry some kind of twisted evil inside you because it’s easier than admitting he hated you as much as you hated him. And you think if you’re special enough you might please his ghost. So make up your fucking mind, Varick, because you can’t be both. I need you to lead my army, not wander the edge of the Thicket chasing after five-hundred-year-old fairy tales!”

He stepped back like I’d struck him, his face a mask of shock of pain.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I reached for him—

He stepped out of range. For one long, trembling moment, he stared at me like I was a stranger. Then he turned and strode to the door.

“Varick.”

He paused, his hand on the latch.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean any of that.”

He spoke without turning, his voice a rumble I felt in my chest. “You’re not the only one who can smell lies, Your Grace.”

He left, the soft click of the door louder than any slam.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

VARICK

I wasn't sure where I was going after I left my chamber. I walked quickly, Laurent's words pounding through my head. *Anger* was too mild a descriptor for the emotion that twisted my guts. It wound around my intestines and squeezed until my breath caught and my eyes watered.

He didn't believe me. He never had. He'd met my father numerous times, had seen...everything. And he dismissed the Thicket like everyone else in Ter Isir.

He dismissed *me*. Not my elven blood. He was king, and he was privy to secrets the lowpeople and even the nobles weren't aware of. But the forest was just a curiosity to him—something that had existed for so long people stopped caring how it came to be.

I understood the desire to accept. Life was busy and complicated enough without worrying children's bedtime stories might be rooted in truth.

And Laurent had his own fears to contend with. He was losing the Deepnight. If it slipped away, Nor Doru would fall.

A whole year. He'd known about the Deepnight for an entire year. He'd talked to me every day without mentioning it. Kissed my lips and shared a table with me. Slept by my side.

He'd had multiple opportunities to confide in me. Instead, he'd offered up a half-truth, and that was just as bad as total deception. Worse even, because it was so fucking calculated. He'd known he couldn't hide everything from me, so he'd

given me just enough information to keep me placated while he courted his princess.

“You’re not indifferent to her.”

He was right, and it was another knot in the rope slowly tightening around my neck. I wasn’t indifferent to Given. It would have been a lot easier if I was. Because the attraction was treacherous. Its roots ran deep, and they were as dark as the Thicket Laurent liked to ignore.

Energy brushed my skin, stopping me cold. I’d walked to Given’s chamber without realizing it, and now magic spilled from it in a thick wave.

Too much magic. It seethed around me, sliding against my skin like it was tasting me and taking my measure. The air was thick with power. It knocked me back a step. I grunted as my shoulder blade hit the wall.

Not good.

I entered without knocking and almost landed on my ass. Power surged, buffeting me back and making my boots skid on the flagstones. The energy was so thick it was almost visible, undulating ribbons that lashed the air. The balcony doors were flung open, and Given was just visible through the haze. She faced the city, her hands clenched around the railing. Snow flew around her. Ice coated her hair and stood in drifts piled against the hem of her gown. Her body shook, but not from the cold. The tremor was unnatural and violent. The ends of her hair danced against her back.

With a growl, I lunged forward. But even with all my strength—all my years of drills and training—it was like swimming upstream in the middle of a gale. Magic hissed and shoved me back.

“Fuck you,” I muttered. I wasn’t here to play. Metaphysical battles were like any other. You could take down just about any opponent if you simply refused to stop swinging. As Laurent was so fond of saying, I was stubborn to a fault. I gritted my teeth and kept pushing—and then kept pushing and *pushing* until I reached Given’s side. I gripped the

railing to keep from being beaten back by the magic. It crackled around her, strongest here because it came from her.

She stared unseeing at the lights of Lar Katerin. Tears were frozen on her face, and fresh ones flowed down the tracks. Her eyelashes were dusted with snow. The front of her gown was soaked. She was like a cold, beautiful statue.

“Given,” I said. I didn’t dare touch her. If I broke the link, she could die. I followed her gaze to the wall of the city...and beyond. “Where the fuck are you?” I breathed. She shouldn’t have been able to go this far. Not this time.

Assuming this was the first time.

I couldn’t call her back with my voice—at least not the one I used in this world. Gripping the railing, I spoke directly into her head. “*Given! Listen to me. You have to return.*”

Nothing. She gazed, unblinking, at the darkness past the wall. Her chest rose and fell, but just barely. The manic trembling continued. Her hands on the railing were blue, her knuckles an angry red.

“*Princess Given, I command you to return! If you linger too long you’ll die.*”

I held my breath. The wind screamed around me, pelting my skin with frozen needles.

Her lips twitched. She sucked in a breath.

Triumph surged in my veins. “*Yes! Come to me. Follow my voice.*”

Around me, the magic receded, a hesitant wave pulling back from a turbulent shore.

“*Come on, Given. Follow me. Come to me and take my hand.*” Throwing caution to the wind, I covered her icy knuckles with my palm. Her fingers curled around mine. I stared at our joined hands, my heart pumping wildly. “*Almost there. I’ve got you.*”

She turned her head, and I swore I heard ice crack. Wide, blue eyes rimmed with icy tears stared into mine. “Varick?” she croaked.

The magic vanished, its sudden absence so jarring, I fought back a gasp.

Given flung herself into my arms. She sobbed against my neck, her icy body pressed hard against mine. “I c-couldn’t get b-back! I w-was trapped there and I couldn’t f-find my way back!” She shuddered, her icy tears burning my neck.

I picked her up and carried her to the hearth. The chair looked sturdy enough to hold both of us. I kicked it closer to the fire and sat with her in my lap. She clung to me like a vine, her willowy body racked with tremors. At first, I sat there stiffly, one hand hovering over her back. It wasn’t lost on me that Laurent had recently occupied the same position.—and that my body had no problem with her being right where she was. Hers was altogether different weight compared to his. A different kind of feel, all soft curves instead of hard resistance. *A woman who made a man want to ruin her.*

And I did. I wanted to fuck this woman. Laurent was never wrong about these things, damn him.

She shivered and buried her face deeper in my neck. The scent of snow and cloves swirled into my lungs, embedding itself. Digging into the very bellows of my being. Magic brushed my skin, but this time it was a whisper. It beckoned, and something inside me lifted its head in recognition.

With a groan, I pulled her more tightly against me, one hand splayed across the center of her back. She wasn’t a small female. She was slender, yes, but she was also sleek and strong. Her curves molded to mine like they were made to fit. But her statuesque figure didn’t come from generations of vampires built to fight Nor Doru’s battles.

No, this was strength from another kingdom. And something inside me recognized that, too.

“You’re cold,” I muttered, rubbing my hand up and down her back. I sat her up and chafed her arms the same way, forcing circulation back into her limbs. Her knuckles were red and swollen. When I moved to her fingers, she whimpered and tried to pull away.

“Be still,” I said firmly, and she jumped at my tone. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, her resistance ebbed away.

My dick tightened. Cursing inwardly, I captured her hand in my larger one. Frostbite was the fear of every Nor Doruvian soldier. I’d learned to recognize the signs as a boy. I pinched her skin. “Can you feel that?”

“Yes!” She sucked in a pained breath.

I grunted. “That’s a good sign.” I sandwiched her hand between both of mine and rubbed vigorously. The wind had ripped all the pins from her hair, and it fell around us in a pale tangle, strands of it clinging to my stubble. I kept at her hand, forcing her to flex her fingers and make a fist. I moved to the next one and gave it the same treatment until the weight of her gaze brought my head up.

She stared at me. Her lips were still tinged with blue, but her cheeks were pink. And an undefined emotion shimmered in her eyes.

I stopped rubbing her hand. “What?” The word was perhaps rude but my tone wasn’t. My voice was hoarse and uncertain.

“You pulled me back,” she whispered. “I heard you in my head.”

I dropped my gaze to our joined hands. Her scent overwhelmed me. My heart beat faster. Any minute now she was going to notice my body’s reaction to her. And this time I couldn’t blame it on feeding.

“You shouldn’t stray too long from your body,” I said finally.

She made a funny sound, something between a cough and a whimper. “You’re not surprised”—her breath shuddered out—“about what I did just now.”

I shook my head. “No...I’m not.”

Silence stretched. Her scent filled my lungs. Cloves and forest. Part of me had known from the start, even before I spoke to Laurent in the Rose Room after I returned from the

Rift. I'd known from the moment I faced her on the Bleak Pass. But it had been easier to close my eyes.

“Varick?” she breathed.

I lifted my head. Saw the confusion and fear in her gaze. I turned her hand over so it rested in my palm. With my fingertip, I traced the path of one delicate blue vein. “You know the story of the Fall of Eldenvalla?”

She frowned. “I think everyone does. My nurse, Helen, told me stories about it.”

“They're not stories.” Under my fingers, her pulse sped up. “When the Rift opened and Vai Seren fell, King Avenor stayed in the city. By all accounts, he was a fine warrior and a good king. He refused to abandon his people. But he wanted the elven race to survive. He sent representatives of the twelve noble families out of Vai Seren. As the city crumbled, they raced toward the border. They were trying to outrun the demons, which by then had taken over the whole of Eldenvalla. The histories claim all the nobles perished in the Rift, but that's not true. Five made it through the Thicket, and they married into vampire families.”

Her heartbeat thumped faster under my thumb.

“They hid,” I said, “and they passed down their blood. Their descendants are scattered across Nor Doru. There are just a handful of us left, you and I among them.”

Her lips parted. “My mother...”

“Elven-born. The blood is strong, and it carries magical gifts. Some of us are more powerful than others. What you did just now is called *farseeing*. I've only known one other who could do it.” I squeezed her hand. “You have to be careful. It's only your spirit that travels. If you linger outside your body for too long you can lose the connection completely. Death follows.”

Her eyes were the color of the ocean after a storm. So deep a man could dive into them. Her gaze searched mine, her pulse still fluttering under my thumb. “Why did they hide? The nobles who survived.”

She was absorbing all this with remarkable calm. Then again, she'd just traveled outside her body. She didn't have to trust that I was telling her the truth about elven blood or magical gifts. She'd just discovered hers.

I drew on mine. *"Some power is too dangerous to be set free, Given."*

She sat so close, I saw her pupils retract and then blow wider as she heard me in her head. And I felt her breath caress my jaw when she rasped, "Like yours?"

"Ours."

"You think I'm dangerous?"

"I know it."

Her brows drew together. "I'm not—"

"You are," I said gruffly. "I'll show you." I grasped her chin and kissed her.

Power. It flowed between us, thick and alive in the wet slide of our tongues. She was rich, red wine and a swift gallop on my horse. The heady scent of pine and that first sharp bite of winter air on a clear morning. She was trouble, and this was absolutely not what I should be doing, but a spark lived in my chest and it bent toward the one just beginning to dance in hers. Fire was like that. No matter how high or hot it burned, it was forever greedy for a brighter blaze. It was never content. Always, it craved more, until it consumed everything in its path.

Panic buzzed in my mind. It gave me enough willpower to wrench away from her. Even so, I groaned at the loss, my chest rising and falling rapidly.

For a moment, she sat there, panting as harshly as I was. Then she scrambled off my lap in a flurry of skirts. She backed away from me, her fingers pressed to her mouth. "What was that? You did something."

I stood, then went behind the chair so there was a barrier between us. I curled my fingers over the back and braced

myself as I caught my breath. “As I said, dangerous. Our blood calls to each other. I know you feel it.”

Her mouth opened, then closed. “I don’t know what I feel. Tonight, you told Laurent to use a blood rite on me.” The look in her eyes darkened to anger. “You had him put me on my knees and take him down my throat while you watched. You humiliated me.”

“Because I had to know.”

“Know what?” she demanded. “If I’ll be an obedient queen? A pet the two of you can order around?”

I tightened my grip on the chair. “There’s a reason the elves lost everything. They grew too powerful, and delved into black magic that should have never seen the light of day. And they knew it. That’s why they tried to hide their blood.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“I had to know if you could be bound...if the part of you that comes from Eldenvalla could be contained by a blood rite.”

“What if it couldn’t?”

I didn’t answer. I let my silence speak for itself.

She hugged her arms around her middle, like she was shoring herself up against a possible attack. “You would have... Have you ever...?”

I knew what she was asking. “I’ve only met one other elven-born who couldn’t be bound. My father.”

“And you killed him?”

“No. That honor went to another.”

“Laurent?”

I nodded.

“So he knows about vampires with elven blood?” Her brow furrowed. “He didn’t tell me any of this.”

I wanted to tell her he hadn’t known about her heritage. But that would have been a lie. He’d obviously learned of it at

some point.

“Lar Satha has always been a minor house,” I said. “None of your people ever came to court. It’s possible none of them exhibited any elven gifts. It’s also possible they hid their abilities. In the library at my family’s estate at Lar Keiren, ancient records talk of knights going from house to house, searching for elves who might have escaped the Thicket.” I leaned over the chair. “That’s what you need to understand, Given. The magic the elves brought forth was evil, and it should have perished behind the Thicket. It’s only the passage of time that has dulled those memories and in some cases erased them. Enough generations have passed to render the Fall of Eldenvalla a children’s bedtime story. It’s a legend now, and there are plenty of people who don’t believe it ever happened. You and I should both hope they persist in their disbelief.”

She frowned. “Why?”

“When people fail to understand something, they usually end up fearing it. Fear is the flipside of hate. And people will kill things they hate. Because, ultimately, they don’t want to be afraid.”

She took all this in. I could see her turning it about in her mind. Examining everything I’d thrown at her. Farseeing and hearing me speak in her head should have driven her to her knees, and yet she stood with her spine straight as she absorbed the news that she was part elven. She’d been the same way at the Rift.

“The elf who spoke to me in my dream,” she said. “You heard him when we crossed the Bleak Pass.”

“I heard the voice. I’ve heard others over the years, but never from the Rift. Only when patrolling the edge of the Thicket. The forest is...unsettled. Anyone with our magic in their veins can feel it if they get close enough.”

These were all things I’d said to Laurent. Over and over again, I’d tried to tell him that the shadow of the forest was growing longer. More ominous.

“What do you want me to do, Varick? Send knights into the trees?”

The problem was, he had a point. What good were fighting men when there was no visible enemy to fight? And the threat wasn't anything I could put my finger on. He'd never said it, but I knew what he thought. *It's all in your head.*

Nothing good happened to people who heard voices.

“You don't want me to wed Laurent,” Given said. “I thought it was because... You and he...” She flushed.

Despite the weightiness of our conversation, my groin tightened. Images from dinner paraded through my head, offering a glimpse of what it might be like...the three of us together.

“I think it's a mistake to blend your bloodlines,” I said. “We know Laurent is powerful. We don't know what you're capable of, or how your power will react with his.”

Her flush deepened. “You're speaking of a child.”

My mind went to Laurent's confession about the Deepnight—about his plan to promise the Sithistrans an heir with Baylen's blood. Of course he hadn't told her about it. He'd have to confess he intended to invade her country. Depose and quite likely kill her brother.

“I speak of the future,” I said.

She rubbed her lips together. “I don't feel powerful.” Her gaze darted to the balcony over my shoulder. She tightened her arms around her stomach as she shivered.

“Where did you go?” I asked. “When you left yourself.”

Her blue eyes jerked to mine. For a moment, fear reigned there. Then she ducked her head. “Darkness. Like a void. I thought I might get lost in it.”

Hints of deception hit my lungs, the scent akin to old smoke. But there was truth in there, too. It was impossible to separate the two. They swirled around each other like flotsam in a stream. This happened sometimes when someone was frightened or confused. Or they tried to recall a dream.

I tipped her chin up, forcing her to look at me again. “You saw a void?”

“Yes.”

Truth.

There was a tub in the corner, the surface of the water just visible behind a privacy screen.

“You should soak in a warm bath,” I said. “Warm, not hot. It’ll help with any lingering pain from the frost. I’ll have servants bring up fresh water.”

Her gaze darted to the tub. Color burned in her cheeks. “Thank you...General.”

The memories of dinner changed, twisting into images of her soaking in the tub, her pale hair piled atop her head, firm breasts breaking the surface of the water. Damp, pink nipples and long, smooth legs. “*We’ll share a wife,*” Laurent had said. “*You’re not indifferent to her.*”

I turned and went to the door.

“Lord Varick.”

I waited, my jaw clenched against the draw of her magic. The sultry whisper of power and potential destruction.

“You said you knew one other with my gift.”

The door was a solid presence in front of me. Other memories—far different ones—threatened to rise. I shoved them away. I left the room, and only when I was well down the hall did I give her an answer. “*Yes, Princess. My father was a farseer.*”

And he’d been a liar, too.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

LAURENT

The Sanctum glowed with the light of ten thousand candles. Pilgrims journeyed from all over Nor Doru to light them and offer the flames to the gods. The wax was mixed with blood offerings, so the squat, round pillars dripped red as they melted. Once a month, priests chiseled the dried blood-wax from the obsidian and gave it to the poor so they could make candles for their homes.

Right now, however, the only souls present were Petru and two of his highest-ranking priests. They met me at the door of the secret temple, where generations of Nor Doruvian kings had prayed in private.

“Your Grace,” Petru said, his expression that of an old man annoyed at being roused from sleep in the middle of the night. “We received your message. Are you certain you weren’t seen?” His rust-colored beard was braided and tied with a band. It might have been adorable if my memories weren’t full of the freshly bloodied length swinging next to me as I knelt and chanted prayers. I’d been terrible at memorizing them. As a child, my knees had been permanently bruised.

I drew my hood back and ran a hand through my hair. “There’s no one about at this hour.” Not even the night soil men were working. I’d stepped around more than one pile of shit as I picked my way across the city.

“You should have come on horseback, my king. It’s dangerous to travel the streets on foot.”

I removed my cloak and handed it to one of the priests. I started on the buttons of my shirt. “Who would harm me, Petru? I’m the vessel of the gods.”

The old male pressed his lips together, and I could almost hear my mother’s disapproving voice echoing through the temple. But he held his tongue as I stripped. One of the priests accepted my clothes. The other carefully folded them. I removed everything, including my rings and the posts in my ear and tongue.

Nude, I walked to the square pool set in the floor. The three of them followed in a swish of black robes and then watched as I descended the steps. I dipped under the water once, submerging myself completely. When I resurfaced, I stood with the water caressing my shoulders. I closed my eyes and listened to Petru chant the cleansing ritual. Candles sputtered, and sleep tugged at me. The dinner with Given and Varick felt like a million hours ago. Varick hadn’t returned to his room. He was probably bunking down with his knights in the Serenity Tower.

It would have been easier if he were angry. I could do a lot with his anger. Give me twenty minutes and I could make him forget he was furious.

But hurt was an entirely different matter. Once again, I’d disappointed him.

“Your Grace.”

Petru’s voice jolted me awake. Water splashed, drops hitting the obsidian floor. One of the priests bent and wiped it clean. I left the pool and lifted my arms. The priests stepped forward with towels and dried me, and I fought to keep from clenching my jaw as they hunted down every drop of moisture. Their towels dipped into my navel and between my toes. Under my balls and beneath my armpits. I endured it as I had so many times before, goosebumps rising on my skin despite the heat of the candles.

“Please lift your chin, Your Grace,” one murmured, and I tipped my head back so he could chase a streak of water trying to make an escape. The other priest circled me and blotted my

hair. When the first one finished with my neck, he bent his head and dried the tiny crevices under my fingernails. My hair took forever to dry. I stared blearily at the obsidian altar that dominated the far side of the room, lulled into a somnolent state by the hissing, flickering candles that covered its surface.

When the priests were satisfied not even a hint of moisture remained to offend the gods, they stepped away.

Petru moved in front of me. One of the other priests fetched a golden bowl full of blood. Petru started to dip his fingers in it, then hesitated. “What prayer are you saying, Your Grace?”

I shook my head. “Not a prayer. A rite.”

His craggy forehead gained a few more lines. “That will take hours.” He gestured to the priest at his side. “We’re not prepared. You haven’t fed—”

“Yes, I have.” When arguments gathered in his eyes, I turned to the second priest. “Get me a robe.” When the man hurried to do my bidding, Petru’s expression turned even more disapproving. But I didn’t give a shit. I’d spent more hours bare-assed in the Sanctum than I cared to contemplate, but I wasn’t having this conversation with my dick out.

The priest approached with the robe, and I waved him forward impatiently. He held it for me, and I shrugged into it, leaving the front open. Thus fortified, I looked Petru dead in the eye. “I have the blood of two elven-born in my veins. I would offer all of it to the gods.”

All three men went still. Petru spoke softly, as if he feared raising his voice might bring down some sort of calamity on our heads. “This is untested magic, Laurent. Lord Varick’s blood is a known quantity, but the princess is—”

“Powerful. And what good is power if you don’t use it?”

His bushy white brows pulled low over his eyes. “This isn’t what we discussed. What we planned. We need her blood, yes, but not for this. She’s to be at your side if and when Nor Doru invades the south. And she and Varick will produce a—”

“That won’t be necessary if I can restore the Deepnight.” I nodded toward the altar. “And I mean to try. Tonight.”

His voice took on the tone he used when he was warming up for a lecture. “You reach too high, boy, toying with power you don’t understand.”

I stepped around him, my gaze on the altar.

He hissed and grabbed my arm. “Don’t you walk away from me.”

In a flash, I spun and gripped his throat. I reached for my power—and caught it. My voice boomed in the small room. “*Amet.*”

Petru’s eyes bulged. One hand flailed up, clutching at his chest. Which made sense, considering I’d just told his heart to stop.

