

SAM HALL



THE  
WOLF  
QUEEN

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## **The Wolf Queen**

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The characters and events depicted in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

 Created with Vellum

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## Author Note

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This book is written in Australian English, which is a weird lovechild of British and American English. We tend to spell things the way the Brits do (expect a lot more u's), yet also use American slang and swear more than both combined.

While many people have gone over this book, trying to find all the typos and other mistakes, they just keep on popping up like bloody rabbits. If you spot one, don't report it to Amazon, drop me an email at the below address so I can fix the issue.

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## Trigger Warning

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This book takes place in a fantasy realm, not a direct analog for our medieval period, but there are some similarities. It is not our world at all. You may notice some anachronisms and speech patterns that don't exactly fit with a medieval setting. Lets chalk that up to creative license!

### **Triggers**

This book has a LOT of triggers, so be aware.

Extensive discussion of loss of a child/miscarriage

Murder and sexual assault by bad guys but addressed as lightly as possible

Violence and war

The trauma of war

Murder of a child that is not a major or minor character. You don't read it on the page, just see the aftermath



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## Chapter 1

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I was having a nightmare.

I had them so often now that it was hard to remember which I had while awake, and which came to me in sleep. I looked about me and all around was an endless, desolate forest. The leaves had all fallen and crunched under my feet as I walked deeper; the empty branches above me stark and black, raking the grey skies. And the clouds, they loomed, grey and swollen, making me shiver with a sense of foreboding as they hung over my head like an executioner's axe.

"Mother...?" I said, in a small voice, one which I rarely allowed myself to use. The dead forest swallowed the sound and answered back with the breeze rustling through dried leaves, coupled with the skitter of hidden lizard feet. "Maiden...?"

I restricted my prayers to the two more genial forms of the triple goddess. But they didn't answer.

A harsh caw had my head whipping up and the whirr of wings alerted me to the fact I wasn't here alone. Ravens came to land on the branches in a great flock, those ebony eyes shining as they watched me walk.

"Mother...?" I was pleading now. "Maiden...!"

*Crone.*

The Morrigan's voice was both the sound of a sword's blade sharpening on a whetstone, and the wet slice of it through flesh and blood.

"Mother!" I shouted, wanting to drown out that voice; but how did you do that when it was inside your own head? "Maiden!"

They were not who I would have cried out to for help in my waking life,

and that was how I knew it was a dream. Instead, I was forced to do something that my non-dreaming self would find nonsensical: to passively watch, with a growing sense of horror while the ravens flapped their wings and cawed, as she landed.

The golden sheen of her feathers let me know who'd joined us, but if that wasn't enough, there was this: the golden-headed raven clacked its beak as it stared at me and then said the word.

*Crone.*

“Moth—!”

*Crone.*

“Maid—!”

*Crone. Morrigan.*

Then I heard her low laughter, saw her focus shifting down my body. My gaze followed the path of hers, and what I saw had me stumbling backwards. Blood covered my hands, and when I slapped them down on my dress, more spread. I realised with horror that, beyond what was on me, blood also bloomed from deep within, seeping free with that ponderous dripping feeling of a woman's moon time, and more besides.

I clutched at my stomach, feeling the searing pain that came, but it was nothing compared to that which stabbed at my heart. I had sliced off my hair with a knife; I had watched Nordred be burned on his pyre; I had seen the Reavers swarming up the walls of Snowmere like rats in a wheat silo. And now I saw this.

My unborn child dying.

They'd told me I needed to be a mother to my chosen people, but to do that I'd had to lose the baby that grew within me.

“No...!” I wailed, my voice ringing out through the trees, plaintive and despairing, the ravens' caws a harsh counterpoint. I sank down to my knees and wrapped my arms around my middle, as if I could hold the child inside me, keep the babe safe and secure.

*You've developed the strength of the Maiden, the Morrigan's pitiless voice told me. And loved with the warmth of the Mother, but you'll need my cruelty before this is done.*

“No!” I barked that out so loudly, so vehemently, that I startled myself awake. Blinking my eyes, I realised that I was sitting up on my bedroll, one hand stretched out before me, the vision of that nightmare forest in my mind superimposed over the darkened canvas of our tent as the first few tendrils of

dawn began to slowly lighten it. Beside me, Axe had rolled upright, grabbing his weapon and looking for the threat, before turning to stare at me.

I stared back.