I held him there, my voice still rippling with the *bly’ad* I’d earned at nineteen. Acquiring *amet* had almost killed me. Even fifteen years later, it lit a fire in my chest, the agony searing all the way up to my sinuses.

But I was willing to bet Petru felt worse.

“I am your king,” I said. “If you ever call me *boy* again, I’ll cut out your tongue and feed it to you.”

His face was purple now. Sweat beaded his forehead.

My voice rippled across the temple as I continued. “I understand power well enough. The gods gave me an abundance of it. I can only assume they want me to use it. Now attend me or I’ll do the rite by myself.”

The room itself seemed to hold its breath. Almost imperceptibly, Petru nodded.

“*Rem.*” I released his throat. The other priests caught him before he could hit the floor. I watched him cough and gulp in air. Eventually, he recovered enough to stand on his own. He straightened his robes, a slight tremor in his hands. When one of the priests tried to help, Petru waved him off, then gestured both men sharply forward.

“Prepare the altar,” he said hoarsely. As they moved away to do his bidding, his gaze settled on me. There was shock and wariness in the dark depths...and maybe something that might have been sadness.

“You’ve been a good teacher,” I told him quietly. “I would not be the king I am today without your guidance.” I squared my shoulders. “But I am not my father. My mother’s blood runs thick in my veins. You would do well to remember it, old friend.”

He lowered his gaze. “None of us are too old to learn lessons, Your Grace.”

Emotion welled. Regret, maybe.

I pushed it away. I was my mother’s son, yes, but I’d learned a few things from my father before he lost himself to his demons. “*The crown is heavy,*” he used to say. As a child, I thought he was complaining. *If it’s so tiresome,* I’d think, *just remove it.* Now I knew what he meant. The crown never leaves a king’s head.

One of the priests approached, his eyes downcast. “We are ready, Your Grace.”

I went to the altar. Now, a bleached white skull sat among dozens of candles, each one dripping red onto the shiny black obsidian. I knelt, my robe puddling on the floor. The skull grinned down at me, candlelight casting shadows over its prominent fangs. The temple floor was also obsidian—black and unforgiving. But a cushion was out of the question. If I wanted to transcend the mortal realm, I had to leave all of its comforts behind.

Whispers of movement behind me. The priests’ robes stirred the air as they placed large golden bowls on either side of my knees. One of the men rounded me and touched my shoulders.

“May I, Your Grace?”

I nodded, and he pulled my robe away, leaving me nude once more.

Petru stepped between me and the altar. The other priest moved to his side and proffered the small bowl of blood. Petru dipped his fingertips and lifted his hand. Blood slid down his wrist and dripped onto the floor. This time, the others didn't wipe it away. The gods knew there would be plenty more on the obsidian before the night was through.

Petru's voice echoed through the temple. "Who approaches the gods?"

"Laurent of Nor Doru," I said. "I come as I am, in awe and humility."

With his thumb, he drew a line of blood down the center of my forehead. Then he painted another stripe across my bottom lip. "You are a son of the gods." He dipped his fingers again and dragged his thumb down the middle of my chest, over my heart. "Speak and hope to be heard."

I extended my arms, my wrists turned up with my hands over the bowls. "I offer the Rite of Destru."

The candles danced wildly, their flames tossed by an invisible breeze. Petru moved away, and the other priests knelt on either side of me. Each held a dagger.

From somewhere behind me, Petru said, "We begin."

I tipped my head back and closed my eyes.

The priests sliced my arms from elbow to wrist.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

GIVEN

The morning dawned bright, the muted sun of Nor Doru doing its best to melt the snow the kingdom had received overnight. The rooftops of Lar Katerin sparkled under the cheery light, looking like a giant had frosted them with a thick coat of icing.

It was beautiful, but I avoided the balcony. The servants gave me odd looks when I asked them to build up my fire. Despite soaking in the bath like Varick instructed, the chill from the night before still lingered in my bones.

I dressed quickly and dismissed the women as soon as I could. Right now, I needed to be alone so I could think.

But as I stared into the hearth, my thoughts were as chaotic as the dancing flames.

I left my body.

My brother wants me dead.

Compared to the shattering revelations I'd learned eavesdropping *outside my body*, the events at dinner seemed almost insignificant. But the knowledge Varick had pressed upon me made me think they were somehow intertwined.

The Prelate's voice echoed in my head, snippets of his conversation with Rolund overlapping in my mind.

"This is the outcome we wanted. You put her in Laurent's path, and he took the bait."

"Stabbing him with the solstone will be enough. Laurent will brand her a spy and order her execution."

“...you have a solemn duty to send those devils to the Fir where they belong.”

“The savior of the realm will be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift.”

It was the last that echoed the loudest, and it triggered a memory of Varick’s words as he’d held me on his lap. *“I had to know if you could be bound.”*

The flames in the hearth seared my eyes, that *bound* repeating over and over. Was I one of the “devils” the Prelate had spoken of? Was Varick?

And Rowena’s visit yesterday... Rolund had sent her. My brother *wanted* me to get caught with the solstone.

But did he, really? Crasor had done most of the talking last night. The few times Rolund had spoken, he’d sounded anguished. *“If there was any other way...”* I hadn’t imagined the plea in his voice when he said that.

And what of Rowena’s voice in my head? Her fear for her husband. Had I imagined that? I could have asked Varick about it, but that would have meant admitting she gave me the dagger. No matter which way I turned, more problems sprang up.

I looked at the basket next to the fireplace. The dagger was my most pressing, immediate problem. I had to get rid of it... but how? Every time I left my chamber, a guard was waiting. If I walked about the palace with a deadly blade in my pocket, I could end up in the Rift just like the Prelate wanted.

And Rowena was likely to end up there with me. Maybe I could dismiss her voice in my mind, but the fear in her eyes had been unmistakable.

I rubbed my temples with my fingertips, trying to ease the ache that had blossomed there as I lay tossing and turning in bed last night, images of the hallway outside my brother’s study parading through my head.

The thing was, I hadn’t actually *seen* Rolund and Crasor speak. For all I knew, the “farseeing” Varick spoke of was a dream brought on by the shock and stress of dinner. He’d

spoken convincingly last night, but could I really trust him? He didn't want me to marry Laurent. *"I've known Laurent since before you were born. I've been fucking him since you were in diapers. You don't have to reassure me that you're not a threat, little girl."*

I'd had nightmares my whole life. What if last night was just another one?

But the voice I heard at the Rift was real. Rowena and the solstone were real. Varick's voice in my head had been very real. *"Yes, Princess. My father was a farseer."*

The father who tried to kill him.

I squeezed my eyes shut, blocking out the fire and the voices that threatened to overwhelm me. I didn't know what to believe or whom to trust. I was alone.

Just like I'd always been. I should have been used to it. After so many years, I should have just accepted it. Acceptance meant survival. In Queen Amantha's court, I'd made myself scarce. Under my brother's rule, I'd kept my mouth shut. When he sent me over the Rift, I went because my king had ordered me to. All my life, I had done what was expected of me, even when it meant smothering my feelings and hiding my true nature.

I opened my eyes. What even *was* my true nature? I was so accustomed to fitting myself into the shapes other people cut out for me, I wasn't sure I had one of my own.

The flames leapt.

My heart pounded.

I was *done* fitting. Hiding. Keeping quiet. Last night, Laurent had promised me answers. *"I'll tell you anything you want to know,"* he'd said. *"No more secrets between us."*

It was time to see if the King of Nor Doru was a man of his word.



TEN MINUTES LATER, MY NEWFOUND COURAGE ALMOST deserted me as I caught sight of the priests posted on either side of Laurent's door. The robed men were an uncommon presence at court. According to the servants, they typically kept to the Sanctum. I was fine with that. On the few occasions I'd seen one, their blood-stained beards and black robes had sent shivers down my spine.

They spotted me at once, and the taller one stepped forward as I approached the door.

"Can I be of service, Princess?"

I willed my heart to stop racing. He could probably hear it. "I wish to speak to the king."

"King Laurent is indisposed."

"Is something wrong?"

"He's indisposed." This priest was a burly man. He wasn't as big as Varick, but he was tall and broad. His beard was as dark as his hair, but the frizzy ends that brushed his chest were nearly black from old blood. He stood like a living wall between me and Laurent's chamber.

I leaned so I could see around him. "If the king is ill..."

Black robes blocked my view as the priest shifted. "King Laurent is not taking visitors, Princess. Now, you'll be more comfortable in your chamber." He looked at something over my shoulder and nodded. A scuffing sound made me whirl.

A guard approached, one hand on his sword hilt. "I'll escort you, Princess."

"No!" The word burst from me, and I flung out a hand to stave him off. Suddenly, nothing was more important than speaking to Laurent. I faced off with the giant of a priest. "I want to see the king, and I'm going to see him."

His expression darkened. The tips of sharp-looking fangs peeked from between his lips as he reached for me. "I don't think you heard what I said—"

"Danus," Laurent's muffled voice said through the door.

The priest froze. “Yes, Your Grace?”

“Let the princess pass.”

The two priests looked at each other. Silent communication passed between them. After a moment, the giant stepped aside in a swish of black robes.

Heart hammering, I moved past him. The other priest opened the door. I half expected him to follow as I entered, but he closed it behind me, sealing me inside Laurent’s darkened chamber. With no sign of Laurent.

A single candle burned on the big pedestal table just inside the door. His apartments were much larger than mine. However, I’d only seen the outer rooms and the dining chamber, and now I had no idea where to go. I stood motionless, uncertainty rooting me to the flagstones.

Laurent’s voice drifted from an archway opposite the one that led to the dining room. “In here, Given.”

I gathered my skirts and followed the sound. Through the archway lay a spacious bedchamber dominated by the biggest bed I’d ever seen. The canopy soared toward the ceiling. Thick curtains embroidered with the night-blooming rose of Nor Doru were drawn across three sides.

A beringed hand emerged and beckoned me forward. “Come on,” Laurent’s voice murmured. “I won’t bite.”

I rounded the footboard.

At the sight of the figure on the bed, all the breath left my lungs.

Laurent lay propped on the pillows, but he looked nothing like the handsome, powerful king I was used to. He looked like a corpse. His skin clung to his bones. He was obviously nude under the sheet that rose to just above his hips. Every rib stood out in stark relief. There were deep hollows under his eyes, and his cheekbones looked like they’d been carved from stone.

“Your Grace!” I cried, rushing forward. I fell to my knees in a heap of skirts at his bedside. “What—?”

“It’s all right.”

“No, it’s not.” My heart thumped painfully. “You’re hurt. You—”

“Not hurt,” he said, a tired smile touching his mouth. His fangs looked longer without the fullness of his lips to frame them. His chest rose as he dragged in air. His breath eased out in an exhausted slide, but his smile grew. “You’re not disgusted by me.” He seemed genuinely surprised.

“No.” I’d seen sickness before, when Helen grew ill. Toward the end, our roles reversed, with me nursing her. And Rolund’s daughter, Cathrin, had nearly died several times over the years. “What happened?”

“I was at prayers all night. One of my duties as king.”

This was his duty? Prayers that left him so emaciated he was almost unrecognizable? “You bled yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Do all prayers require bloodletting?”

Even in his weakened state, he managed to raise an eyebrow. “Your religious education is woefully lacking. It’s scandalous, really.”

If he could joke like this, maybe he wasn’t as bad off as he looked. “What did you pray for, Your Grace?”

“I told you to call me Laurent when we’re alone.” He reached out and tugged a lock of hair that had spilled over my shoulder. “I wonder if you’ll ever do as you’re told, Princess.”

I took his hand. His fingers were like sticks. “I’ll call the priests.”

“No.” The word emerged as an order, his voice stronger as he tightened his grip. “Give me your vein.”

“My vein?”

Amusement kindled in his silver eyes. “You know how feeding works by now, yes?”

My face heated. “Of course...” I had no reason to refuse. But memories of dinner—and his power—swirled in my mind. I wished I knew of a way to fight the arousal that would inevitably accompany his bite.

He didn’t give me time to reconsider. He brought my wrist to his mouth and latched on hard.

Pain...then *fire*. Heat blasted me, streaking in a sizzling path from my wrist to the juncture of my thighs. In an instant, my underclothes were soaked. A low-pitched moan spilled from me as my inner muscles clenched. But now I knew what my body craved. It longed for the fullness of his fingers inside me. The stroke of his tongue against the most sensitive part of me.

He’d ruined me at Lar Satha. Opened doors I could never close again. Waves of desire built higher and came faster, crashing one on top of another until I couldn’t hold back. I tipped over the edge with a strangled cry, my hips rolling helplessly as a powerful orgasm swept through me.

He continued to drink, his throat working as he took deep pulls from my wrist.

It’s too much. The thought formed, but I couldn’t act. Could only watch through bleary eyes as he drained me. Slowly, his color returned. His face filled out, his looks and youth restored. The fatigue left his expression, and his irises glowed like molten metal. His hand holding my arm tightened, his fingers supple and strong.

Fear licked through me. What if he took everything? There was no one to stop him. Maybe no one *could* stop him. He claimed he wasn’t a priest, but he worked in dark blood magic. I’d felt its grip as I took him down my throat. Panic fluttered, but I was already too weak to wrench away.

My heartbeat thudded in my ears. Then it seemed to pound through the room. It filled my head. Shook me like a giant’s steps rocking the floor under my knees. Black gathered at the corners of my vision. Just as it smeared over everything, Laurent tore his mouth away. Big hands went under my

armpits, and then the room spun as he lifted me and rolled me under him.

“Here,” he said, the word echoing around the bed as something hard pressed against my lips. It pushed into my mouth, and his blood touched my tongue.

Sugar and liquid fire. It slid down my throat, quickly filling all the empty hollows he’d created. Within seconds, my head was clear.

And I was pinned under a very nude—and very aroused—King of Nor Doru.

His power filled my veins, the rush of it almost too much for my body to contain. Emboldened, I swung my fist.

He caught it and pressed my hand to the pillow beside my head. When I screeched and swung the other one, he caught that, too.

He held himself over me, his breath tickling my cheek. “It’s a capital offense to strike the king.”

I lifted my head. “Another trick?”

“What trick?”

“You lured me in here so you could drink from me.” I strained against his grip, but it was useless. He held me effortlessly, his long fingers pinning mine to the bed. His erection pressed hard between my aching thighs, my layers of skirts the only barrier between us.

His smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Your memory is faulty, Princess. *You* sought *me* out.”

Damn him, that part was true. “You still drained me.”

“And I filled you back up.” He gave me more of his weight, his hard length nudging my throbbing center. “You took me a lot easier this time.”

The double meaning tightened my nipples and quickened my breaths. My heart pounded, each beat echoing between my legs. I was no stranger to men’s bodies. I’d seen Rolund’s knights train shirtless more times than I could recall. On a few

occasions, I'd watched in secret as the men-at-arms flung buckets of water over each other in the courtyard. Their naked flanks had been pale and unappealing, like a broiled chicken thigh.

Laurent's body was nothing like that. His chest was smooth and hard, his flat, pink nipples strangely alluring. The muscles in his shoulders and arms strained taut as he held me down.

And the hard length between my thighs felt a lot bigger than anything I'd seen in that courtyard.

"I want to fuck you," he murmured.

My breath hitched. I swallowed thickly. "You can't."

"Not yet, no. Not until we're wed."

He said it like it was inevitable. Like he was ready to announce it to the whole kingdom. "I haven't said yes, Your Grace."

"You will. You're running low on options, Princess."

"I thought we already established I don't have any." It was probably foolish to taunt him while he was on top of me, but the tumult of the past twenty-four hours made me throw caution to the wind. "If I didn't believe it before, I do now. You could force me to the altar with a word. I'm not likely to forget how it felt to have my wishes replaced with yours."

His smile held a hint of roguishness. "I'm not as powerful as Varick would have you believe. My magic springs from my veins. If my hands aren't free to place my blood on the person or object I wish to bind, my power is useless. If you're worried about it, Princess, just tie me up. Then I'm yours to do with as you will."

More heat streaked to my center. I drew an unsteady breath. "You're doing this on purpose."

"I'm simply assuring you there's nothing to fear about becoming my wife. Besides, I don't think you want to return to Rolund and a life worshipping mirrors and drinking watered-

down goat blood. It sounds dull as fuck. I promise you my court—and my bed—are a great deal more entertaining.”

The mention of Rolund made ice slide down my spine. “Let me up. Please.”

He kept me in suspense for another long moment. Then he was gone. A cool breeze stirred over me just as I registered him standing next to the bed. He faced away from me as he wrapped a sheet around his waist.

I scrambled to my feet and shook out my skirts. I couldn’t tell him about Rolund. If I did, I’d have to tell him about the solstone. And I wasn’t at all certain I wanted Laurent to know Rolund’s plans. The minute I divulged them, Laurent would prepare for war.

And he’d almost certainly arrest Rowena, if not execute her. He projected an image of a merry, irreverent king, but I’d seen behind his mask often enough to know how serious he took his reign.

Laurent faced me, the sheet knotted low on his hips. His gaze swept down my body. “You look well.” He smiled. “My blood suits you.”

I moved away from the bed. We faced off like adversaries in the darkened chamber. A banked fire glowed in the hearth behind him, limning his body in gold. “It seems mine suits you as well, Your Grace. My *elven* blood.”

His gaze narrowed, his teasing demeanor vanishing like smoke. “You spoke to Varick. Did you manifest a gift?”

“I...”

He closed on me quickly and seized my arm in an iron grip. “Answer me, Given,” he demanded in a low voice.

“Yes! I mean, I don’t know.” His sudden intensity started my heart pounding again. *How quickly the mask slips.*

“Yes or you don’t know? Which is it?”

“He said it was called farseeing. But I can’t be sure what happened.”

Something fierce lit his gaze. “I knew you would be powerful.”

“You knew about the elven-born, but you didn’t tell me.”

“You needed time to embrace your vampire side. I felt it imprudent to burden you with rumors of an entirely different ancestry.”

“Rumors or facts?” I lifted my chin. “I may be young, but I’m not a fool, Your Grace. You are the king. If there are secrets in Nor Doru, you’re in a position to know all of them, including which of your noble families harbor vampires with elven blood.”

His expression turned shrewd. Too late, I realized that tipping my head back put my mouth in almost perfect alignment with his.

He took advantage, sliding his other hand through my hair and lowering his mouth to mine. I stiffened, but it was a token resistance and he knew it. When I pressed my lips together in a bid to keep him out, he merely pressed harder. I opened on a whimper, granting him entry. If he was a marauding army, I was a castle in full surrender. His tongue stroked and sucked, and I felt the bar dragging along my bottom lip. The sensation triggered the memory of that wicked piece of metal dragging across more intimate places, and I moaned into his mouth.

He smoothed a hand over my hip and around to my backside. He squeezed hard, turning my moan into a gasp as he pulled my hips into his. He deepened the kiss and kneaded my backside through my skirts, his long fingers dangerously close to my most private, secret place. It wasn’t the kiss a lord gives his lady. No, it was a taste of what I could expect in his bed. And gods help me, I wanted more than a taste.

When I was aching and breathless, he pulled back, only to curl a finger under my chin. His lips were wet, and his raspy voice seemed to stroke between my thighs. “If I thought you were a fool, I wouldn’t be taking you to wife.”

“I’m not—”

“Don’t argue with me.” He put his lips to my ear. “Listen carefully, Princess, because what I’m about to say is important. I know what you are. I knew before I brought you over the Rift. But others know, too, and they fear your power.”

My throat tightened, Varick’s warnings rippling through my mind.

“The safest place for you is by my side,” Laurent murmured. “Be my queen, and you’ll have the protection of every knight on this side of the Rift.”

My insides trembled. “Who would want to hurt me?” I whispered. But it seemed a lot of people did. *The south*. My brother. Maybe the whole Brotherhood. I just didn’t understand why. The Fall of Eldenvalla was a children’s bedtime story. Now it was as real as the nightmares that had plagued me my whole life.

Laurent’s breath tickled my ear, lifting the fine hairs on my body. “No one will hurt you if you sit the throne of Nor Doru. I vow it, Given. You are meant for bigger things than Rolund would ever offer. You can be a princess or you can be a pawn. You cannot be both.”

My pulse raced the same way it had the day I walked across the Rift. Now, as then, I stood at a crossroads of sorts. If I went forward, there was no turning back.

His tongue touched the curve of my ear. “And I will make you a queen.”

I pulled back so I could see his face.

Glowing silver eyes stared down at me, power in their depths. Power he was offering as a shield. Problem was, he wanted things in return. I just had to hope it wasn’t more than I was prepared to give.

“Yes,” I heard myself say. “I will wed you.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

LAURENT

I huddled deeper in my cloak as I strode toward the courtyard at the base of the Serenity Tower. Snow whirled in thick eddies, fat flakes settling on the fur ruff around my neck. Tibern hurried in my wake. He hadn't stopped talking since he burst into my chambers and informed me Varick was readying men to depart for Lar Keiren. In the middle of the fucking night.

My steward's anxious voice snapped at my heels. "I told him he should clear this with you, Your Grace, but you know how the general is."

Why yes, I did know.

Tibern nearly crashed into me as I stopped and surveyed the courtyard. Horses stood, their breath steaming, as knights of the warrior class checked stirrups and baggage. A small carriage was hitched to four draft horses. Through the glazed window, Lady Evelina sat stiff and pale-faced. Varick stood beside the carriage, his blond head bent as he spoke with one of his captains.

One of the knights noticed me. "The king!"

As his shout echoed, every knight turned. The few wearing their helmets removed them. Every male in the courtyard bowed his head and saluted.

Varick's gaze found mine. He murmured something to his captain and crossed the courtyard. When he reached me, he touched his gauntleted fist to the night-blooming rose

engraved on his black breastplate and inclined his head. His crimson cloak swirled around his ankles.

Golden eyes met mine. “Your Grace.”

“General.”

Silence hung in the air. Slowly, knights returned to their business. Or pretended to.

When it became obvious I wasn’t going to say anything else, Varick’s mouth tightened. “I hear congratulations are in order, my king.”

“We’ll speak privately,” I said under my breath. I turned on my heel and stalked to a small room where the palace armorer stored chain mail and equipment in need of repair. A moment later, Varick entered and closed the door on a gust of snow, making the single lamp flicker and dance.

I rounded on him. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

He remained by the door, his hair like honey in the weak light. He hadn’t shaved, and blond scruff covered his jaw. “I’m for Lar Keiren. It’s past time Evelina was wed.” He offered a humorless smile, the tips of his fangs gleaming white in the shadows. “It’s a season for weddings, it seems.”

“You’re doing this in retaliation.”

His eyes flashed. “Not everything is about you, Laurent.”

My snort was loud in the quiet room. I went to him, not stopping until I was close enough to feel the cold rolling off his armor. Snow melted on his shoulders and ran in little rivulets down his breastplate, leaving dew on the petals of the rose that had symbolized my house for a thousand years. This close to the door, I could hear the muffled sounds of knights and horses outside. “You’re being stupid about this. Leaving in the dead of night with a handful of men.”

“Warriors, all of them. No one will cross us.”

“Your sister seems pleased. Quite the blushing bride. I assume those are tears of happiness on her face?”

“She’ll do as she’s told.”

“So will you. I never granted you permission to return home. Nor will I.”

A muscle leapt in his jaw. “You can’t deny me this. Time is running out on Lina’s betrothal contract. I need to see her settled. Martin of Lar Plestes and his people are already at Lar Keiren. I arranged it days ago.”

Anger burned in my gut. He’d outmaneuvered me. Now that Lar Plestes was involved, my hands were tied. There was no reason for me to interfere with a lawful betrothal. If I prevented Evelina from going through with the wedding, her groom could sue the crown for damages. And I couldn’t send a female of her station across the countryside without a proper escort. Lar Keiren was located in the far north, its borders flirting with the Wastes. Any number of disasters could befall her between Lar Katerin and Varick’s estate—but not if she had a contingent of warriors with her.

Varick watched with steady, treacherous eyes as I ran through all this in my head.

I knew my smile was vicious. “How strategic,” I said silkily. “If only you’d use those planning skills of yours to serve the realm.”

His nostrils flared. He’d held himself rigid since he closed the door. But now he leaned forward, crowding me with his height. “I have *always* served you. Maybe that’s the problem. You’ve never been told no.”

I bared my fangs, the softest hiss easing from my lips. “Nobody tells me no.”

He stepped into me, his chest bumping mine. Blond head angled down as he crowded me. “Oh, you’re wrong, Your Grace. I tell you *no* all the time. I also tell you *when* and *how far* and *right now*. And you serve me so well. You’re always such a good boy for me.”

Just like that, the lines between us blurred. By some unspoken agreement, we’d always kept the two halves of our lives separate, each of us knowing when to shift in and out of

our respective roles. In our bed, I knelt to him. Outside of it, things were altogether different.

But now, the two worlds blended. It was like trying to stand upright while the ground slid and crumbled under my feet. I couldn't allow it. *The crown never leaves a king's head.* If I let him challenge me this way, nothing between us would ever be the same.

"Watch your mouth, General," I said through clenched teeth.

My back hit the door before I could blink. He picked me up and pinned me there, three hundred pounds of warrior vampire pressing me into the wood while my head was still spinning. His strong arms gripped me around the thighs, and his breastplate dug into my chest. He hitched me higher and flashed his fangs.

"I should fuck you against this door," he growled. "Let my men hear how well you take it."

His breach of protocol was so, so wrong. His arrogance infuriating. But his dick was hard and his scent—leather and sword oil and sweat and *him*—overflowed my lungs. I opened my mouth to spit an order and ended up smashing my lips to his.

The kiss was wilder than any of our previous ones. Hot and competitive. A furious clash of tongues and fangs. I drew his blood. He drew mine right back. I gripped his thick biceps, and then I grabbed his face and fought him with my lips and teeth. The room filled with our grunts and the subtle creaking of the leather fastenings that held his armor in place. He worked his hips, grinding our dicks together.

At last, I needed air, and I threw my head back, gasping as he trailed his mouth down my neck. His stubble scraped mine, his lips searing a fiery trail to the fur that had grown much too hot.

"Fuck me," I rasped. I didn't care who heard. We'd been in the storage room so long, his men probably already assumed he'd bent me over the armorer's worktable. "Please, baby."

He stiffened. Lifted his head and stared at me with bloodied lips.

I leaned in to kiss him again.

“No.” He dropped my legs and stepped back, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he caught his breath.

I grabbed two handfuls of his cloak. “Come here—”

“I *said* no.” He gripped my wrists and shoved me hard against the door. Put his face in mine. “If you want to fuck, go fuck your wife.”

For a second, I was too angry to move. I wanted to punch his face. Instead, I shoved him back. “You are such a fucking asshole.”

“And you’re a liar,” he bit out. “What a pair we make.” He tossed me a savage look and turned away. With short, jerky movements, he straightened his clothes and smoothed his hair.

I leaned against the door, fury and lust like hot wires in my veins.

He turned back but kept his gaze on a spot over my shoulder. “I request formal permission to escort my sister to my estate for her wedding.”

So many unspoken things crowded the space between us. The Rift. The Thicket. The Deepnight. Given. The elven blood that bound the two of them whether they liked it or not. I couldn’t deny I’d lied to him. I’d planned to wed her from the start, and now he knew it. Secrets were dangerous things. Like water, they could tunnel under even the strongest foundation and send the structure above crumbling to ruin.

“You’ll be careful,” I said quietly.

His eyes flicked to mine. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“And you’ll return.”

“Yes.”

He was impressive in his armor. All that muscle and power. His head nearly scraped the beams that crisscrossed the ceiling. The first time I’d led him to the secret room at the top

of the hidden stairs in my bedchamber, he'd trembled as I knelt and took him into my mouth.

"My father..." he'd whispered.

I'd run a hand up his thick thigh. *"Isn't here."* His fingers had twisted in my hair. At sixteen, his hands were already callused from working with a sword. I'd wanted to feel those little pads of rough skin everywhere. *"It's just us, and in this room we can be anything we want. Do anything we want."*

His fingers had tightened in my hair. *"My father can go places others can't."*

I'd heard that rumor about Valen of Lar Keiren. The formidable general. A cruel vampire who ripped out his enemies' throats on the battlefield. Some whispered he knew things he couldn't possibly know.

But at sixteen, I hadn't wanted to think about my father's general.

No, my thoughts had centered solely on the general's son. So I'd stood and pulled Varick into my arms. He'd shuddered as our cocks met, and he'd rested his forehead on my shoulder.

"Do you want this?" I murmured.

His groan filled the room. *"You have no idea, Your Highness."*

"I'm no prince tonight," I'd said, smiling into his hair. *"I'm yours...and our fathers will never know."*

But, of course, I'd been wrong.

I looked at him now, my memories replaced with the real thing. The passage of time hadn't dampened my desire. All those years ago, we'd vowed to watch out for each other no matter the circumstances. And now he refused to stand at my side as I took a queen. I couldn't be certain how much of his pique stemmed from his fears about Given's elven blood and how much sprang from the threat a female posed to our relationship. The idea of losing him because of this decision was like sharp claws sinking into my chest.

"I don't like it when you're gone," I said suddenly. "I..."

His lips parted. A line appeared between his brows.

“...miss you,” I finished.

Golden eyes hardened. “I’ll return once Evelina is wed.”
He swept past me and wrenched open the door.

Then he was gone, leaving nothing but silence and snowflakes in his wake.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

VARICK

An hour outside Lar Katerin, the only sources of light were the moon and the few torches my knights' squires carried as we rode. The road leading north from the city was frozen solid. Wagons and carriages had carved deep ruts in the mud. The grooves were treacherous for most horses, but the big warhorses were surefooted enough to stay out of trouble. Still, our progress was slow. And bitterly cold.

Wind screamed past my head, turning the inside of my helmet into a frozen tomb. One of the joys of wearing armor in the winter. You still sweat like a pig, but the moisture turns to ice and sticks to your skin. I squinted into the distance, mentally calculating the time until our next stop. The men would need to change their undershirts and air out their boots. At least Evelina was comfortable. She had two of her women with her, the three of them bundled in furs with heated rocks tucked near their feet.

I had to assume my sister was well. She hadn't spoken to me since I informed her she was soon to become the Lady of Lar Plestes. I'd hoped for a better outcome in our relationship, but it wasn't to be. All I could do was see her safely wed.

"Rider!"

The shout came from the rear. My knights moved quickly, the night echoing with the rasp of steel on steel as swords were drawn and horses were fanned into a defensive formation.

A sole rider trotted up the road. As the figure came into view, I cursed under my breath.

“Stand down,” I told my men. I sheathed my sword and spurred my horse forward, moving down the rows of knights. When I was past the carriage, I reined in and leveled a look at a bedraggled Jordan of Twyl.

“Brother Jordan. What an unexpected pleasure.”

“The Lord favors—” He clamped his mouth shut, his wind-reddened cheeks going a shade darker. “General.” He cleared his throat. “I heard you were traveling to your family’s estate in the north.”

I stayed silent, my gloved hands resting on my pommel.

If possible, he flushed harder. “Well, um, you might remember I swore an oath to serve you.”

“I remember.”

He cast his gaze over the carriage and the assembled knights. He swallowed hard as his eyes settled back on me. “As your sworn man, my place is by your side, my lord. I would ride with you to Lar Keiren.”

The wind picked up, turning the snow into tiny daggers that pelted every inch of exposed skin. The tip of Jordan’s nose was red. His dark curls were plastered to his head. He wore the robes of the Brotherhood, the rough fabric flapping about his legs.

I nudged my horse forward until the beast stood alongside his. My knee brushed his robes. He peered up at me with wide blue eyes that held more than a little uncertainty and a healthy dose of fear. Snow dusted his lashes.

I grunted. “Some Wesyfeddan you are, dressed for a stroll in Beldurn.”

Some of the tension eased from his shoulders. “I rushed from the palace... I didn’t prepare for the journey.”

“Obviously.”

He gave me a hopeful look. “So I can come?”

“I can hardly send you back.” I lowered my voice. “What do you seek at Lar Keiren? And don’t even think about lying

to me.”

He had the good grace to look sheepish. “Your family’s castle is rumored to house some of the oldest books in the kingdom. I wouldn’t mind taking a look. But even without the library, I’d still want to go with you. I swear it on my oath.”

His words held the ring—and scent—of truth. Having him along might prove amusing. His presence could be a distraction from the monotony of the road—and my wayward thoughts.

“I’m not traveling the length of the kingdom with a male in a dress,” I said gruffly. Just as his face fell, I added, “One of the younger squires probably has something you can borrow. A pair of britches, at least. Have you ever seen a frostbitten scrotum, Brother Jordan?”

He blanched. “No, my lord.”

“I assure you, it’s possible to freeze your balls off in a non-metaphorical way. I doubt you want to experience it firsthand.”

“Nor anything close to it,” he said weakly. He shifted in the saddle, like he was reassuring himself his parts were still intact.

I nodded. “We’ll go for another few hours before we make camp. You’re welcome to ride in the carriage with the women.”

He squared his shoulders. “I prefer horseback, my lord.”

I hid a smile. I hadn’t meant to insult his manhood. But apologizing would only make it worse, so I kept my mouth shut.

I turned and made eye contact with one of my captains. The big male rode forward at once. His gaze roved over Jordan, but he kept his expression neutral as he pulled his horse to a halt.

“Yes, General?” Snow dusted his shoulders and lodged in the crevices of the night-blooming rose on his breastplate.

“Brother Jordan will be making the journey with us. He needs something warmer to wear.”

“Consider it done.”

As the captain rode off, Jordan offered me a shy smile, a hint of dimple appearing. “Thank you, my lord. You won’t regret this.”

I wheeled my horse around. “Perhaps not.” The wind whistled sharply, sending a gust of white powder into the air. “But you might.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

GIVEN

The carriage moved slowly through the streets of Lar Katerin. I sat alone, my bouquet of night-blooming roses on the empty seat opposite mine. Snow flew outside under a cold winter sun, but the carriage was warm. A bead of sweat trickled down my back. I leaned into the seat to stop the moisture's descent.

"Are you nervous, Your Highness?" one of the serving girls had asked this morning as she helped me dress. My face must have provided the answer, because she'd pressed a goblet into my hands. *"Blood-wine with a little something extra."*

I'd downed it without thinking—something I regretted now. I had no way of knowing if the "something extra" was responsible for the warmth spreading under my skin, but the interior of the carriage felt like a prison.

Or maybe that was just the knowledge of what lay at the end of my journey.

Laurent had wasted no time planning our wedding. In the space of forty-eight hours, he'd summoned the heads of all the noble houses, set the palace staff preparing a feast, and arranged for a lavish ceremony in the Sanctum.

I knew why he hurried. News traveled quickly. By now, Rolund was probably aware of my decision to marry without his permission. He might already be assembling his army. If Laurent and I delayed, it would create an opportunity for my brother to stop our union from going forward.

Normally, Rolund would be within his rights to start a war over my unsanctioned wedding. But he'd sent me over the Rift. Put me into Laurent's hands.

Plotted my death.

I twisted my fingers together in my lap. "*The savior of the realm will be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift.*" Crasor had recited it as if he'd said it many times before. But what did it mean? "Realm" could refer to Sithistra or Nor Doru. It might even mean Wesyfedd or Eldenvalla, although I doubted it.

But I doubted everything, including my decision to become Laurent's queen.

My heart pounded as I looked at the throngs of lowpeople outside the window. They lined the streets, slowing the carriage's progress. The king's wedding and the coronation of a new queen were unparalleled events, and the city had been celebrating for two days. Animals had been slaughtered in markets throughout the city, and blood-wine flowed from great casks Laurent's knights had set up on every corner.

Knights from the warrior class walked alongside the carriage, serving as a deterrent to anyone drunk or foolish enough to get too close. But their presence did nothing to dampen the roar of the crowd. The noise was deafening.

Little by little, the carriage creaked forward. The interior grew stuffier. Eventually, I leaned back and closed my eyes. Lulled by the carriage's gentle rocking, I drifted off.

A gust of cold air hit my face.

I jerked awake just as Laurent's frame filled the open door. He wore his ruby-studded crown, and his eyes were as pale as the muted sky I glimpsed behind him. Between his crown and his black, fur-lined mantle, he looked every inch a king.

"Oh! Forgive me, Your Grace." I pushed myself upright and smoothed my heavy skirts.

Faint amusement touched his expression. "You fell asleep on the way to our wedding? I'm not sure that's a good sign, Princess."

I bit my lip as I reached for my bouquet. “I didn’t sleep very well last night.”

His features softened. “A common affliction of brides-to-be, I’m told.” His eyes moved over me. “You look beautiful. The kind of queen I envisioned as a boy.”

The words warmed me. I looked down, letting my hair swing forward to obscure my burning cheeks. According to the servants, it was Nor Doruvian tradition for royal brides to wear their hair unbound. Nothing would touch my head until Laurent crowned me. My gown was a rich black with long sleeves and a bodice that plunged in a deep vee, revealing the sides of my breasts and most of my stomach.

Elissa would faint if she could see me.

Laurent extended a bearded hand. “Come. The nobles are waiting, and there’s nothing more dangerous than hungry people in their finest clothes. If the blood-wine doesn’t start flowing soon, the lords on my council might foment a rebellion.”

He escorted me inside the Sanctum. Its glittering obsidian exterior was matched by more glossy black stone on the inside. The walls soared to impossible heights, and the ceiling was supported by massive columns cut in a way that made the inky-colored stone reflect the light.

There were no lowpeople inside. Just nobles—and far more than I’d seen at court. The men wore night-blooming roses pinned to fine, quilted jackets. The ladies were like a field of wildflowers, their clinging, low-cut dresses dyed every color of the rainbow. Rowena and her husband were absent. According to the servants, they had returned to Lar Kessa, where they would remain for the winter.

“The south is with you.”

I looked at the Sanctum’s black columns. *Not anymore.*

Laurent guided me down the long aisle, which was carpeted in rose petals. The scent perfumed the air as we crushed them under our feet. The High Priest, Petru, waited

before an altar covered in red candles. More than a dozen priests in black robes fanned out on either side of him.

My hands might have shaken if not for the flowers and Laurent's grip on my fingers. He nodded to nobles as we passed, but our procession was silent except for the whisper of my gown and the shifting of the rose petals. Before I knew it, we stood before Petru, who motioned for us to kneel.

The ceremony was brief and simple. I pledged my loyalty and obedience to Laurent. He vowed to protect and provide for me.

There were no words of love. No mention of affection.

After we said our vows, Laurent stood and placed a black circlet of woven night-blooming roses on my bowed head. Petru stepped forward with another priest at his side. The High Priest dipped his thumb in a small golden bowl and touched it to my forehead. The scent of blood hit my nostrils.

"Rise, Given, Queen of Nor Doru. Wife to Laurent, King of Nor Doru and Vessel of the Sacred Blood."

I stood. Laurent brought my hand to his lips. He kissed my knuckles before turning me to face the crowd. He looked out over the throng and raised his voice. "My queen, Given of Nor Doru."

"Given of Nor Doru!" the crowd shouted as one.

The Sanctum erupted in thunderous applause.

Relief poured through me. *It's over.* I'd done my part, and it hadn't been bad at all. Now I could relax and look forward to the feast.

As the crowd continued to cheer, Laurent kissed my knuckles again. "One more thing to do, my sweet." He made eye contact with Petru and gave a slight nod. The High Priest gestured to the robed men around him. They moved toward a small, open doorway behind the altar.

"Come," Laurent said, tugging me in their wake.

My pulse leapt as I allowed myself to be led. "Where are we going?" Behind us, the nobles kept applauding.

Laurent said nothing. Just laced his fingers more tightly with mine and pulled me through the door and into a second, smaller room. This one held another altar. But there was also a strange-looking platform with a canopy. Sheer black curtains hung from all four sides, not quite obscuring the interior. The priests gathered around it.

But there were also women. Their heads were completely covered. Their black robes were cut close to their bodies, and black veils covered their faces. The material was sheer, though, allowing me to see their features.

Priestesses. I didn't need to ask. It was obvious what they were. The Quiet Ones from the Wastes. Unlike the priests, they took vows of celibacy and silence.

My steps faltered. "Laurent..."

He turned in a swirl of black mantle. His expression was indecipherable, but his hand on my jaw was gentle as he cupped my chin. "This is necessary, Given," he murmured. "Do as I say and it will be over quickly."

My stomach lurched. "What's necessary? What is happening?"

His thumb pressed over my lips, stilling my questions. He held my gaze and spoke softly. Deliberately. "The ceremony is not over. I know you're unfamiliar with our faith. I'll remedy that, but for now I need you to cooperate, because this is important. You vowed to obey me. Your duties start now." He released my face but kept hold of my hand. My options were to let him pull me toward the altar or dig in my heels and make a scene. The latter would only earn me embarrassment. Laurent might be my husband now, but he was still the king. I was his guest before. Now I was his subject.

Numbness stole over me as we rounded the end of the platform. Inside the curtains lay a bed with a white sheet stretched over it. That was it.

But it was enough. There was no ambiguity about what this was.

My blood ran cold, then hot. The priestesses arranged themselves around the altar, which was covered in the same red candles as the one in the main part of the Sanctum. But there was also a bleached white skull—and obviously a vampire skull with its long fangs. Red wax dripped down the obsidian like slow-moving streaks of blood.

The urge to flee was overpowering. My muscles tensed, and I half-turned, almost managing to twist my hand from Laurent's grip. But just when I might have run, two priests moved behind me. One was the giant who had tried to stop me from entering Laurent's chamber.

The rest surrounded Laurent and began removing his clothes. He held my stare as they worked, stripping him with nothing but the sputter of candles and the whisper of cloth filling the room. Slowly, he was revealed to me. He was smooth and golden everywhere, his muscled body a work of art. Most men looked smaller without clothes, but he was the reverse. Broad shoulders led to a chiseled chest and taut abs. His ribs tapered to a trim waist and muscular thighs. He was beautiful, his eyes like polished metal as the priests untied and unbuttoned and unpinned. He was completely bare between his legs, and it was both unexpected and deeply alluring.

He was fully erect, his shaft rigid and tipped with a broad head. Moisture glistened at the tip.

My face heated...and the heat spread everywhere, winding its way through my limbs and leaving me trembling.

The priests retreated behind the platform. Then the priestesses came forward, and my stomach did a violent flip.

My turn.

One of the women circled me and began undoing the long line of buttons that ran down my back. Two others knelt before me in puddles of black robes. They were young, their faces lovely under their veils. One lifted my skirts to my waist while the other removed my shoes. I flinched when her fingers moved to my thighs and untied my garters, her knuckles brushing my skin. I'd been attended by servants my whole life.

Dressed and undressed and bathed. But never had I been nude in the presence of strangers...or men.