Tears streamed down my face, shed silently, even as the others shifted restlessly in their sleep. I loved that they could sleep on, but hated it as well. How dare anyone, anything, enjoy a moment's peace when all of mine was gone?

Axe moved closer, moving slowly in the way that people did when gentling wild animals, and for good reason. Ever since that awful moment of realisation in the cave below the citadel, when I'd learned that I'd lost the babe I hadn't known I had—gods, was it only a week ago?—I'd shied away like I was half-wild whenever one of them approached me. But when I didn't pull away from him, he gathered me close and simply held me. The tremendous bulk of his hard body was exactly what I needed. My eyes closed and I sank into him, drawing comfort from his strength.

“C'mon, lass,” he said, finally, nodding to my bow that I'd left beside me the night before. “We've got to find meat if we're to feed the masses. We may as well get a head start on things.”

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## Chapter 2

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The world was quiet at this time, the point between night and dawn. Wet grass swallowed our footsteps as we walked over to the cooking fire. Someone had left the coals burning, ready for it to be awakened and fed with wood when the camp came back to life. And it was our job to provide something for them to cook. A pot of water had been left to simmer over the coals, and I scooped some hot water up in a cup to make a morning brew, adding leaves that left a strange astringent aftertaste in the mouth. Not tea, but it was all we had. I made the same for Axe and he took it with a nod.

We sipped the bitter drink as the world came back to us in the sounds of birds calling and leaves shifting in the breeze. I shuddered at the reminders of my nightmare. But as I scoured the darkened tree line, I saw no hint of ravens and that was comfort enough. I stood up and tossed the dregs of my cup onto the grass. Axe followed, as he always did now. Each one of them had reacted differently to our loss and this was his way. He was my very big, very attentive shadow.

“The east wood?” I asked him, once we were away from the tent city we had created.

“Been there too often. The pickings are getting slim,” he responded, with a shake of his head.

Pickings were getting slim everywhere on the border between Strelae and Grania. We needed to move on, move beyond the borders to the soft lands of my birthplace. The wheat in my father’s fields alone could keep my people going for some time. My fingers tightened around the grip of my bow and then I stepped forward.

“The north then.”

We didn't allow our people to hunt north, deeper into Strelae. Callum had gotten what he wanted. He'd taken the capital as his and installed his dread Reavers. We knew this because we got news each day as more and more groups of refugees found their way to us. More mouths to feed, more people to care for. As Axe and I set out, I shook my head free of the last vestiges of my nightmare, knowing that the message it had portrayed was wrong.,

I was a mother. I was mother to Del and Jan, a relationship I accepted with all of my heart. But then there was everyone else. Everyone who'd been forced from Snowmere. Everyone who'd been driven from their homes, having had their lives and their families shattered. Everyone I'd failed to keep safe. I'd dreamed of being queen, of dragging a heavy, heavy coronation mantle down the aisle, the weight of a crown pushing down on me, but I hadn't understood the significance of that weight until now when I had the responsibility for all these lives on my shoulders. That was what drove me to be out, hunting, before the sun was up.

But wasn't that what every mother did?

Pushed aside her own pain and sleeplessness and went out into the world, determined to bring back everything her children needed. I felt that deep ache, one that had hollowed out the life inside me and replaced it with pain, and knew that was exactly what I had to do now.

I'd crept out onto the moors the morning I'd met Axe and the rest of my mates, full of youthful confidence and enthusiasm. I'd been ready to prove something to myself, and I'd done it, in taking down that stag. But I felt so much older now. Looking back to that morning, my aims, my hopes, my dreams all seemed so childish. I'd felt like I was poised on the edge of greatness without any idea of what was to come. But as I crept through the trees now, placing my feet precisely so as to not snap twigs or crunch leaves, Axe my silent shadow, I felt an echo of that. A sense of something greater that burned inside me. Something that wouldn't be denied—despite my father's attempts to cow me. It made sense that I would become Strelan and two-souled, because a wolf had ever lived within me.

And now, my feet became her paws, my nose was as sensitive as hers as we scoured the forest, looking for our prey. We halted and stood in place with a predator's implacable patience when we heard heavy steps further in. We glanced at each other, Axe and I, sharing that strange pack sense that came naturally to our wolves and, then, we saw him.