And the priestesses weren't preparing me for a bath. Laurent and I were going to mount that platform...and then he was going to mount me.

My clothing took longer to remove than Laurent's, but the women seemed in no rush. Their touches were light and gentle, and the swish of their robes was strangely soothing. One gathered my hair and held it to the side so the priestess behind me could undo the last of my buttons.

Laurent's gaze never left mine. It became a lifeline—twin pools of silver I wanted to dive into.

My dress fell away, then my chemise and drawers. One of the priestesses brushed the side of my bare breast as she lifted my camisole over my head. The Sanctum was warm, but my nipples puckered, the pink tips hard points in the lower half of my vision. My breasts trembled as I drew rapid breaths. Gentle hands removed the circlet from my head. Another set of hands smoothed my hair back into place. I stared at Laurent with my heart thumping loudly in my ears and a strange tingling spreading through my limbs.

He broke my stare when a priestess brought him an obsidian dagger. He took it—and his demeanor changed. Like smoke shifting in the air, his movements grew methodical. Reverent. It was like he moved underwater, his body flowing with currents I couldn't see. He turned to the altar and bowed his head. Murmured something in that sibilant tongue that made the fine hairs on my body stand on end. When he turned back, his eyes gleamed like moonlight. He drew one of the curtains aside.

“On your back, my queen.”

Fresh heat entered my cheeks. The curtains offered a measure of privacy, but they didn't shield everything. The priests were a cluster of black robes and long beards along the back wall. The priestesses joined them as Laurent helped me onto the bed.

Dagger in hand, he climbed in after me, and for one terrifying moment I thought he might plunge it into my heart. But he wedged himself between my thighs and sat on his heels. Now I was spread open, my innermost secrets bared to his gaze—and the gazes of the priests and priestesses. My heart raced and my body heated.

And the warm air of the Sanctum caressed the moisture between my thighs.

The moment I felt it, a barrier crumbled. My nipples tightened even more, and a gasp escaped me before I could stop it. I was aroused in front of all these people. Maybe *because* of all these people, I realized with a mixture of shame and heat. A remnant of embarrassment squirmed through me, but it was nothing compared to the lust that throbbed in all the places I was supposed to keep private. Spread out like a sacrifice with Laurent poised over me, the dagger glittering in his hand, I felt lush and wicked. Nothing but sheer black panels separated the bed from the eyes of the priests and priestesses. They were a wall of black robes and gleaming eyes. On the other side of the platform, candles dripped red. The vampire skull grinned.

“Look at me,” Laurent said, and his voice rippled with power that snapped my gaze to his. It was the same as the night of the dinner. Varick’s words rose in my memory. *“If he wasn’t king he’d be High Priest of the Sanctum.”* If I’d had any doubts, they were put to rest now. Power crackled over my skin, delivering little shocks as if I’d touched metal after walking across one of the palace carpets.

Laurent held the blade of the dagger vertically against his lips and made a slow, shallow cut from the top to the bottom. Blood welled and dripped down his chin. A few drops splashed onto my chest. The scent of his blood hit my nostrils. My fangs lengthened in response. I opened my mouth and hissed.

His eyes went heavy-lidded. He spoke in his priestly language again, his blood-stained fangs showing. More blood dripped onto my breasts as he leaned over me and drew the

blade down my lips, leaving a line of fire that matched the one building between my legs.

Vampires are mortal the same as men.

I wasn't so sure I believed it now.

Gaze locked with mine, he gripped his shaft. Then he drew the dagger across his weeping tip, cutting the velvety-looking skin just above his slit. He smeared the blood and pearly white moisture over the swollen head. Then he covered my body with his and kissed me. Our tongues met in a tangled, bloody dance. My breasts smashed against his chest, my nipples growing even tighter. The sparks continued firing over my skin, but now they crackled down my throat as his blood entered my veins.

Arousal struck deeper. Harder. I whimpered, and the sound echoed around the small chamber, reminding me we weren't alone. But the strange, potent desire that had taken hold of me reveled in it. *Wanted* it. I arched against his weight, spreading my legs shamelessly. His manhood nudged my entrance and slipped against the slickness there.

He trailed his lips down my neck, trailing hot blood that cooled as the air hit it. As he nuzzled my throat, I turned my head toward the priests and priestesses. Dozens of glowing eyes met mine.

Laurent struck.

The orgasm took me by surprise. I arched hard, crying out as my vision went blurry. The waves started in my neck and frazzled down to my hot, wet center. I rolled my hips, needing...more. *Something*.

He knew. He pulled his fangs from my throat but left the wound open. "*Levu,*" he rasped—and he thrust to the hilt inside me.

Another orgasm slammed into me, stretching my mouth wide on a soundless scream. The world tipped, then righted itself. He fell into a hard, fast rhythm, his thrusts making the curtains dance. The ladies of Rolund's court always whispered about how painful sex was. How it was something to be

endured. I felt no pain, only the exquisite, relentless rush of a never-ending release. Just as one wave crested, another built. With every thrust, his shaft stroked the slippery button of desire between my legs.

He held his wrist to my lips. "Bite."

I clamped down. His blood gushed down my throat, making me scream against his skin.

"*Levu,*" he said again, then sealed his mouth over his previous bite and sucked.

Something wrapped around my chest, like invisible hands had circled my torso with a leather strap. It squeezed tight, cutting off my air. Then it released. But it didn't disappear. It settled under my skin and stayed there.

Wind ripped through the room, blowing the platform's curtains wide open. The priests and priestesses saw everything now. Laurent pumping between my splayed thighs. His fangs buried in my neck. My fangs embedded in his wrist. And they heard everything. The slap of his hips against my skin. The slick sound of the moisture between my legs. His grunts and my cries. Our labored breaths and the rhythmic rocking of the platform.

He released my neck as he pulled his wrist from my mouth. He swiped his tongue over the puncture marks, then levered himself above me. Sweat sheened his shoulders. The cut on his lips had already healed. I knew mine was only scabbed over. The flesh stung and pulled as I struggled to catch my breath. My breasts bounced wildly, and I whimpered as the sensitive tips scraped his chest.

He thrust harder, his movements growing uncoordinated. The tendons in his neck strained. After a few more punishing thrusts, he threw his head back and shouted. At the same moment, scalding-hot seed flooded me.

He stayed in position for a long moment, his mouth open, fangs scraping his bottom lip. Slowly, he lowered his head and met my gaze. The possessiveness and triumph I saw there stole my breath.

“Now we are wed, my queen.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

VARICK

“**N**ow you are wed.”

The priest faced the sparse crowd in the Lar Keiren family temple and lifted his arms. “I give you the Lord and Lady of Lar Plestes,” he said warmly.

There was a smattering of applause, almost all of it from the Lar Plestes side. Jordan and I stood among a small knot of servants and lowpeople from the village. As if he realized how pathetic our efforts sounded compared to the Lar Plestes’ contingent, Jordan clapped harder. After a second, he put his fingers to his lips and whistled sharply.

Martin of Lar Plestes—big and bearded and dressed in full Nor Doruvian armor—grinned. Evelina did her best to murder Jordan with her eyes.

The ex-brother didn’t seem to notice. Or perhaps his experience with sisters rendered him immune to such looks. He continued clapping until the new couple had swept from the temple.

As the meager crowd began to filter outside, I shot him a look of my own. “You’ve made your point.”

He was the picture of innocence. “It was a beautiful ceremony, my lord. You must be happy it came together so smoothly.”

I grunted as I pulled on my gloves. “I’m happy it’s over.” Evelina hadn’t spoken to me the entire journey to Lar Keiren. Unfortunately, Jordan had filled the miles with abundant conversation, hardly pausing to take a breath. He told stories

of the Towers of the Mir and the stuffy rules of the Brotherhood. As irritating as his endless chatter could be, he had a way with words. Not long into the journey, my knights were jostling for position so they could ride near him.

I understood their reasons. It was a boring journey, and the weather was bitterly cold this close to the Wastes. Jordan was an entertaining distraction—and he didn't complain. The latter had surprised me. Riding the length of Nor Doru on horseback was a grueling experience for anyone, let alone a Wesyfeddan accustomed to life in the Brotherhood. But he'd endured without incident.

Pale winter sunlight spilled onto the temple's obsidian floor as we reached the doorway. Jordan's stare was like a weight pressing against my face.

I stopped. "What."

"What? Nothing. My lord."

I sighed. "I've trained hundreds of squires, Brother Jordan. I know when a lad has something to say."

A frown flitted through his eyes. "I'm hardly a lad. I'm twenty-seven."

"Good for you. Now spit it out."

"Fine. When will we return to Lar Katerin?"

He'd been working up to ask. I'd sensed his restlessness over the past couple of days, and I knew the question was coming. We'd been in Lar Keiren for close to two weeks. Evelina and Martin would depart for the Lar Plestes estate in the morning. My steward was a trustworthy male who had everything in hand. There was no reason for me to linger. Worse, a storm could sweep down from the north and bury us under a dozen feet of snow. If that happened, we might be stuck in Lar Keiren for a month.

It might not be so bad. Northerners were always prepared for such things. The castle was well-stocked, with plenty of cured meats and barrels of blood-wine in the cellar. The great hall was a pleasant place to pass the time. Quiet. The opposite of Laurent's court, where privacy was rarer than solstone.

“My lord?” Jordan ventured.

“I’m thinking, damn you,” I snapped. My voice boomed down the temple’s steps and over the snow-dusted grass where plenty of nobles still clustered. Heads turned at my outburst.

Jordan’s blue eyes went wide. “I didn’t mean...” He gulped. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want your fucking apology,” I said under my breath. I strode down the temple’s steps and past the curious nobles. Bunch of busybodies. They were probably starved for entertainment. News traveled slowly in this part of the kingdom.

Unless the news was about the king’s wedding and the coronation of his queen. We’d received word of *that* just yesterday. Given of Sithistra was now Given of Nor Doru. Long live the queen.

I walked without considering where I was going, and soon my boots sank into the sand that bordered the western side of the estate. The beach stretched the full length of the Bitter Sea, which fed into the Morinlor Ocean. The sea was aptly named. Although beautiful, the beach was next to useless, since the water was always too cold for swimming. The Morinlor was warmer in the south, but it encircled Eldenvalla. Ships that ventured into those waters never returned. Every few years, some enterprising young merchant stupidly set sail from the Port of Lar Keiren hoping to hug the coast of the dead kingdom and discover untold riches. Those fools were never heard from again.

Wind tore at my hair and cloak as I faced the sea. Tall waves rushed in and crashed onto the sand. The surf raced forward and kissed the tips of my boots. The water was beautiful and deadly. The coast of Lar Keiren was littered with rocks that could spell doom for even the most experienced sailors. When ships broke up, they rarely washed ashore. The current swept the wood and cargo out to sea, leaving only memories on the shore.

Memories rose around me now—shouts and torches and the rasp of steel on steel. There was a reason I rarely returned

to this place. Had only done so now to do my duty by Evelina. Martin of Lar Plestes was a fine knight with seven generations of pure, untainted warrior blood running through his veins. Any children they produced would be vampires...and nothing else.

At least that was my hope. It was the second-best option. No matter how hard I tried, I could never bring myself to consider the first one. Not for her.

But for me...

The water beckoned, the waves climbing higher. A male could freeze in those icy depths within minutes. My cloak snapped around my ankles. The heavy fabric caught on my sword belt, jostling the dagger strapped to my side. Looking down, I grasped the handle. The bloodstones were flush with the grip, but I squeezed hard enough to make the gems dig into my skin.

I drew the blade. The metal appeared to shift in the light, dull silver rolling over itself. A pretty illusion, but make-believe all the same.

“I’ve never seen one of those.”

I spun, the dagger raised. Jordan threw up his hands. He backed up a step, his boots sinking into the sand.

I lowered the blade. Anger replaced my shock. “Do you know how dangerous it is to sneak up on me?”

“I wasn’t sneaking. I mean, I wasn’t trying to.” He glanced at the water. “I was...worried about you.”

For a second, the only sounds were the wind and waves. His blue eyes were the same shade as the sea—and they saw far too much.

“Don’t be,” I grunted, sheathing the blade.

“That’s elven steel.”

I looked at him. “I thought you said you’d never seen it before.”

“Not in person.”

“Books, then. The ones you weren’t supposed to read?”

A smile touched his mouth. “Something like that.”

More silence. I drew my cloak more tightly around me, then jerked my head toward the castle that perched on a craggy cliff above the beach. “The servants will be setting out the feast. If you want to eat, you should head back. Lar Plestes and his knights eat like pigs.”

His gaze darted to the water again. “Respectfully, my lord, I’d just as soon stay here. I can walk back up when you’re ready.”

Awareness crept over me. I took a step toward him. “What are you on about, Jordan?”

“I’m not leaving you here by yourself.”

“Then let me make this plain. I don’t want company.”

His boyish features hardened. “I know what that dagger is. And I know what happened on this beach.” He drew a deep breath. “I told King Laurent I would make sure you didn’t visit the shore alone.”

Anger rose hot and swift. In a blink, I gripped his jacket in both fists. “Laurent sent you? He told you to spy on me?”

“Not spy on you. Keep you safe.”

I dragged him up so his face was level with mine. “I warned you not to dig. You swore an oath to me. How dare you go behind my back and seek information from Laurent.”

“The king told me nothing,” he said, his gaze unflinching. “You’re a Child of Prophecy, Lord Varick. The Brotherhood doesn’t stop at predicting a person’s birth. They observe. They follow. They know your father tried to kill Laurent on this very beach. They know he turned his wrath on you when you stepped between him and the prince. They know it wasn’t the first time, and that your back bears scars so deep and twisted they will never heal. They know something dark lived inside him. You think it lives in you, too, but I’m telling you that’s not true. And if you think I’m going to let you walk into that water, you’re dead wrong.”

“I wasn’t going to drown myself.”

He shoved his face closer to mine. “Bullshit. The stench of that lie is so thick, even I can smell it.”

My fangs lengthened. I seized his throat. “Shut up.”

“You’re worth saving,” he rasped, those blue eyes sharper than any blade. “You are worthy of love.”

“I said shut up!”

“Just because Laurent hasn’t said it—”

My roar cut him off. I tackled him to the ground and snarled in his face. “You think you know everything, you miserable little shit. Well, here’s a new story you can carry back to the Towers of the Mir. The scars on my back don’t linger because they’re deep. The night my father tried to kill Laurent, I stabbed my sire through the heart. He lay dying in the hall up on that cliff, but he was elven-born and his gift was farseeing. Do you know what that means? He appeared dead but he wasn’t. Not yet. And with his remaining strength, he left his body and appeared to the last of his men who were still loyal to him. The ones Laurent hadn’t managed to capture yet. My father, ever disgusted by my *unnatural desires* as he called them, ordered his knights to drag me down here, beat me, and rape me. And they did, Brother Jordan. One after another. They flayed my back to shreds and pinned me down and took turns bugging me. Then they left me for dead.”

Jordan’s face went deathly pale. He hadn’t known. The truth gleamed in his eyes. So did pity.

The last turned my fury into blinding rage. Scarcely aware of what I was doing, I jerked his head to the side and buried my fangs in his neck. Hot blood filled my mouth—and it sizzled with power. Pure, undiluted magic. Warm, wild wind and rich soil tilled from deep under the forest floor. Glacial streams and sapphires put to flame. My eyes watered. The taste was so potent, I immediately recoiled. I drew back, blood dripping down my chin.

“Mage,” I croaked, my heart pounding harder than it had the day I earned my spurs.

He met my gaze calmly, seemingly undisturbed by my attack.

“You’re a myth,” I said.

Faint amusement gleamed in his eyes. “You’re the last person who should accuse me of not existing.”

I moved off him, sitting hard on my ass in the sand. He sat up more slowly. His blue gaze was steady as I swiped his blood off my chin. The wound on his neck bled freely.

“I should fix that,” I said gruffly, nodding toward the puncture marks. He tilted his head, exposing his neck. His trust filled me with a squirming, hot emotion I recognized as shame. I leaned in and sealed the wound. “I apologize for... that.”

“It’s all right.” He brushed his fingers over the spot. “I’ve never been fed from until now.”

“Never?”

He smiled a little. “My kind value secrecy.”

I swallowed, tasting more of his blood. “Does the Brotherhood—?”

“Know about us? No, and we like it that way.” He studied me. “You know your histories, Lord Varick, probably more than anyone outside the Towers or the Sanctum. The Brotherhood ran mages out of their ranks hundreds of years ago. There was a time when the Towers embraced magic. It was a good thing, too, considering it was mages who raised the Thicket. But no organization is immune from power struggles. The factions who distrusted magic grew powerful in the decades after Eldenvalla fell.” He shrugged. “Eventually, they got their way. Mages left the Brotherhood and disappeared into the pages of history. And then we became a myth, much like yourself.”

“Except here we are, speaking to each other,” I rasped.

His smile grew, revealing his dimple. “Yes. Here we are.”

“If you want to stay hidden, why join the Brotherhood?”

He sobered. “You’re not the only one who grew up in the shadow of the Thicket.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Dark forces are moving in those trees, Lord Varick. Old threats are stirring. My people believe you and Princess Given have important roles to play in the events to come. Although, I suppose she’s Queen Given now.”

His declaration didn’t surprise me as much as it should have. Magic ran through my veins, too. And I’d known there was something different about Given the moment I realized she heard the voice at the Rift.

But Jordan clearly had more details than I possessed. “What does that mean?” I demanded. “What events do you speak of?”

“We’re not totally sure. But there is a reason you, Laurent, and Given were brought together. That much I know.”

I huffed and looked out at the water. “The three of us.”

“You love him,” Jordan said softly.

My throat tightened. “From almost the moment I met him,” I told the sea. “He...found me. That night.”

Jordan was silent for a long moment. When he spoke at last, his voice was soft. “And he saved you?”

“He did. He fed me but it wasn’t enough to heal everything.” Another wave crested and broke against the shore. “He’d already used so much of his power. He left to fetch thralls, and I dragged myself into the water.”

Jordan sucked in a breath.

“The salt sealed the wounds in my back,” I said. “It burned, but I wanted to hurt. I wanted to sink to the bottom like the shipwrecks I watched as a boy. But Laurent wouldn’t let me. He dragged me onto the shore. Pounded my chest until I puked up seawater. Then he made me swear on elven steel that I would never try to take my life again.”

Silence fell. Jordan was quiet for so long, I wondered if he’d left. But when I turned my head, he was still there. His dark curls were rumped. Sand dusted his shoulders.

“What are you capable of?” I asked.

He was silent a moment longer. Then he scooped a handful of sand into his palm. “My magic is rooted in the earth. It’s the reason mages were able to raise the Thicket.” He squeezed his fist. When he opened it, a small, white flower rested on his palm.

I touched a petal. “You don’t see many of these this far north.”

“No,” he murmured, “you have to go south for that.”

I looked up to find him watching me. “I don’t know what to expect when I return,” I said. It was more than I would have ordinarily admitted. But he knew so much about me. He probably already knew this, too. I was on uncertain ground with Laurent. His deception about the Deepnight still rankled. Briefly, I considered asking Jordan if he knew the canopy was disappearing. Just as quickly, I discarded that idea. Laurent would never share that kind of information with an outsider. If Jordan didn’t know, I wasn’t going to be the one to tell him.

But he knew about Given—and he’d clearly guessed that her presence was something of a wedge between Laurent and me.

He tipped the flower into my hand. “No magic can truly predict the future. There are too many variables. One person’s wants and desires clash with another’s. But sometimes things align a certain way for a reason. Given of Sithistra was put into *your* path, my lord. When she stepped into Nor Doru, yours was the first face she saw. Magic can be unpredictable, but sometimes it doesn’t miss.”

I regarded the tiny bloom for a moment. Finally, I curled my fingers around it and looked up. “And what of Laurent? What does magic say about him?”

Jordan’s smile was as soft as the flower tucked in my hand. “Just because you can’t see blooms like that in the Wastes doesn’t mean they’re not real.”

“I’m a soldier, Jordan. Symbolism is wasted on me.”

His dimple peeked out. "I'm not so sure about that, my lord. But let me put it this way. I don't think you'll find what you're looking for here in the north. But I have a feeling it's waiting for you in the south."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

GIVEN

When Nor Doruvians said winter was upon us, they meant it.

For five days, the snow hadn't stopped falling. All of Lar Katerin was covered in a thick blanket of white. Through the balcony doors, the fat flakes came down so fast and thick they obscured the view of the city. It was morning, but the sun was more of a suggestion than an actual presence.

I sat in a tub of warm water in front of the fire. Despite the heat, I shivered as I stared at the balcony's railing. I hadn't ventured onto it since I "visited" Sithistra. Two weeks hadn't dulled my memories of feeling locked outside my own body. Fortunately, it hadn't happened again. I wasn't even certain I could *make* it happen again. And I didn't want to. If I was honest with myself, some part of me hoped that ignoring it would make the whole problem go away.

But I knew that wasn't the case. Varick had yet to return from his family's estate, but he wouldn't stay gone forever. The issue of elven gifts would inevitably come up.

Although, there were plenty of other issues to discuss when the general came back to the palace. Like where he expected to sleep—and who would be in his bed. Laurent wasn't going to give him up, and I didn't expect him to. The question was, what did this *thing* between the three of us look like? The idea of both men excited me, but it also twisted my stomach into knots of anxiety. The passionate kiss Varick and I shared was never far from my mind.

But a kiss was one thing. Sharing a bed while my husband looked on was another. When I tried broaching the subject with Laurent, he quickly shut me down.

“I believe I told you to leave the general to me, sweet wife.”

After that mild rebuke, I stopped asking about Varick. But it was obvious his absence bothered Laurent. He wanted Varick, but he also needed him. By now, all of Beldurn was probably buzzing with the news of our wedding. And yet Laurent’s patrols reported no movement on the Sithistran side of the Rift. No amassing of troops, no spies trying to sneak into the north.

No messengers delivering correspondence from Rolund’s court. It was as if the wedding and coronation never happened. Like Rolund didn’t care that I was now Laurent’s queen.

Laurent took this as proof for his claim that Sithistrans were too frightened of the Deepnight and its vampires to wage war in the north.

But I knew my brother. This silence was far from permanent. It was the calm before a certain storm. I just didn’t know when the first bolt of lightning would strike.

Another shiver lifted goosebumps on my skin.

“Are you cold, Your Grace?”

I looked up at the serving girl who stood next to the tub. For a brief moment, the title confused me. I’d heard it often enough since I wed Laurent, but I still felt like an imposter. As if I’d borrowed someone else’s clothes.

I forced a smile. “I’m fine, thank you. Just watching the snow.”

She returned my expression, her fangs showing. “Ah yes, the first big storm of the season is usually a big one. I pray the gods send us a respite soon.”

The door opened and Laurent strode in, as resplendent as ever in head-to-toe black. He must have come from a council meeting because he wore his crown. Whatever his personal

beliefs about Sithistrans' willingness to fight, he wasn't leaving Nor Doru's defenses to chance. He'd spent a significant portion of the past two weeks locked away with his highest-ranking nobles, planning a response in the event Rolund retaliated.

The maids stopped their work and curtsied. Murmured "your graces" filled the bedchamber.

Laurent's gaze found me at once, and his eyes lit up. Without breaking my stare, he waved a lazy hand. "Leave us, ladies. I'll help the queen finish her bath."

My cheeks heated as the women tittered, dropped more curtsies, and hurried from the room. As the door closed behind them, I frowned at my husband. "Do you ever knock, my lord?"

He strolled toward me, slowly rolling his sleeves up as he advanced. His silver gaze moved from the hair piled on top of my head to my breasts bobbing on the surface. When he reached the tub, he squatted and dipped an arm in the water. I held my breath as he trailed a fingertip down my inner thigh.

"On your door?" he asked. His finger wandered lower...*a lot* lower. "No, Wife. Where you're concerned, I come as I please." He teased my clit. "And I come often."

My breath shuddered out. Instant heat curled through me. My knees fell open of their own accord, making water slosh against the sides of the tub.

"Do I not?" he asked with a raised brow. His fingers continued stroking between my legs.

"You do," I breathed.

His lips curved. He watched my face closely as his fingers continued their work. He pinched and teased and stroked. Rolled my clit between his thumb and forefinger until I gripped the edges of the tub and whimpered. He was so good at this. Since our wedding, he'd made love to me every night—and several times during the day. Each time was different. Sometimes, he took me the way he had on the platform, his big body stretched over mine and his hips pinning me to the

bed...or the floor. Other times, he sat me on top of him and ordered me to ride. When we did it that way, his eyes never left my breasts.

“These are beauties, Given,” he’d rasp, his rings catching the light as he played with my nipples. “Bounce a little harder for me, princess.”

He still called me that, but it was different now. It was *his* name for me—one he used when he wanted to be wicked. Like when I sat beside him in the great hall and he stroked my thigh under the table. Or when he wrapped my hair around his fist and showed me exactly how he liked to be sucked. Or when he found me in the hallway outside our apartments and fingered me against the wall, his free hand pressed over my mouth. “Quiet, princess,” he’d say sternly, his eyes hard as he rubbed tight circles over my aching center. “You don’t want anyone to hear, do you?” Then he’d finish me, straighten my skirts, and lick me off his fingers.

He pushed one inside me now, and the memories of all the *other* times he’d done so made me clamp down hard. “Laurent...”

“Shhh.” He lowered his mouth to my arm resting on the edge of the tub. His tongue captured the beads of moisture on my skin. One by one, he licked them up, his pink tongue darting out. I could only watch, breathless, as he reminded me what his tongue was capable of. Because some nights he didn’t just fuck me. Some nights, he spread me out on his big bed and tortured me that way—gripping me around the thighs and lapping at my sex until I pulled his hair and begged for release.

He added another finger. The water was cooling rapidly, but sweat rolled down my neck. As a fierce, trembling need built between my legs, I whimpered. “Please...”

He lifted his head. Under the water, his fingers pumped in and out slowly. “Please, what?”

My moan was equal parts desire and frustration. “You *know* what.”

“Oh?” He kissed my arm. “Tell me what I know, princess. And don’t leave anything out.”

Heat blistered through me. We’d played this game before. *His* game. The one where he forced me to state in explicit detail exactly what I wanted him to do to me. It was a game he always won.

I curled my fingers around the edges of the tub. “I want... *ah*,” I gasped as he thrust his fingers deeper. Water sloshed over my breasts, the little waves keeping time with his movements.

His breath fluttered against my arm. “I’m afraid that’s not good enough.”

“I want you to fuck me. N-Not with your fingers. With your...”

“Say it.”

“Cock.” My face burned. Somehow, after everything, I still blushed. Maybe because some part of me knew he’d only revealed a fraction of what lay in store for me in his bed. Almost from the moment we met, he’d pushed past all my boundaries. Brushed aside all the years of ladylike reserve pressed upon me in Rolund’s court. I wasn’t the same Given who stood at the edge of the Rift. I wasn’t sure who I was anymore, but I didn’t recognize that person. Laurent had turned me into someone else entirely.

“Tell me where you want my cock,” he said. “If you’re a very good girl, maybe I’ll give it to you.”

I knew the words he wanted me to say. They were words he’d taught me—whispered behind the curtains of his bed. His fingers penetrated deeper, and my breath hitched as I said, “My pussy. I want your cock in my pussy.”

His eyes gleamed. “Well, who am I to deny a lady?” In one swift move, he stood and swept me from the tub. Water poured off me and splattered on the flagstones.

I gasped and threw my arms around his neck. “You’ll get the bed all wet!”

He dumped me on the mattress and climbed in after me. His long, nimble fingers flew down the buttons of his jacket, and the way he jerked it off and flung it aside sent a fresh rush of heat to my sex. He tossed his shirt after it, then made short work of his laces. His dick popped out, and he stretched on top of me. “You mean *you’ll* get the bed all wet. Spread your legs.”

I did as he said, my hips already rolling.

“So obedient.” He stretched my arms over my head. Laced his fingers with mine and pinned my hands to the bed. He nuzzled down my neck, licking at the drops of water. He kept going, dropping open-mouthed kisses on my shoulder and the sensitive skin under my arm. It was such an intimate, untouched area. Being Laurent, he didn’t let that stop him. He nipped the side of my breast, making me squirm. “Such a dutiful queen, getting so wet for your lord. They’ll hear your pussy all the way in the kitchens.”

My groan came from so deep in my chest I didn’t recognize my voice. “Please don’t make me wait.” Because I wasn’t sure I could endure it.

He swiveled his hips, making a small adjustment that had his tip prodding my opening. “Look at me.”

My breath hitched. He said it exactly the same as he had during our wedding rite. Now, as then, his gaze burned with possessiveness. It was like he wanted me to know who claimed me.

As if I could ever forget.

He pushed inside slowly this time, stretching me with his big cock. His hard length crowded my walls as he rolled his hips, not stopping until his balls pressed snugly against my ass. His pants still clung to his hips. His crown was still nestled among his dark waves. The post in his ear gleamed a dull silver—an ever-present reminder of how skillfully he wielded the one that pierced his tongue.

But I didn’t want that right now. I wanted him to hurry up and *move*. Give me some kind of friction on my clit. That was

another word he made me say, when we lay in bed in the middle of the night. He'd bury his dark head between my thighs, and his raspy voice would drift up like lazy curls of smoke. *"If you can't say it, princess, then you can't come."*

I said it.

It was on the tip of my tongue now as he stared me down with his cock lodged deep, giving no indication he intended to deliver the relief I craved. My inner muscles clamped hard. I whimpered and tried to free my hands.

He tightened his grip and gave me a knowing look. "How do you want me?"

"Now," I breathed.

His eyes crinkled at the corners as he chuckled. "I've created a monster, it seems." Slowly, he lowered his mouth to my ear. His breath stirred the fine hairs at my temple as he began to thrust. "But as I told you once before, I think you've been one this whole time."

Sparks fired over my skin. At last, he stroked over the place where I needed him most. With every pass, my passion climbed higher. In no time at all, I was right on the cliff, my hips lifting to meet his thrusts. He moved my wrists to one hand and held my arms stretched high above my head. He paused a moment, naked admiration in his gaze as he watched my breasts bounce. Then he snaked his free hand between my legs and found my clit.

"Yes!" I squirmed as much as I could, which wasn't much. And he did it on purpose, holding me down so he could control exactly how much of his dick I received. Every time I neared the edge, he slowed down, yanking me back before I could tip over it.

The pressure between my legs was so intense, I released a strangled squeal. I bucked my hips, willing his fingers to go faster. "Please," I panted. "I'm so close. I'm going to come."

"When I say," he corrected, his voice steady despite his powerful thrusts. The muscles in his chest and shoulders

bunched as he held my wrists with one hand and fondled my clit with the other. “Only when I say.”

There was no use arguing. Or begging. The past two weeks had taught me that. He made me wait, but he finally kissed me. He drank in my cries and pitiful whimpers. He stroked the post in his tongue over mine, plundering my mouth as he quickened the pace of his thrusts.

And when he was satisfied, he reared back. Rose to his knees, grabbed my hips, and yanked me closer. He held my ankles in a wide split and fucked me. Yet another lesson from my new husband. There were different kinds of sex. Laurent was often gentle, but he was rarely sweet. He fucked. Hard and dirty. Even when he flipped up my skirts and buried his face between my legs, he fucked.

And if a quiet voice in my head wondered if he might *make love* to me one day, well, I ignored it for now. Life was far too complicated at the moment to worry about such things.

He pumped faster, his hips snapping forward so quickly they were a blur. His fangs showed between his parted lips, and his fingers around my ankles squeezed tightly. “You’ll come with me,” he growled.

I could only nod. In another man, a decree like that might be too arrogant. But Laurent had been born into power. Now that I knew just how much, his orders were simply an extension of him. Something so wholly embedded in his being it seemed as natural as breathing.

He didn’t tell me when. But he didn’t have to. He leaned forward—the slightest adjustment that made his dick pound against my clit. Two strokes and I was done. I didn’t remember closing my eyes, but I must have because the world went dark as I screamed. Distantly, I heard him roar as he came.

When it was over, he flung himself beside me. He rolled to his stomach and hugged a pillow with his face turned away. When the crown tipped off his head, I realized he was sleeping.

I lifted onto my elbow. As I studied his back, I worried my bottom lip with one fang. It was too early in the day for him to be this tired. And he never slept immediately after sex. Even in the middle of the night, he rose and brought me a cloth.

He came from meeting with the nobles.

He'd worn his crown. The most potent symbol of his authority outside of his blood magic. Maybe he wasn't as confident about Rolund as he claimed.

Irritation stirred in my chest. I was Laurent's queen. But so far, my duties seemed confined to his bed. Just because I enjoyed it there didn't mean I wanted to live in it all the time. I knew Rolund better than anyone in Nor Doru. But Laurent hadn't bothered to ask what I thought my brother might do next. He hadn't asked me about Rolund at all. I couldn't spend my life shunted off to the side like my brother's wives. And if I let Laurent get away with it now, it would always be that way between us.

I reached for his shoulder—

A knock sounded on the door. "Your Grace?" a deep male voice rumbled. I shot upright and scrambled for a sheet.

Laurent was awake at once. Cursing under his breath, he sat up and shoved a hand through his hair. "What is it?"

"Apologies for disturbing you, Your Grace, but you asked to be informed when Lord Varick returns. Sentinels spotted the general and his men a few miles outside the city. They should arrive within the hour."

Laurent had immediately tensed at the mention of Varick. He cleared his throat. "Thank you. I'll be out in a moment." Tension rolled off him as he turned to me. "I have to go."

"I know. I want you to."

His gaze sharpened. "Do you?" he asked softly. There was significance in the question. We both knew what him going to Varick meant. And we both knew my answer would determine how the future unfolded for all three of us.

“Yes.” I drew a deep breath. “I want that.” Any other arrangement would spell disaster. Deep down, I’d always known it would come to this. If I had any thought of stealing Laurent’s affection away from Varick, I would fail. So the only option was the one Laurent had suggested the day he took me to Lar Satha. Undoubtedly, he’d planted that seed on purpose. I was beginning to learn that underneath my husband’s sultry irreverence lay a calculating ruler who never did anything he didn’t plan well in advance.

He leaned in and kissed my cheek, and the slow glide of his lips against my skin made what should have been a chaste display of affection as seductive as anything else he did. When he pulled back, his eyes flickered with carnal promise. “We’ll dine in my chambers tonight.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

LAURENT

It took Varick nearly two hours to show up in the Rose Room. By the time his footsteps rang out on the stairs, I was ready to march to the Serenity Tower and fetch him myself.

But when he appeared, my irritation vanished. He wore court clothes, and his wet hair was the color of thick honey.

“You bathed,” I said. I leaned against the footboard and squeezed the wood so I wouldn’t go to him like I wanted to.

“It was a long journey. I’m surprised you didn’t smell us entering the city.”

A smile tugged at my mouth. “If their swords don’t kill you, their stench will?” Armies on the move stank worse than a rotting corpse.

“The knights in the rear were grateful for the cold.”

I hesitated. “The Deepnight—”

“Intact. I saw nothing out of the ordinary, nor did my men.”

Relief washed over me. “How are the roads in the countryside?” I sent men-at-arms to clear them, but the snow had been falling so quickly the crews couldn’t keep up.

“Passable, although the horses didn’t enjoy the drifts. It helped that we weren’t hauling a carriage on our return.”

I nodded. “Evelina is settled?”

“As much as she’ll ever be, I suppose. Lar Plestes is a good male. And infatuated with her. She’s savvy enough to use that to her advantage. He’ll follow her around like a puppy and treat her like a princess. She might not see it now, but it’s a better life than she’d ever have at court. The nobles sneer at her behind her back. I couldn’t bear it anymore.”

Evelina’s exploits had plagued Varick since she came of age. Possibly before that. She had no elven gifts to speak of, but legend said Eldenvalla had grown lascivious in its last days. I knew he worried she’d inherited a destructive kind of promiscuity. Valen had been the same, installing any number of mistresses at Lar Keiren. He’d sired no bastards as far as Varick knew, but it wasn’t for lack of trying. The stress and humiliation had sent Varick’s mother to an early grave.

“You are a good brother,” I told him now. “A fine warrior and a worthy male.” The last was an honorific reserved for the warrior class. The highest compliment a knight could give another. I’d won my spurs at a young age, but it was due more to custom than merit. I wasn’t really entitled to bestow such praise, but I did it anyway because Varick was the worthiest male I’d ever met.

He looked away. Made a noncommittal sound.

“It’s good to have you back. I don’t like it when you’re gone. I never have.”

He met my gaze again. Energy crackled between us. His throat worked as he swallowed.

“I don’t like you on that fucking beach,” I muttered. My eyes burned. “Dammit, I don’t like it when you hurt.”

We stared at each other a beat longer. Then we rushed each other. We met in the middle, clashing in a tangle of limbs and lips and feral growls. I gripped his jacket in both hands and pulled him harder against me, sealing my body to his from mouth to thigh. He grabbed my hair. Yanked my head back and plunged his tongue deep.

There was a moment when I fought his dominance. Accustomed to sleeping with Given, my first instinct was to

assert control. He responded by shoving me backward, then attacking my clothes. His hands trembled as he fumbled with the embroidered clasps that marched down the front of my jacket.

“Fucking take this off,” he growled, his impatience fogging the air. He marched me back as I obeyed, then stopped and quickly stripped out of his clothes. When we were both blissfully naked, he shoved me onto my back on the bed and climbed on top, kissing me and rubbing his leaking cock all over mine. He rubbed me everywhere, grinding his body on me while he deepened the kiss. His fang caught my tongue, and his rich blood shot down my throat.

Magic. He tasted like Given. Fuck, how were the three of us going to navigate this new world I’d created?

His hand wrapped around my dick, and my worries vanished in a jolt of raw desire.

“Fuck!” My shout echoed off the ceiling as my hips bucked. I gripped the back of his neck and squeezed, doing my best to stick my tongue down his throat. He kept it up as we kissed, working me from root to tip and back again. I spread my legs. Hooked an ankle around his thigh and thrust hard into his hand, urging him to go faster.

Instead, he released me and slid down my body, trailing kisses as he went. He bit one nipple, then the other, making me grab at his shoulders. But he wouldn’t be caught. He kept going, pausing here and there to suck at my skin while I moaned like a Gate Street whore.

At last, he reached my cock. He looked up, golden eyes flashing, and sucked me all the way into his mouth. Hot, wet heat enveloped my dick. He swallowed me whole, letting my tip hit the back of his throat. His big hands gripped my thighs, his fingers digging into the muscle. He ascended slowly, sucking so hard his cheeks hallowed. When he reached my cockhead, he swiped his tongue over the precome beading at the tip. Then he bobbed on my dick, all loud and sloppy, filling the room with wet slurps and the sound of his smacking lips.

A whimper hovered in my throat. Legs spread, I propped myself on my elbows so I could see all of him. Two weeks was too damn long to go without this.

“You’re so fucking big,” I breathed. I ran a greedy gaze over him, drinking in his wide shoulders and the golden hair on his chest. His strong jaw and tree-trunk thighs. Every muscle looked cut from stone—the product of years of training and centuries of breeding. He wrapped one sword-callused hand around my cock and worked my shaft as he sucked me down.

My balls tightened. My hole clenched in anticipation of feeling his big dick fill me up. I bit my bottom lip so hard I tasted blood.

He must have liked that, because he growled and sucked harder. He pulled off long enough to let a long string of saliva drizzle down my dick. He watched it descend, then worked it over my length before slurping me down again. He licked another swirl around my cock head, which held my heartbeat and most of the blood in my body. I had to squeeze my eyes shut because the sight of his golden stubble and his firm lips sealed around my shaft was too much. His free hand cupped my balls briefly, then dipped lower. His finger teased my hole.

My hips jerked off the bed. “Varick...” I fell back on the bed. Speared my hands through my hair and pulled at the strands until pinpricks of pain dotted my scalp. My heart raced. Shivers coursed up and down my limbs, concentrating in my thighs. “If you want to fuck me, you have to hurry up. I can’t hold out.”

For once, he didn’t argue. Probably because he was as close to losing it as I was. He released my cock with a wet *pop*, letting my dick smack against my stomach. “You brought oil?”

I lifted my head. “What do you think?”

He gave me a look as he thrust a hand under the pillows and withdrew the vial I’d stashed there. He uncorked it and dumped most of the contents on his fingers. His cock sprang proudly from the nest of golden hair between his legs. He

slicked oil over his straining shaft. “Shameless slut. Thought you were going to get fucked today, hmm?”

“You could say that.” I watched him shake out the last few drops of oil. “You think that’s going to be enough?”

He lowered himself back over me. Shoved one of my legs up and stroked slick fingers over my opening. His face was so close to mine I could see each individual eyelash. “You want to feel good or not?” he demanded, his warm breath tickling my cheek.

“I want you to hurry up and stick your fat dick in me.”

“Then shut up and let me do this.” He braced himself on his forearm as he worked me open. He was so damn good at it. The perfect combination of aggressive and gentle. Sometimes, he made me come that way, fingering me until I fell apart. But I wanted more from him now, so I clung to my control by the ragged ends of my fingertips.

He watched my face the whole time, collecting all my emotions. It was shockingly intimate, having his fingers buried deep inside me while he observed every twitch of my lips and flutter of my eyelids. He was quiet while I gasped and moaned. When he hit my spot, he remained a steady rock as I arched and yelled a long string of profanity. But when I lifted my head and kissed him, he kissed me back. Rough and wet and hard. Just as sloppy as his mouth on my dick.

“Fuck, baby,” I breathed against his lips. My hips rolled, and I whimpered and shivered. Slick sounds accompanied his easy thrusts in and out of my hole. “I’m ready.”

“Just a little bit more.”

“I can’t.” He was three fingers deep, and I was leaking so much my stomach was a shiny mess.

“Yes, you can.” He put his face closer to mine. “Breathe. That’s my good boy, relaxing that little hole. Always so tight and pretty for me. But I need it loose for the things I’ve got planned for it.” His gentle tone belied his filthy words and the wicked things his fingers were doing inside me. He rubbed

firm circles over my gland, forcing a fresh spurt of precome from my slit.

A high-pitched sound ripped from my mouth, which hung open as I writhed on his fingers. His hard, glistening dick brushed my thigh. He looked ready to burst.

But he kept us waiting. Because he liked this—opening me up. He liked the initial resistance and the reactionary clenches I couldn't control. He liked the heat and the way he could reduce me to a desperate, squirming mess. He liked seeing me give up. Because surrender was always part of it. Letting him in meant letting go.

I thumped the back of my head against the bed. “Fucking shit, Varick.”

“Yeah, enough,” he said suddenly, almost like he was talking to himself. He pulled his fingers from my ass and flipped me onto my stomach. Rough hands grabbed my hips and jerked me onto all fours. He shoved my head down with a firm hand between my shoulder blades. Then he palmed my cheek, lined up, and drove into me in one powerful thrust.

We both yelled. He seized my hips and ground his pelvis against my ass, lodging himself so deep I swore I could feel his dick in my throat. My balls drew up tight. The tip of my aching cock scraped the bed, and I buried my face in the sheets and swore.

“All right?” he asked gruffly.

“Fuck yes. Keep going.”

He grunted. Dug his fingers into my hips and launched straight into a hard, powerful rhythm that shook the bed and made me clutch at the sheets. He'd worked us both up so much, there was no room for nuance. No slow, easy thrusts that built to a powerful crescendo. This was filthy fucking, pure and simple. He hammered my hole, drilling me so hard I felt like my bones might shake apart. His balls slapped my taint—an erotic spanking that made me grunt like an animal. Every stroke of his cock nailed that magical spot inside me, liquefying my bones until I was a mindless puddle of need.

“More,” I panted. “Let me have it.”

“You’re getting it,” he growled, but he fucked me harder, pounding my ass with punishing thrusts. Even with my healing abilities, I was going to feel him tomorrow. *Good*. I wanted to remember every inch of his dick. I clawed at the sheets as he threatened to fuck me off the mattress.

He kept at it for a minute, then yanked me up so we were both on our knees. He hooked his arms around my elbows and really laid into me, plowing me so hard and fast my teeth clicked together. The bed’s massive headboard smacked the wall.

“Fuck,” I gasped. I couldn’t catch my breath. “Fuck, Varick. Oh fuck.”

His teeth nipped my shoulder. “Stick it out.”

We’d been together long enough for me to know what he wanted. I spread my knees wide and arched my back until it hurt. The position thrust my ass up, giving him more access to my hole. He loosened his grip on my arms and leaned back. A low, satisfied sound rumbled from him.

I could feel his gaze on the place where our bodies met. Envisioned those golden eyes focused on his cock tunneling in and out of me. He liked watching himself fucking me almost as much as he liked fucking me. A few times, he’d hauled a mirror up the narrow stairs to do just that. On those occasions, I felt him for longer than a day.

“Good boy,” he rasped now. He released my arms and smacked my ass hard, and I knew he was watching it bounce. I braced myself with both fists pressed into the bed in front of me. He kept right on spanking, punctuating his thrusts with hard blows that ripped feral sounds from my throat. I was *loud*, my cries and curses nearly drowning out the thick slap of his body against mine.

He gripped my cheeks in both hands and jiggled the muscle. “You missed me, hmm? Needed to get dicked, didn’t you.”

“Yeah” was all I could manage through clenched teeth.

“Is it good? You like it?” He didn’t wait for an answer. He threw an arm around my chest and pulled me against him, sealing my back to his front. We stuck to each other, locked together with lust and sweat. His fangs skimmed my neck. “Your dick is so hard. I bet you could come like this.”

Probably. I tipped my head down and stared at my cock. It bounced in sync with his vicious thrusts, the tip so red it practically glowed. I reached for my dick, only for him to seize my wrist and pin it to my side.

“Don’t you fucking dare.” He gripped my throat, his big hand squeezing my windpipe. “You know better than that.”

“Need to come,” I croaked. It was going to happen any second whether he gave permission or not. But maybe that was his goal. Another excuse to punish me. He’d like that—but so would I, so “punishment” was a relative term.

He wrapped both hands around my neck, forcing my head back as he continued plowing me. He pumped so hard and deep it was like he was trying to fuck his nuts inside me. I gazed at the beamed ceiling as goosebumps covered my skin and I teetered on the edge of euphoria. His stamina was unrivaled. I couldn’t have kept up his pace this long. He snapped his hips and squeezed my throat, slowly throttling my intake of air.

The familiar wash of dizziness swept me. Spots danced in my vision. My face tingled...and then the sensation spread everywhere. My arms, my legs, my flailing dick. My balls were numb, so I couldn’t be certain if they tingled. I didn’t much care, either. I just needed to come. And I was going to. Gods, I was going to lose it.

He spread his long fingers over my jaw and forced them inside my mouth.

“*Mmph,*” I grunted, reduced to a bundle of raw nerves and desperate desire. My dick streamed. I was so overstimulated, his thrusts were almost too much. And then they pushed past that barrier and tipped into nirvana. An inferno roared under my skin. I ceased to be Laurent. Stopped being anything that resembled blood or bone or flesh. I was merely a receptacle

for pleasure. Endless waves of vibrations like ripples of water spreading ever outward. Drool coated my chin. I sucked on his fingers and prepared to fly apart.

Without warning, his voice slid *inside* my head. “*You want to come?*”

Shock popped my eyes wide. He *never* used his gift during sex. Never. He rarely used it at all. I grunted my assent, and he moved a hand to my dick and jacked me hard.

“Then let’s see it.” On the last word, he released his grip on my throat.

I incinerated. I came on a deafening cry, bucking as my dick spurted and air rushed into my lungs. My ass pulsed around his cock—spasms I couldn’t control as the full-body orgasm ripped through me. Milky come splattered the bed and coated his hand. I was still coming when he shoved me flat on my stomach, collapsed on top of me, and rode my ass to his own release. He shook as he flooded me with hot come.

“Fuck,” he rasped, his forehead pressed to my nape. His heart thundered against my back. “Fuck, Laurent.”

I exhaled into the bedding smashed against my face. “Well, you certainly did that.”

He said nothing, but I felt his smile against my neck.

We came down together, and when I twisted my head back, his mouth was waiting for me. Our kiss was slow and thorough this time, the frenzy behind us. After a minute, he rolled us to our sides, his larger body spooning mine from behind. He curled an arm under my thigh and hiked it up.

“Show me.”

I flexed, pushing his seed from my body. It slid from my still-quivering hole and trailed down my crack. There was a lot. If I had to guess, he hadn’t come at all in the past two weeks. But I would never ask. The beach at Lar Keiren was one of a few things Varick simply would not speak of. But he never forgot. And he knew I didn’t, either. The posts I kept in my body were part of the vow we’d made the night he promised not to hurt himself again.

“So beautiful,” he murmured, his heavy-lidded gaze traveling up my body. He scooped a glob of my come from my abs and held it to my lips. I sucked his fingers into my mouth, and when I licked them clean, he fed me more. He held me that way, ferrying come from my chest and abs to my waiting mouth. He watched me suck, his eyes occasionally dipping to my leaking hole. When every drop of come was gone, he grasped my softened dick and squeezed a bead of semen from the tip.

“*Varick*,” I groaned. He pushed his fingers into my mouth, and I shuddered as echoes of my orgasm rippled through me.

After a few more lazy kisses, we lay quietly in the wrecked bed. The sheets were uncomfortably damp and my skin itched with drying sweat, but I would have stayed longer if I could. Maybe forever.

But I couldn't. The world waited at the bottom of the stairs. Duty waited. My wife waited.

I stared at the shadows the candles set dancing against the wall. “I need you here.”

His chest expanded against my back. His sigh ruffled my hair. “What's she like?”

“Powerful. Passionate.”

“And you aren't sure how you feel about the first one.”

I turned in his arms so I could see his face. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“What if she's more powerful than you?”

I started to smile. Then stopped. “You're serious.”

He held my gaze, his own steady.

“What if she's more powerful than *you*?” I tossed back.

“I'm fully prepared for that to be the case. She told you she's a farseer?”

“Yes.”

“A rare gift.”

“Others have possessed it.”

“Oh, I’m aware.” He tossed his head toward the top of the stairs. “So are you, or have you forgotten who stood there and watched us fuck?”

I pulled from his arms and sat up. When he tried to leave the bed, I got on my knees and cupped his jaw in both hands. “This isn’t about *him*. He’s dead, and he’s not coming back. The only place he lives is your head.”

Varick jerked from my grasp. He moved across the bed and sat on the edge. Now, candlelight cast flickering shadows over the waxy scars that ran from his shoulders to the base of his spine. The marks were a stark reminder that Valen of Lar Keiren would never truly go away.

I crouched behind Varick. After a moment, I leaned forward and kissed one of the thick, angry weals. Muscle trembled under my lips. I planted another light kiss and sat back. “This isn’t about him,” I repeated. “It’s about us. About saving the Deepnight and keeping this kingdom safe. I can’t do it alone. I need you here. By my side.”

He stayed still. And silent.

“You used your Voice. In my head just now.”

He grunted, and it was such a typical response I smiled despite the heaviness of our conversation. “I need actual words, baby. It’s not like you to use your gift. Did you change your mind about Given?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“That’s not what I asked.”

He twisted around, and his fierce golden gaze slammed into mine. “You are the king. And you are Nor Doru. If the Deepnight fails and the land dies, I could lose you too. I’ll never let that happen. I won’t *allow* it. Do you understand?”

Relief—and another emotion I couldn’t examine too closely—made me want to sag forward. Instead, I brought his hand to my mouth and dipped my tongue into the valleys of

his knuckles. “I understand. I want the three of us together. Tonight.”

He frowned. But his gaze strayed to my mouth, and his voice took on a distracted quality as he said, “I’ve only just arrived at court.”

“That’s why we should do it right away. We begin as we mean to go on. I told you we would share her. Given wants you. I know you want her.” I sucked the tip of his finger into my mouth, then released it. “And I definitely want to see you two fuck. What do you say, baby? Would you like to fuck my wife?”

His eyes closed on a long blink. “I think that’s been obvious from the start.”

“Tonight, then. There’s no time like the present.”

And no time to lose.

CHAPTER
THIRTY

GIVEN

Once again, I found myself seated between Laurent and Varick at the dining table in Laurent's chambers. All day, a sense of surreality had plagued me. Everything was the same as before. But everything was also completely different.

I was Laurent's wife now. The Queen of Nor Doru. But it was the other difference that made my heart pound and heat graze my cheeks.

Laurent and Varick had slept with each other. As in, this very day, Varick had fucked my husband. "*He fucks me. Never the other way around.*"

The heat in my face spread down my neck. From the moment Laurent slipped from our bed, images of the two of them together had paraded through my mind. What was wrong with me that I couldn't stop thinking about it? That I didn't really *want* to stop thinking about it? The knowledge of their coupling pressed against me from all sides—and the pressure was worse now that they bracketed me.

And for some reason, knowing that Varick wanted me even as he resented my presence made the fire in my veins burn hotter. Every time his gaze landed on me, it left me breathless and flooded with a mix of pleasure and confusion.

"You've barely eaten," Laurent said, his eyes lifting from my plate to my face. My *flaming* face. Even in the dim candlelight, I was certain he could see it. Which meant Varick could see it.

Which meant they both knew exactly what I was thinking.

“I wasn’t that hungry, my lord.”

He sipped his blood-wine, his gaze holding mine over the rim.

Varick shifted his big body in his chair. “I never congratulated you on your wedding, my queen.” He lifted his own goblet. “To the Queen of Nor Doru, long may she reign.”

Laurent echoed the toast. A little smile played around his mouth. The silver post winked in his ear.

“I heard the ceremony went smoothly,” Varick said. “No mishaps.”

“No, General,” I said, my voice sounding like I hadn’t used it in months. “No mishaps.”

“Thank the gods,” Laurent murmured. He traced a fingertip around the rim of his goblet.

I squeezed my thighs together under the table. I *wasn’t* hungry, but I regretted not eating. With nothing in my stomach, the two cups of blood-wine I’d consumed had my head spinning. I looked away from Laurent’s finger as it made another lazy trip around the goblet’s rim.

“Given is unaccustomed to our blood rites,” he said, pulling my gaze right back to him. His eyes glinted. “But she adapted beautifully.”

My breath hitched. The heat slid to my breasts, which felt heavy and swollen. I glanced at Varick, who watched me even though Laurent was speaking.

“I worried about her,” he said, his tone casual, as if he discussed the weather. “I debated explaining the bonding rite beforehand. But I decided against it.” He looked at Varick. “I didn’t want her to feel anxious about being bedded in front of all those priests.”

Varick’s gaze stayed on me, and now a predatory light gleamed in his eyes. My heart pounded. *Vampires are mortal the same as men.* The old Sithistran saying felt lightweight and

flimsy now. Caught between two pairs of glowing eyes, I couldn't help but feel like prey.

But it didn't stop an ache from throbbing between my thighs. On the contrary, it made everything throb harder. Nerves fluttered in my stomach. I couldn't blame it on the wine. Not anymore.

"It turns out," Laurent said, "our princess likes being watched." He dipped a finger in his goblet and touched a drop of blood-wine to his tongue. "You enjoyed their eyes on you, didn't you, sweetheart?"

My mouth opened, but only a faint, breathy sound emerged.

He gave me a look of mock disappointment. "I asked you a question, my lady. And as I told you when we met, you can't lie to me. I'll always know."

The flutters in my stomach climbed into my throat, so I had to swallow before I could answer. "Yes," I said hoarsely. "I liked it."

"You liked being watched." His finger stilled on the goblet's rim. "You liked being stripped and spread open, your pink, wet pussy on display for all to see. You liked your lord thrusting between your thighs. Making you come. I'm told they heard your cries in the main part of the Sanctum. But that's all right. Because you liked it, didn't you, princess."

I squeezed my thighs more tightly together. "Yes, my lord."

He made a satisfied sound, as if he'd just made an interesting discovery. He slid his gaze from me to Varick. "So there you have it, General. A ceremony with no mishaps."

"I'm pleased to hear it, Your Grace."

I looked between them, the ache in my sex bordering on pain. I knew what came next. I just wasn't sure how it was going to unfold. So I trembled on an edge of uncertainty with heat building under my skin and anticipation sparkling in my veins.

As if by unspoken agreement, both men rose. Varick was nearest to me, and he moved behind my chair and pulled it back. Then Laurent was there, drawing me up with his hand on my elbow. He caught my chin and kissed me, his tongue stroking deep. When I was breathless, he broke away. He put a hand on my hip, turned his head, and kissed Varick.

Suddenly, all the scenarios I'd imagined were right in front of me. And I wanted to look everywhere at once. Varick leaned into Laurent, his arm brushing mine as he went. He put a hand on the back of Laurent's neck and deepened their kiss. Their jaws worked together, both so masculine but so different. Laurent's dark stubble never completely disappeared, not even when his servants took a straight razor to his cheeks. Varick's golden whiskers were a compelling contrast. When he changed the angle of the kiss, his day beard scraped Laurent's with an audible rasp.

I knew I was gawking. I bit my lip so the moan lodged in my throat wouldn't break free. Because I didn't want anything to interrupt this. Varick was a giant, and he loomed over Laurent. Curiously, though, Laurent didn't appear small or weak. Maybe it was because I knew what he was capable of. I'd tasted the power that snaked through his veins.

Their kiss was more aggressive than any Laurent had given me. It was a sort of battle, with nips and grunts and tantalizing flashes of tongue that had me digging my teeth deeper into my lip.

Without warning, Varick ended the kiss and turned to me. Quick as lightning, he pulled me into him and kissed me. The connection I'd felt the first time flared back to life.

"You think I'm dangerous?" I'd asked him that night.

"I know it."

He was right. This was dangerous. *We* were dangerous together. But I couldn't stop kissing him. Not when he tasted of Laurent and a rush of something wild and earthy. The spark of recognition I'd felt as I sat on his lap before the fire blazed higher.

Just like that first time, he was the one to break the kiss. But when he pulled back, he was panting, his fangs descended and his eyes glowing like twin suns.

Laurent squeezed my hip. “Both of you get on my fucking bed.” He didn’t wait for compliance. He grabbed my elbow and steered me through his rooms. My skirts swished and Varick’s boots snapped at our heels. It wasn’t a great distance, but I was gasping for air as we reached Laurent’s bedchamber. A fire leapt in the hearth. Candles shuddered as Laurent guided me to the canopied bed. He stopped, pushed his fingers through my hair, and tilted my head back.

“Varick and I will take good care of you, princess. Do you believe me?”

Nearby, Varick removed his boots and began stripping out of his clothes. He watched us, his fingers moving down the buttons of his jacket.

“Given?” Laurent’s voice pulled my attention away from Varick. My husband stroked his thumbs over my cheeks. “You have nothing to fear from either of us.”

“I know.”

He kissed me gently. “Tonight is about pleasure, and yours matters more than anything.” He turned me away from him and tugged the pins from my hair. When the heavy mass cascaded down my back, he pushed it aside and unfastened my dress. He knew female clothing inside and out, and he had me in nothing but my flimsy chemise in under a minute. The sleeveless garment hugged my body and fell only to my knees. It was so thin it revealed almost as much as it concealed. I braced for him to take it, too, but he scooped me up and put me on the bed. He withdrew, and a completely nude Varick took his place.

I couldn’t stifle my gasp. I knew he was big. His size was his most defining feature. But nothing prepared me for his muscular thighs and the thick, meaty shaft that swung against his leg as he climbed over me. My mouth watered at the sight of the plump veins that snaked down his rigid length. My fangs shot lower than they ever had.

His own fangs showed as he sprawled beside me and rested his palm on my stomach. His skin burned mine through the thin layer of my chemise.

“You lied just now,” he rumbled. He rubbed a slow circle over my belly. “When you told Laurent you know you have nothing to fear. You’re afraid of me...and a little bit of him.”

My gaze shot to Laurent, who was pulling his shirt over his head. He pushed his pants down his hips, and his erection sprang free. Nude, he joined us on the bed. He stretched out on my other side and cupped one of my breasts through the chemise.

“Is that so, princess?” He lowered his dark head and sucked my nipple through the chemise. When he pulled away, the material was see-through, my nipple a hard, blushing point. “I think we have to remedy that, don’t we, General?”

Varick responded by bending and giving my other nipple the same treatment. His big hand squeezed my breast, and his hot mouth sucked hard. Unlike Laurent, he teased his tongue around the stiffening peak—and he gave me a sharp nip with one of his fangs before pulling away.

Now, two wet circles marred my chest, and both nipples stood up like dark pink spear points. It was more revealing than wearing nothing at all.

“She’s got beautiful tits,” Varick said.

Laurent made a low sound of agreement. “Wait until you see her pussy.” He smoothed his hand down my body, running his palm over Varick’s before reaching the hem of my chemise. He dragged the gown up to my waist, baring me to Varick’s gaze. But he didn’t stop there. My husband moved a beringed hand to my sex and spread my lips apart with his thumb and forefinger. My engorged clit stood up proudly from its sheath, the small bud shiny with desire.

In that moment, I knew Queen Amantha was right. I was the wicked product of unholy lust. Because Varick’s eyes on me—his golden, glowing gaze fixed on my most private place—lit a fire that roared through my veins. The fact that my

husband showed me off this way, sharing me with his best friend and lover like I was a delicacy he wished Varick to sample, made me moan and lift my hips.

“So eager, wife,” Laurent murmured, proving he knew *exactly* what was happening. He stroked a long finger down my cleft and held it aloft, showing Varick and me the moisture he’d collected. “Do you want Varick to taste you, princess?”

My “yes” was a breathy moan as my face flooded with heat. How was it possible to be both embarrassed and deeply aroused? But the first fueled the second. Undoubtedly, Laurent knew that, too.

He pushed his fingers into Varick’s waiting mouth. Varick’s eyes drifted shut as he sucked my juices.

The same odd mix of pleasure and confusion I’d felt at the table squirmed through me. Varick and I had butted heads from the moment we met. He disliked my relationship with Laurent. Most of the time, it felt like he disliked *me*. But here he was licking my pussy from Laurent’s fingers, his golden lashes dusting his flushed cheeks. Some depraved part of me thrilled at the sight. Was it possible to hate someone and want them at the same time?

Yes, it most certainly was. And in some cases, the hate drove the want. Twisted it into obsession.

Laurent smirked at me. “I think he likes how you taste, Given. Maybe I should let him help you come. He’s been thinking about it since he fetched you from the Rift. I think he’s waited long enough.” He pulled his fingers from Varick’s mouth. He moved Varick’s hand from my stomach to my pussy. “Two fingers, baby. Small circles. Don’t go too fast.”

It took me a second to realize Laurent addressed Varick—and that he was telling Varick *precisely* how I liked my clit touched.

Varick dipped his big, callused fingers into my opening and carried moisture to my clit. Then he followed Laurent’s instructions to the letter. He rubbed firm, slow circles, stroking two rough fingers right where I needed them. The soft

smacking sounds sent fresh heat rolling through me, and I spread my thighs wantonly.

“Good girl,” Laurent rasped, sliding a hand under my knee and pulling me wider. He used his other hand to drag my chemise to my neck. Cool air caressed my damp nipples and the heated folds between my legs. My breasts trembled as I drew shuddering breaths.

“*Oh*,” I gasped. “I’m... I’m going to come!”

“Of course you are, princess,” my husband said. “A little bit faster, baby,” he told Varick. “When she starts to go, press hard.” His words were like a lit match to a fuse. Just as Varick picked up the pace, pleasure flooded me. My back arched, and my mouth opened on a strangled cry. I flung my thighs apart and keened.

Varick pressed his sodden fingers firmly over my throbbing clit as bliss roared through me. I pumped my hips up, fucking myself against his fingers. I thrashed so violently, I jostled both men. Laurent tightened his grip on my leg, locking me against him as I shook.

Low, masculine murmurs broke through the hazy aftermath of my orgasm. Then several things happened so quickly, there was no time to protest. Laurent lifted me. He set me on my knees long enough to pull the chemise off and toss it aside. Varick moved behind me with his back propped against the pillows, and then Laurent settled me between Varick’s spread thighs with my back to Varick’s chest. Varick hooked my legs over his, spreading me wide. His big, hard cock stood up between my legs.

I couldn’t look away from his dick. Laurent positioned himself on all fours between my legs. He smiled, his fangs white and sharp-looking as he took in my splayed pussy and Varick’s beast of a cock.

“This is something I’ve wanted to see for a long time.” He gave Varick a look hot enough to melt my bones. “Play with her tits.”

Varick leaned forward, which shifted me forward, too. He seized Laurent's jaw and dragged him up, and then I was pressed between them with their faces inches apart right at my shoulder.

"You think you're in charge here?" Varick asked Laurent. His tone was light. Achingly gentle. And so dangerous that goosebumps shivered down my arms.

Laurent's silver gaze shifted to mine. His lips curved. "You remember what I told you at Lar Satha?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"It made you so wet, princess. I bet you think about it every time I fuck you."

Varick's fingers tightened on Laurent's jaw, and his deep voice rumbled against my back. "Enough talk." He shoved Laurent away. "Put that mouth of yours to good use."

Laurent laughed, his jaw red from Varick's grip. He stayed on his knees as he grasped Varick's dick and licked all around the swollen head. His tongue ring flashed, and his thick, dark eyelashes made fans on his cheeks. He sank to his forearms, his ass high as he lapped at the beads of moisture that seeped from Varick's slit. He sucked at Varick's tip for a moment, then opened wide and sucked down Varick's shaft.

He did all of this between my legs, my aching pussy sitting right above Varick's dick. I was so aroused, I could feel my hot juices trickling from my opening. The scent of my desire wafted up. Then Varick's big hands covered my breasts, and I moaned long and low.

"Are you watching him?" he said in my ear. His fingers pinched my nipples, his rough skin making my pussy clench.

I nodded. "Uh-huh." I couldn't take my eyes off the sight of my husband sucking another man's dick. It occurred to me that he was better at it than I was. His mouth was bigger, for one thing, and he took every inch of Varick's shaft. Even so, it was clearly hard work for him. Laurent's jaw was forced wide. His nostrils flared as he breathed heavily, bobbing up and down, his nose brushing the wiry blond hair at Varick's groin.

His saliva covered Varick's dick from root to tip, making the thickly veined shaft glisten. The sights and sounds were unbearably sexy. When Varick thrust his hips up unexpectedly, Laurent choked and quickly adjusted.

And that was sexy, too.

Varick's lips brushed my temple. "Is your pussy aching again, Given?"

My breath caught. He so rarely used my name. He'd certainly never said it while I sat naked on his lap as he kneaded my breasts.

His fingers clamped hard on my nipples. "Is it?" he growled.

"Yes!" I arched like I'd been jabbed with a hot poker. The change in position rubbed my pussy over his groin. His pubic hair tickled my folds. If I slid just a bit lower, I could grind my clit on the base of his dick. Feeling bold, I wiggled until I made it happen. In an instant, another orgasm hovered just out of reach. I gasped and rocked my hips.

Laurent pulled off Varick's dick. "Hello, princess."

Varick palmed my throat, forcing my chin up. "Greedy, isn't she?"

Breathing heavily, Laurent chuckled and drew a fingertip down my center. "Always."

"Give her some attention, then," Varick said, and he grabbed me under the knees and pulled my thighs to my chest, folding me in half.

I almost came on the spot. My heart throbbed in my pussy, which was spread lewdly. My opening gaped. I'd never been in such a vulnerable position, my pussy and ass on full display. Everything between my legs felt hot and wet and swollen.

Laurent wasted no time obeying. He sank down and sucked my clit into his mouth, licking and suckling me the way I liked. He twirled his tongue ring over my clit, making me jerk and moan loudly. Part of me wondered if he sought to prove a point. Perhaps push back against some of Varick's

dominance, especially when it came to me. Because none of this happened unless Laurent allowed it. At the end of the day, I was *his* wife.

“Put your arms around my neck,” Varick ordered. I complied, and then gasped as Laurent licked down to my opening and thrust his tongue inside me. He fucked me with it a few times...and then dipped farther south. He swirled his tongue over my most private, forbidden place—something he’d only hinted at before.

This was more than a hint. He lingered, teasing around my rim. Poking the tip of his tongue against my pucker until the ring of muscle relaxed.

“Laurent,” I choked out. Instinctively, I tried to slam my thighs shut. But of course I couldn’t. Not with Varick holding them open.

My husband continued tonguing my asshole. And then he stiffened his tongue and thrust it *inside* me. In and out, hot and slippery and invasive. The sensation was both alluring and shocking. I wanted to shove his head away, and I wanted to grab him by the hair and hold him against me until I came.

Because it felt incredible, what he was doing. It was like he’d opened a door I hadn’t even known existed. The constant hum in my pussy buzzed higher. Everything inside me tightened.

I squealed, writhing against Varick’s grip on my legs. “Gods! I’m going to come!” Laurent hummed against my hole and tongued me faster. He put two fingers on my clit and rubbed hard. Varick pulled my legs so wide my hips ached. The combination of his hands wrapped around my thighs and Laurent’s tongue in my ass hurtled me straight into release.

Distantly, I heard someone screaming. It was only when my throat began to hurt that I realized the sound came from me. My eyes watered. My toes curled. I squeezed my arms around Varick’s neck as the waves battered me.

When they finally receded, Laurent sat up and wiped his mouth. He and Varick were both so hard their dicks looked

painful.

Laurent looked Varick in the eye. “I want us to fuck her together. You get her pussy. I’ll take her ass.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

VARICK

I knew my surprise showed on my face as I absorbed Laurent's declaration. I couldn't fuck Given. Not in a way that might result in a child. Even a whiff of doubt surrounding Laurent's heir would be disastrous.

"I can't," I said. "If she conceived—"

"She won't." Laurent smoothed a hand up her thigh. "It's not that time in your cycle, is it, princess?"

She sprawled in my arms, her damp body still flushed from her orgasm. Now, a new flush appeared in her cheeks. She shifted off me, all long legs and creamy breasts. She pulled her knees up and hugged them against her chest—and she probably didn't realize I was at the perfect angle to see her pouty little pussy peeking from behind her ankles.

Laurent knew, though. He caught me looking and slid me a smug smile.

Damn him and his suggestions. Now that he'd put the possibility out there, I wanted nothing more than to sink my dick into Given's heat. The sweet taste of her pussy still lingered on my tongue. And the power in her veins called to mine. It had taken every ounce of my willpower not to bite her. But I couldn't risk mingling our blood. We were two potent chemicals. There was no telling what dangers a mixture might bring.

"No," she murmured. "I mean, I don't think so. I..." She licked her lips, her cheeks a brilliant pink. "I'm half-human. I'm not as...regular as full-blooded vampire females."

“Varick and I would know if you were fertile,” Laurent said. “We can scent it.”

Her blue eyes went wide. “You can?”

“Only at close range.” He tugged her into his arms and put her under him, his lean body stretched on top of hers. He slid a hand between her legs and stroked her slick folds, making her whimper. “You don’t have to worry about the lords of the court sniffing you out, sweetheart. The only noses allowed near this gorgeous pussy of yours are mine and Varick’s.”

Doubt tugged at me. While it was true female vampires threw off more arousal at certain points in their cycle, it wasn’t always a reliable indicator of fertility. And Given was a halfling.

Laurent continued working his hand between her legs. “What do you think, princess? Do you want to ride Varick’s cock while I fuck your ass?” His hand dipped under her. She gasped, then moaned, and I knew he was fingering her juices into her hole. Her nipples were a tight, dusky pink. Ripe berries I wanted to pierce with my fangs. I wanted to do a lot of things to Given of Sithistra.

Given of *Nor Doru*.

And wasn’t that part of it? She was Laurent’s now, and she was elven-born. She was Rolund’s sister. She brimmed with untested power. She was gorgeous, and she *made a man want to ruin her*.

“Make no mistake, Princess, if I decide to be inside you in other ways, it will happen.” When I told her that atop the Serenity Tower, she’d looked stunned—and aroused. I could have her right now. Laurent would give her to me. It was what he wanted, after all. All I had to do was say the word.

I could ruin Given of Nor Doru a little.

“Yes,” she moaned, her hips rolling as Laurent pumped his fingers in and out of her ass.

Abruptly, the memory of Jordan pulling a white flower from the sand at Lar Keiren appeared in my mind. His voice ran through my head. *“Given of Sithistra was put into your*

path, my lord. When she stepped into Nor Doru, yours was the first face she saw. Magic can be unpredictable, but sometimes it doesn't miss."

Given's cry of ecstasy broke through my thoughts. Laurent lifted his head from her throat, his lips bloody. "She wants it, baby. She wants you. And I want to feel you when we're both inside her."

My heart pounded in my ears, the sound like the surf at the frozen beach on the shore of the Bitter Sea.

I could have Given of Nor Doru. Maybe I was meant to.

"All right," I heard myself say.

Laurent moved off of her. Then he scooped her up and settled her astride me. Her hot, wet pussy seared my skin, and I hissed, baring my fangs as white-hot pleasure shot up my dick. Propped as I was, I had the leverage to maneuver her wherever I wanted her—and I wanted her on my cock. I grasped her around the waist and lifted her. She was so lust-drunk from Laurent's feeding, she spread her legs eagerly.

Laurent brought my dick to her wet opening and held me steady as I lowered her onto my shaft. I hissed again as her pussy stretched wide around my cockhead. Her plump clit was another berry I wanted to taste.

She whimpered and wriggled her hips, adjusting to my size.

"A little more," I rasped. She was so tight and hot. And she was fucking drenched. All those orgasms had left her sopping, and I sank balls deep with minimal resistance. Her pussy was like a little forge. A searing fist that squeezed every inch of my dick.

She moaned, shivering as she braced herself with her hands on my shoulders.

"There," Laurent murmured. He kissed her temple. "How does his dick feel?"

She shivered again. "Good. It's...a lot."

He winked at me. "I'll bet." He slid from the bed. "You two stay just like that. Give me a minute."

Given and I stared at each other as he padded from the bedchamber.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

A spark of the pertness I'd grown accustomed to flared in her blue eyes. "Are you?"

Smiling, I pulled my knees up. The change in position settled her more firmly across my hips and pushed my dick that much deeper. When she sucked in a breath, I let my smile spread. "I've got my cock buried in my queen's hot pussy. You might say I'm perfectly content, Your Grace. And you know what else?"

Her breath shuddered out. Lust darkened her eyes to midnight blue. "What?" she whispered.

I squeezed her waist, admiring how my fingers spanned it. I drew her closer until her tight nipples brushed my chest and our mouths were nearly touching. "I fucked her husband this morning."

For a second, I thought she might come right then and there. She closed her eyes and made a sexy, kittenish sound. Her pussy clamped harder around my dick. But then she seemed to master herself. When she opened her eyes, they held a challenge. "I wasn't sure you liked women, General."

I bounced her once on my dick, making sure to squeeze her waist just a little too hard. "How about now?"

Laurent returned, his gaze immediately assessing as it roamed over us. But he kept quiet as he climbed onto the bed with a vial of oil in his hand.

I slid down so my back was flatter against the pillows. Laurent slicked himself quickly, then pulled Given's hair aside and kissed her neck, his lips over the spot where her pulse fluttered rapidly. He pressed her down with a hand on her shoulder, and I helped her prop herself on her forearms on my chest. She trembled on my dick, uncertainty flashing in her eyes.

“Relax, princess,” Laurent murmured behind her. He put a flat foot on the outside of my thigh. Gaze locked with mine, he worked a hand between her cheeks. She gasped, and I knew he was slicking her hole. Her breasts smashed against my chest, her taut nipples poking my pecs. Strands of her pale hair caught in my stubble, and her sweet scent filled my lungs. She rocked forward, her quiet moan a soft breeze on my chin.

I dug my fingers into her waist and watched her pupils dilate. Stared at her sharp little fangs and her pink lower lip caught between her teeth. “Ohhh,” she breathed. Her eyes went heavy-lidded and then closed as she whimpered. Her juicy pussy clamped hard around my dick, lighting a brand new fire inside me. If I hadn’t fucked Laurent earlier in the day, I would have come already. Her cunt felt too damn good.

Laurent caught my gaze over her shoulder. He gave me a nod and then eased his hips forward.

Given’s eyes flew open. She tensed, her nails digging into my chest. “Laurent...”

I tangled a hand in her hair and kissed her. Plundered her mouth, which was as hot and wet as her pussy. I stroked my tongue deep, swallowing her moans and whimpers. She kissed me back, and the magic flowed between us. As before, we didn’t need blood. The connection sizzled on its own—a powerful loop that built and crackled. It seemed impossible, but my dick swelled inside her.

And then I felt Laurent. The firm grind of his cock against mine with only a thin barrier between us. I tightened my grip on Given’s hair and groaned into her mouth. My hips thrust on their own, my body seeking more of that incredible pressure.

Laurent thrust again, which pushed Given more firmly against me. His hand found mine on her waist, and we laced our fingers together as we both began to thrust in earnest. I pulled my mouth from Given’s and found him watching me, his eyes burning with lust, his fangs scraping his bottom lip. He grabbed the hair I’d just released and pulled her head back. He whispered in her ear as his silver gaze seared mine. “He

feels good, doesn't he, princess? That big cock buried deep inside you while your husband fucks your ass?"

"Yes!" she cried, writhing between us. She couldn't move much, but she tried, her squirming molding her sweet curves to my body. Her pussy strangled my dick. Laurent thrust forward, driving her deeper onto my dick. All three of us moaned.

"I think my princess likes riding two cocks," he murmured. "Whatever would they say in Sithistra, my lady, if they knew how much you enjoy having your holes stuffed?"

She squeezed her eyes shut, soft cries spilling from her lips.

He lowered his voice to a sultry hiss. "Just imagine how much you're going to like it when Varick fucks my ass while I'm inside you."

Her cries became wild sobs.

He released her hair and leaned closer, smashing her between us. His lips found mine, and we kissed over her shoulder. We thrust into her body, finding a rhythm that rubbed our cocks together. A few seconds later, Given shook violently as an orgasm swept her.

The atmosphere changed. Grew savage and more charged. I ripped my mouth from Laurent's with a growl as we both thrust harder, pumping our dicks in tandem. I clenched my teeth. Given screamed and shuddered all over again.

Laurent threw his head back. "Fuck! I'm coming!"

My own release bore down on me. Panic gathered as I realized I needed to pull out. But the thought arrived a half-second too late. I came on a shout, my dick twitching as I pumped come deep inside Given's pussy. Laurent thrust a final time and collapsed against her back. For a long moment, the three of us stayed plastered together, our chests heaving as we struggled to catch our breath. Then Laurent pulled out and flopped onto his back, one arm flung over his eyes. "Fuck," he muttered.

Given stirred against me. I moved to shift us into a more comfortable position just as Laurent rolled to his stomach and thrust his hands under the pillow.

His bellow shook the bed.

Given and I sprang apart as he reeled back, blood spraying across the sheets. Steam rose from his fingers.

A lifetime of training took over. With one mighty sweep of my hand, I shoved Given off the bed. She went sprawling onto the floor, but I didn't have time to worry if she landed safely. Only one material made a vampire's skin smoke like that.

Solstone.

I grabbed Laurent around the waist, vaulted off the bed, and shoved him away from the danger. When he tried to step around me, I shoved him again. "Stay back, Your Grace." He cursed but did as I said, his bleeding hand cradled against his stomach.

I went to the bed and ripped the pillows away. Sure enough, a fucking solstone dagger lay on the mattress. Yellow waves rippled down the blade.

Behind me, Given gave a startled cry. "That's not where I left—" Her voice cut off abruptly. But it didn't matter. I was on her in seconds, my fingers biting into her arms as I dragged her onto her toes so I could snarl in her face.

"Finish the fucking sentence," I demanded.

She winced, her gaze darting over my shoulder, where I sensed Laurent looming. But he didn't come forward. His life was precious to the realm, and he knew better than to imperil his safety. It was my job to stand between him and would-be assassins. Even if one of those assassins was his wife.

"Do as Lord Varick commands," he said, his voice deadly quiet.

"I..." Her face crumpled. "Someone gave it to me! But I never meant to use it, I swear it!"

I shook her, sending her pale hair flying around her shoulders. "Who? I'll have a name right now or I'll take it

from your flesh.”

“I c-can’t—”

“Now!” I roared.

“Rowena,” she gasped. “Rowena of Lar Kessa.”

Laurent hissed. “You mean Rowena of Sithistra.” He rounded me but kept space between himself and Given. “That fucking brother of yours put you up to this, didn’t he? Sent you across the Rift with orders to spread your legs and then stick a solstone dagger in my heart, you traitorous bitch.”

“That is *not* true! How could you think that?”

“Because there’s a fucking solstone dagger in my bed!”

Her eyes flashed. “I didn’t put it there! Rowena gave it to me—”

“When?”

She clamped her mouth shut.

He surged forward like he meant to grab her.

“Your Grace,” I snapped, ready to block him.

He fell back, but menace flowed off of him. “Answer me, Given. Answer me right now or so help me I’ll—”

“Two weeks ago,” she said, “but I was never going to use it. I swear it to you on all the gods.”

He growled and stepped toward her again. His fingers had stopped smoking, but the wounds were deep. And they would never heal. “Watch your lying mouth when you speak of the gods.”

“I’m not lying! Please, Laurent, you have to believe me. You said you would always know if I lied to you.” She jerked her gaze to mine, her blue eyes full of tears. “You too, Varick. Use your senses and listen to me.” She drew a shuddering breath. “Rowena gave me the dagger. I hid it in my room because I didn’t know what to do. And then...the night I left my body, I traveled to Beldurn, where I saw Rolund.”

I stiffened.

Laurent sucked in a breath. “*What?*”

She squeezed her eyes shut briefly. “I m-mean, I didn’t see him. But I heard him talking to Crasor, the Prelate of the Brotherhood. They spoke of solstone. They talked about sending all the devils into the Fir. And Crasor said something I’ve never heard before. I didn’t understand it then and I still don’t. He said the savior of the realm will be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift.”

Laurent froze. He went so completely still that I risked looking away from Given so I could see his face. He stared at her, something like resolve in his eyes. “Rolund knows, then,” he murmured.

I frowned. “Your Grace?”

“Release her,” he said without looking at me. Blood dripped steadily from his fingers.

“Laurent—”

“I said let her go, General. She speaks the truth.” He gave a short, humorless laugh. “About this, at least.”

Confusion swarmed me, but he’d given me an order. I dropped my hands from Given’s arms and stepped back.

“Put your dress on,” Laurent told her. He turned and found his pants on the floor. He faced away as he pulled them on. From the tight set of his shoulders, I knew his hand pained him.

Given looked as bewildered as I felt. “Laurent? Does this mean you believe me?”

He whirled, his eyes blazing. “I don’t know what to believe! You hid the deadliest weapon known to vampires in my home for two weeks. You heard your brother plotting against Nor Doru and you didn’t tell me. You kept that information to yourself as you knelt in the Sanctum and vowed to serve this realm and obey me as your king and your husband.”

“I meant those vows!” she cried. “I *have* obeyed you, and I *will* serve you!”

He closed the distance between them in a blur of movement. Before I could intervene, he took her chin in a bloody grip. “Oh, you will, wife. I don’t know where your true loyalties lie. Maybe I’ll never know. But it doesn’t matter, because I don’t have to trust you to ensure you serve this realm. The prophecy is bigger than all of us.” He looked at me. “Bigger than any of us.”

An ominous feeling crept over me. My heart pounded. What prophecy did he speak of? The only prophecies I knew of were the silly birth predictions the Brotherhood issued. All my life, I’d dismissed those as a money-making scheme. Just a way to entice nobles to keep the Towers spewing their bullshit. Laurent had always laughed along with me. He knew what real power was. The priest-king of Nor Doru didn’t believe in prophecies.

But his father was mad, a voice whispered in my head. And he was losing the Deepnight.

He released Given. “Put your dress on.”

“Wh-What are you going to do? What prophecy are you talking about?”

“Get dressed. I won’t tell you again.”

“Laurent?”

“Guards!” he shouted.

Given gasped and went for her gown. I found my clothes and yanked my pants on as boots thundered in the outer rooms. Men-at-arms with swords drawn burst into the bedchamber.

“Take her,” Laurent said. “Put her in the dungeon for now.” He looked at me. “I want you to search her room.”

Given made an anguished sound. “You said you didn’t have a dungeon!”

His expression was cold. “You’re right. But how else was I supposed to know whether you were capable of sniffing out lies?”

The men-at-arms pulled her toward the door. She twisted around, tears streaming down her face. “Your Grace, *please!* If we could just talk.”

He turned away, and he didn’t look at her again as the guards half-led, half-dragged her from the room. For a moment, he bowed his head.

I stayed where I was, the ominous feeling tightening around me.

“I won’t keep her in the dungeon for long,” he said. He lifted his gaze. “Just until you’ve searched her room.”

“And then what?” I rasped.

“Then she does what I brought her here to do. What she was born to do.”

I didn’t want to ask. Didn’t want to know. But the truth had arrived at last. I felt its approach like a dark horse bearing down on me.

“Tell me,” I told the male I’d loved since I was sixteen. Nothing he had to say could change how I felt.

“One year before Given of Sithistra was born, the Brotherhood prophesied her birth. The prediction proved accurate, and she was confirmed as a Child of Prophecy. But on the night she entered the world, the Brotherhood issued a second prophecy. The brothers wrote it on the bottom of the scroll used to record her name and parentage. It said that the savior of the realm would be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift.” Laurent held himself rigid, his silver eyes full of an emotion I couldn’t place. “Shortly after Given was born, the prophecy was ripped from the scroll and spirited away from the Towers of the Mir. It was lost for many years. But a certain group found it. They’ve studied it extensively, calling up magic to decipher its meaning. Petru and the other priests of the Sanctum have looked it over, too.”

My voice seemed to come from far away as I asked, “What group?”

“The mages of Wesyfedd.”

The dark horse of truth galloped faster. “And what does the prophecy mean?” I forced myself to ask.

“Given of Sithistra, the last elven-born of Nor Doru, will conceive a child with another elven-born. Bound in the blood of old Eldenvalla, that child must perish in the Rift and then reemerge to save the Deepnight from destruction.”

Blood rushed in my ears. *Whose child must perish in the fucking Rift?*

“Who is the other elven-born?” I asked. But I already knew.

“You.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

GIVEN

I was too numb to cry. Unfortunately, I wasn't too numb to feel the cold. It burrowed under my skin and leeches into my bones. Not only did Laurent have a dungeon, but it was also darker and more uncomfortable than the one in Beldurn Castle. The men-at-arms had pushed me into a small cell carved from the rock that supported the palace above. The door was solid iron, its only opening a tiny slit that revealed I was completely alone in the dank underground cavern. A lamp burned somewhere outside my cell, its light barely bright enough to let me see my hand in front of my face.

At least Laurent hadn't thrown me into the Rift.

As soon as the thought came, tears burned my eyes. I hugged my arms over my stomach. A sob escaped my throat, my breath a small, white cloud in the frozen air.

My body ached from the things Laurent, Varick, and I had done in bed. Even now, I felt both of them inside me. Felt their hands and mouths on my body. Their sweat on my skin. In the moment, the passion that had arced between us had felt exactly right. When the three of us moved together, all my doubts had fallen away. My fears had melted along with my body, which had flowed between the two of them so seamlessly it felt like we'd always been connected.

But that vanished the moment Laurent found the solstone. My breath puffed out again—a tiny ghost hovering in the cell. Who could have moved the dagger? And why? Rowena was the only person in the Midnight Palace who knew of the weapon.

Or was she? I squeezed my arms more tightly around my midsection and paced, my thin slippers offering little protection from the rough stone floor. Rowena was with her husband at their estate. She couldn't have put the dagger in Laurent's bed. But maybe she didn't work alone. Maybe she wasn't the only Sithistran spy in Nor Doru. But I had almost no hope of finding out who might be working against Laurent, especially now that my husband no longer trusted me.

"I don't have to trust you to ensure you serve this realm. The prophecy is bigger than all of us."

What had he meant by that? How was I supposed to serve the realm if he believed I was a spy? But when he'd spoken of prophecy, he'd sounded...resigned. *"Rolund knows, then,"* he'd said. What did my brother know? It had something to do with Crasor's words about the "savior of the realm."

Bound in blood.

Reborn from the Rift.

Not born. *Reborn*. What did that mean?

A faint scuffling sound brought my head up, my gaze instantly locked on the door. My heart pounded painfully. A key scraped in the lock, and the door swung open.

Varick ducked through the doorway, his golden eyes piercing the gloom.

Terror gripped me so tightly I couldn't move. *He's here to kill me.* Or take me to the Rift. Rolund would get his way, after all.

But Varick didn't rush in and seize me. His features were tense, almost frightened. "Come on," he mouthed. "Quickly."

I crossed the cell. He snagged my arm and pulled me against him, then pressed his mouth to my ear. "I'm getting you out of here."

"But Laurent—"

"Shhh." Abruptly, his voice filled my head. *"Listen to me. The Deepnight is failing. Disappearing. If the canopy disintegrates, the people will burn and Nor Doru will fall."*

Laurent believes the prophecy you overheard has something to do with you.” There was a pause, and then his voice flowed again. *“He thinks you and I are supposed to conceive an elven-born child. And his priests have convinced him that he needs to toss that child into the Rift so it can reemerge and save the kingdom from the unveiled sun.”*

Confusion and shock formed a whirlwind in my mind. But in the center of it, icy cold reigned. “What?” I whispered.

Varick spoke aloud again, holding me tightly with his breath tickling my cheek. “I don’t know anything about the prophecy, but enough men with power have convinced Laurent that it’s real. He is the king. If he thinks he has to do this to save the realm, he will.”

“But...I’m not pregnant.” As soon as I said it, I realized I didn’t actually know that. Not after what happened in Laurent’s bed. I jerked my head back so I could see Varick’s face.

The look in his eyes told me his thoughts matched mine. “I came inside you tonight.” Bitterness flashed across his features. “An outcome no doubt arranged by Laurent.”

The icy center inside me cracked. Laurent thought I’d betrayed him. But he’d betrayed me, too. And he’d done the same to Varick. “What will you do?”

For a moment, pain hovered in Varick’s eyes. Then he blinked and it was gone. “Right now, I’m going to get you out of Lar Katerin. Then I’ll return and try to talk sense into Laurent.” A muscle in Varick’s jaw jumped. “He’s been under more pressure than I realized. I should have paid closer attention.”

He blamed himself for Laurent’s plans? “Varick—”

“Come,” he said in my head. *“I’ll take you somewhere safe.”*

“Where?”

“Wesyfedd.”

Of course. It was the only place that made sense. I couldn't go to Sithistra, and I definitely couldn't stay in Nor Doru. The mountains and caves of Wesyfedd were the perfect destination for someone who didn't want to be found.

"Brother Jordan," I said suddenly. "Could he—?"

"No." Varick's voice was clipped. His eyes hard. "It's best if we go alone. And we have to go right now. We can't linger here." He took my hand and pulled me with him past a row of empty cells just like mine. On our way out of the dungeon, he grabbed the lamp from a hook in the wall.

With a firm grip on my arm, he hurried us through a series of tunnels. Despite his size, his steps were nearly silent. I tried to be just as quiet, but I was hampered by my long skirts that tangled around my legs and tried to trip me every few steps. The tunnels reminded me of the ones Laurent had taken me through the day we rode to Lar Satha. But these weren't quite the same. The ceilings were higher, and the air smelled of horses and leather. Moments later, Varick helped me through a tall wooden door.

Swirling snow and freezing air blasted my face as we stepped into a dark courtyard. I looked up and saw the Serenity Tower looming over us.

Varick pulled me against him, his expression grim. "We move quickly, and we don't look back."

"All right," I whispered, my heart thumping painfully.

"Do you trust me?"

My lips parted. Did I? I'd followed him from the dungeon without protest. I was willingly leaving the city with him. It never occurred to me that he might be lying. But my gut told me he wasn't. The pain he was fighting to keep from his eyes made me believe Laurent had wounded him deeply.

And I'd heard Rolund and Crasor with my own ears. "*The savior of the realm will be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift.*" If my child was supposed to save Nor Doru, it made sense that the Brotherhood—and my brother—wanted me dead.

“I trust you,” I rasped.

Varick released me and moved into the shadows. When he reemerged, he led two horses. He pulled a bundle from one of the saddlebags. When he shook it out, I realized it was a long, black cloak. He wrapped it around me and fastened it under my chin like I was a child. Then he tossed me up and mounted his own horse.

“Keep your head down. If you hear a shout, ride like hell.”



NO ONE SHOUTED. WE SLIPPED FROM THE CITY UNDER THE cover of darkness, and when we reached the gates, we galloped hard. We rode without stopping, and soon our horses frothed at the mouth. Varick and I didn't fare much better—at least I didn't. Snow pelted my face and gathered on my eyelashes. The cold pierced my cloak and gown, and I shivered even as sweat trickled down my back.

An hour passed. Then two. And still we rode, eating up the frozen countryside.

My world shrank to the dark sky, the blinding snow, and the rhythmic sound of our horses' hooves flying over the ground. The galloping pace shook my bones, and I found myself clenching my jaw as I leaned over the beast's neck. Varick looked at me now and then, but he didn't slow. And he didn't speak in my head again. He was a big, powerful presence at my side, his own cloak snapping behind him.

Maybe the cold and my discomfort kept me from noticing the *other* powerful presence until we were nearly upon it.

The Thicket.

Suddenly, the forest was a towering barrier before us. Its darkness was so absolute I could barely make out the shapes of the trees. But I didn't need to see them. I could feel them.

My horse could, too, because it reared without warning, nearly tossing me from its back.

Varick was beside me at once, his quick hands seizing my reins and pulling the beast's head down. His warhorse was steady as a rock. He controlled it effortlessly, squeezing its flanks with his thighs as he wrestled with my mount. When he got it under control, he slid from his saddle and examined its legs. His low curse echoed in the night.

"Your horse has gone lame. You'll have to ride with me." He gripped my waist and settled me across his saddle.

"Will my horse be all right?" I asked, shivering atop the warhorse as he hobbled my mount.

He was silent until he swung into the saddle behind me, bringing the scent of leather and clean sweat. "A farmer will find it and drain it."

"Kill it?" My heart squeezed. The poor beast had run for hours in the snow. And now it would die.

Varick wrapped an arm around my waist and urged the warhorse into a trot. "We are vampires, Given. The gods saw fit to make us thrive on blood."

I wanted to look back at the horse, but I kept my gaze forward as we moved toward the Thicket. In a way, I envied the creature. It wouldn't see its end coming. And it didn't have to face the wall of trees.

"We won't enter the forest," Varick said, probably sensing my tension. "There's a village at the border. I know a guide who will take you to Aberwas for a fee. He's reliable, and he's good with a sword."

Questions spun through my head. What happened when I reached Aberwas? Where would I stay? How *long* would I stay, and would Laurent search for me? As my husband, he had every right to force me back to Lar Katerin. That was the law in all of Ter Isir. A runaway wife could never truly be safe anywhere.

But at the moment, my immediate concern was the Thicket. It crowded around us, the wall of trees blocking out the sky. We couldn't reach Wesyfedd without skirting the treeline. As we neared it, goosebumps lifted on my skin. I

thought I saw movement in my peripheral vision, but when I looked, there was nothing.

A high-pitched shriek split the air.

A scream lodged in my throat, and I grabbed Varick's forearm so hard my fingers hurt.

"It's nothing," he said, his voice low at my temple. "Just an animal."

My heart pounded. The wind had died down, but snow still spun around us. The trees were still, the forest eerily quiet. The warhorse's hooves crunched loudly over the snow.

And power flowed around us. It emanated in waves so thick I felt like I might glimpse them if I squinted. So I kept my eyes as wide as possible, and I didn't look left or right. I stared straight ahead, my gaze on the rolling hills that bordered Wesyfedd. If I didn't look, I wouldn't see anything. Maybe I'd fall asleep, and when I woke we'd be in the village Varick spoke of. I'd put the journey and the Thicket behind me, and tomorrow I could worry about what came next.

A shout pierced the silence. A second later, a deep voice bellowed, "Stop in the name of the king!"

Laurent. There were no kings in Wesyfedd. The only king on this side of the Rift was my husband, and now he'd come to claw me back to his side. Or worse.

Varick squeezed my waist and kicked his horse into a gallop. We lurched forward, crashing over sticks and fallen leaves. Snow flew, and the sounds of pursuit rang out behind us.

Varick's horse was fast, but it had run for hours already, and now it was weighted down by both of us. Without warning, Varick pulled the reins hard to the left and plunged us into the trees.

I gasped and gripped his arm more tightly. Branches tore at my clothes. Varick's harsh breaths sounded in my ear. The trees whipped by as he urged the horse faster.

And everywhere, power swelled. I saw it now—a green fog that blanketed the ground. It parted in front of us, wisps trailing across the forest floor. My skin grew damp, and I felt the power clinging to me like spiderwebs. I wanted to wipe my face and shake it from my hair, but I didn't dare let go of Varick. Somehow, I knew that if I fell in this place, I might never get back up.

“AMET.”

Laurent's voice boomed. His power—a force altogether different from the fog—wrapped around me and yanked hard. I fell. Varick fell with me. Together, we crashed to the forest floor in a tangle of flailing limbs and screaming horse. My back struck the ground and then bowed.

And it was in that moment that I realized I couldn't breathe. My mouth stretched wide, but I couldn't suck in air. I'd stopped breathing, and some part of my brain registered that Laurent had commanded it.

My vision dimmed. My fingers curled into claws that dug into the dirt. Every cell within me strained for air, but it wouldn't come. In some still, cool part of my mind, I realized I was dying.

Leaves crunched and a black mantle swirled in the corner of my eye.

“Rem,” Laurent said quietly.

Air rushed into my lungs. I coughed violently and flopped onto my side. Somewhere nearby, I heard Varick wheezing. I lay in the dirt and struggled to catch my breath.

Black boots appeared in front of me. Laurent crouched, his forearm slung over his leather-clad knee. His rings were gone, replaced with thick, white bandages.

“You're far from home, princess.”

I struggled to a sitting position. *“Don't call me that.”*

There was a rustling sound behind me, and then Varick's deep voice rumbled. *“Laurent, we need to leave. Now.”*

Laurent didn't take his gaze off me. "I'll speak to you in a moment, General. Right now, I have a few questions for my wife."

"I have questions for you, too," I said, standing on shaky legs. Everything hurt, but I was too vulnerable on the ground. Laurent rose, too, and he seemed larger now. More dangerous. Snow dotted his hair. His jaw was shadowed with dark stubble. Menace huddled around him like a cloak. We stood in a clearing with a ring of trees around us.

I took a step back, my slipper sinking into the mud. "You said you couldn't bind people without placing your blood on them. Another lie?"

"You're one to talk of lying."

Deflection. He did it whenever he didn't want to answer a question or divulge information.

"Laurent." Varick strode from the fog, which seemed suddenly thicker. "Your Grace, we shouldn't linger in the Thicket."

I lifted my chin as I faced off with my husband. "I admit I should have told you about the solstone."

Laurent's eyes gleamed. "Don't forget your little trip to Sithistra."

"I haven't, my lord. It was a mistake to keep those things from you. But you kept things from me, too. How could you plot to kill my child?"

He swung his gaze to Varick. "You told her."

Varick radiated tension. He barely looked at Laurent, instead darting his gaze around as if he sought to peer between the trees. "We can speak of it later. The three of us, back in Lar Katerin. But right now we need to move."

"Oh, now you want to return to the city?" Anger flashed in Laurent's eyes. His voice rose. "How cozy, the three of us riding home together. I'll be sure to make myself scarce so the two of you can scheme in private."

Anger threatened to choke me. “It was *you* who schemed. You were going to sacrifice an innocent child to the Rift.”

“It’s the prophecy.”

“It’s monstrous.”

He stepped toward me, and his growl echoed around us. “Monstrous is letting an entire kingdom die under a naked sun. You can’t hide behind your humanity anymore, Given. You said vows before all the gods. You let me put the crown of Nor Doru on your head. Trust me when I say the weight is heavy. You’re a halfling no longer. You’re a vampire, and we are *all* monsters here. Even you, princess.”

Varick winced. “Dammit, keep your voice down.”

Fog swirled thicker. Somewhere in the forest, the high-pitched shriek sounded again.

Ice slid down my spine. I moved closer to Varick, my anger forgotten.

But Laurent clung to his. He didn’t seem to notice the shriek or the fog. His eyes tracked my movement as I stepped toward Varick.

My husband’s expression hardened. He extended his uninjured hand. Black waves rolled from his fingertips. Tendrils of inky power curled like smoke and spread outward.

Varick’s eyes went wide. “Laurent, don’t do this here.”

Laurent’s fangs descended. “You want us to return to the city? Fine, but the two of you are going in irons. And since you’re so fond of running, I’m going to hold you until I can gather my men.” He nicked his thumb on his fang and strode to a tree. He smeared blood on the trunk. “*Hesseth.*”

Varick lurched toward him. “Laurent, don’t!”

Laurent spun and threw out his hand. “Ricti.” A smoky, black wave lashed out. It caught Varick in the chest and sent him staggering back.

I clamped a hand over my mouth to keep from crying out. Laurent went quickly from tree to tree, smearing blood and

muttering priestly words under his breath. Varick stood in the center of the clearing. He appeared physically unharmed, but it was as if his feet were glued to the ground. He fought, his muscles straining, but he couldn't defeat whatever force restrained him. He clenched his fists at his sides as the fog rolled in faster.

“Laurent,” he said, his voice anguished. “I am begging you to stop. You put us all in danger using blood magic in this forest.”

“Listen to him!” I cried, awareness prickling over my skin. Something was coming. All around us, branches snapped. Slowly, I backed to the edge of the clearing. The wind picked up, carrying the distant sounds of men's voices and steel clashing against steel. And then, a man's agonized cry.

I jumped, my heart hammering so hard I felt lightheaded. The fog was so thick now, I could barely see Laurent. But I heard his hissing, foreign words.

“Laurent!” Varick shouted.

A flash of black mantle caught my eye. I gathered my skirts and rushed toward it, half-tripping, half-sliding in the snow. As I ran, the fog parted, and I saw Laurent touch his thumb to the final tree.

“*Hesseth,*” he rasped.

Power flared, and a barrier snapped into place. For a moment, I even saw it—a streak of light that raced from tree to tree.

It encircled Varick, who crashed to his knees.

At the edges of the eerie green fog, shadows moved. A sound like the thunder of horses' hooves filled the air. Close by, a high-pitched cackle rang out.

At last, Laurent seemed to notice something was wrong. He spun, confusion stamped on his features.

A horse burst from the fog. A knight from the Midnight Palace was mounted on its back. He pulled hard on the reins,

and the horse stopped at the edge of the circle of trees. In the center, the fog was so thick that Varick was barely visible.

The knight's eyes were wide, his expression terrified. Blood streaked his face. "Your Grace! There's been an attack. Many are dead. You have to come with me." As he finished, three more bloodied knights burst from the trees. All had their swords drawn.

"Save the king!" one bellowed, hurtling toward Laurent. "They're coming!"

The thunder of hooves and the snapping of branches grew louder. The fog covered everything. Shadows rushed the clearing from all sides.

"No!" Laurent yelled. Through a gap in the fog, I saw him grapple with a knight who was trying to pull him onto a horse. "I won't leave Varick!"

Everything seemed to slow down.

The fog parted more. A massive horse with glowing green eyes emerged from the trees. On its back was a male with flowing black hair and eyes like burning sapphires. His clothes were richer than anything I'd seen in any royal court. The blade of his sword was dark gray and appeared to flow like liquid metal, shiny rivulets running down the blade.

He was beautiful, with ears that curved to tapered points.

Impossible, I thought, my knees loosening. No elves survived the fall of Eldenvalla. The creature before me simply could *not* exist.

More riders emerged behind him, each one more beautiful than the last. Their eyes glowed like gems. All had ears like the black-haired rider.

The shadows swarmed Varick. His body jerked backward. An invisible force dragged him from the clearing, his boots leaving two furrows in the snow.

Laurent's mouth stretched wide, but no sound emerged. The Nor Doruvian knight hauled him into the saddle, wheeled his horse around, and fled.

Shadows pursued them.

I pressed my back against a tree smeared with Laurent's blood.

Slowly, the black-haired elf turned his head toward me. Behind him, the other elves did the same. Their heads swiveled in perfect unison, and dozens of glowing eyes latched onto me.

The black-haired elf smiled. "Given. Now is a good time to run."

I grabbed my skirts, spun, and sprinted away. Laughter rose behind me, the sound high-pitched and unnatural. Mud and snow flew as I ran. Branches lashed at my body. One caught me in the face, and I cried out but kept going. Ahead, the fog thinned, and the edge of the forest was visible. Beyond it, the curve of the road leading to Wesyfedd beckoned. But I was never going to make it. My lungs burned. The sound of horses and the wild, terrible laughter drew closer. They were right at my back. They could have easily caught me by now.

They were *letting* me run, I realized. Playing with me.

Tears streamed down my face.

Laughter in my ears. A horse's warm breath against my neck.

Suddenly, light blinded me. I tripped and fell to my hands and knees, my chest heaving. The light spread everywhere, as if someone had turned on the sun. Behind me, the laughter became deep growls and pained screams that climbed so high in pitch I threw my hands over my ears.

The light dimmed slightly. A horse crashed toward me, its form haloed by light. I tried to move, but I was too exhausted to stand. I braced myself for death.

But as the horse drew near, I saw that it carried a rider. A man sat in the saddle, his tall form blotting out the light behind him. He was human, his broad chest covered by an armored breastplate embossed with a mountain inside a laurel wreath. In some dim corner of my mind, I noted that he was

handsome. Dark eyes met mine as he leaned down and extended a gloved hand.

“Quickly. I can’t hold them for long.”

My heart pounded like a drum. “I’m with someone,” I gasped. “I can’t leave him behind.”

The dark-eyed man shook his head. “If he was behind you, he’s already dead.”

My gut clenched. Tears clogged my throat. “Who are you?”

“My name is Rhys,” he said, his dark eyes burning with intensity. “Rhys the Fair. Now, come with me if you want to live.”

The growls at my back swelled. The light around me flickered.

With my last burst of strength, I took Rhys the Fair’s hand and let him pull me onto his horse.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Pennza is a USA Today Bestselling Author of steamy paranormal romance. After stints as a lawyer and a soldier, she discovered her dream job is writing about stubborn alphas and smart heroines. She lives in the Great Lakes region with her husband and five children.

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