Kings of old had used the stag as their emblem and it was easy to see why. He was a magnificent creature, standing at the river's edge, his muzzle dripping, a full rack of horns on his head like a crown as he scanned the forest, looking for threats. But I couldn't see his beauty, his majesty, not right now. My belly was empty enough to ache with it and so were many others', I was willing to bet, so I raised my bow in a fluid movement that barely made a sound. Axe appeared noiselessly at my shoulder.

"That's it, lass," he said in barely a whisper. "You can take him. You know just where to hit the big bastard." His voice was the perfect opposite to what my father's would have been if he had stood by me on the moors that day. "Just breathe out and let that arrow fly."

I knew, Axe knew, that I would hit the stag. It was an innate sense in myself I hadn't trusted until pressed, but Nordred had given me at least one thing and that was this. I was a machine, as men typically were, and I could engage all my cogs and wheels and use my body as a weapon—

*To kill.*

I heard the Morrigan's snicker and it almost queered my aim, my arm jerking up slightly, but I corrected at the last minute before I let the arrow fly.

*Killer.*

The deer reared up, ready to fight off an unseen enemy. That enemy was me. But it collapsed down in a messy heap, the arrow having struck true and hit him straight in the heart. It didn't stop the beast from gasping out its last breath as we ran over, or its long legs flailing as I got close.

The bright red blood staining its pelt caught at me and I paused for a second, staring, transfixed, as memories overlapped with reality.

Blood on my hands, on my armour, seeping from between my legs. Too bright a red to be my courses. This was the blood of—

"A quick death, lass," Axe prompted, breaking the terrible spell I was under. "That's all we can give him, but it's a gift we must make."

My gift was death—it seemed to have become my constant companion—so his words made sense. I put my hand on the knife sheathed on my belt and approached.

"Morrigan, dread queen..."

Nordred had taught me these words on the battlefield and I said them again now.

"Gift me strength of arm, so I might reap the souls of the unworthy in your honour." I jerked my knife free. "May my sword cut through my



enemies like this knife does the wheat.”

The stag’s head thrashed, like he’d rally and deprive me of my sacrifice, but I knew it was the last moment of fight before the end.

“Make me your vessel, death dealer, slayer. Let me litter the battlefield with corpses as offering to your divine beak!”

I fucking despised the dark goddess and I threw that spite into my words, right as I sliced the knife across the stag’s throat, sending my hatred up with my prayer as I stepped back. Then staggered, feeling a rush of... something. The sound of wings fluttering filled my ears as I fought to stay upright, my head light, my body filled with something that throbbed and pulsed. Axe leapt forward to steady me, but that just made it worse. When he gasped, I looked down, saw the blue light that glowed from our skin, growing brighter and brighter until I forced myself to pull away.

Reality came slamming back in.

Hot blood stained my skin, again, and I looked down at my dress and saw I’d made a mess of it. Annis would be vexed with me. She had ideas of dressing me as a queen, but she didn’t realise what that meant in Strelae. Their queens had ruled by being conduits to the goddesses’ powers, something Callum had been able to wrest away due to some accident of birth and will. But he wouldn’t retain that control for long, not if I had anything to bloody say about it. Ravens landed around us, cawing and eyeing the corpse with greedy eyes, just as Axe moved forward.

“Shoo!” I said, flicking my bloodied hands at them and smiling at the sounds of their disgruntled cries. “Return to your mistress. There’s nothing to report here.”

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## Chapter 3

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“I’ve got it.” Axe slid an arm around the stag and then hoisted its dead weight up on his shoulders. I just blinked at this display of strength. I knew in theory how strong each one of them was, but it was moments like this when it was pushed home. “Many of your burdens I cannot carry, lass,” he told me. “But I can at least bear this.”

“Axe...” I took a step toward him, hearing in his voice the notes of regret, of self-deprecation, and I couldn’t bear it. Although I turned the blade of derision against myself most days, I couldn’t tolerate it cutting into him. I moved closer yet and felt him go very still as I placed my hand on his chest. “You have far more value than that.”

“Do I?” There was a note of challenge in his voice as he shifted the stag until it sat more comfortably. “And what could I hope to do for you? I couldn’t save Snowmere for you. I couldn’t keep that prick from cutting down Nordred. I couldn’t even stop—”

I placed my fingers against his lips, feeling the prickle of his beard as I did so. His eyes widened, shining bright blue as he moved his mouth to press the smallest kiss there. I drew my fingers away and his face fell, until I went up on tip toes and kissed him instead. His fingers tightened around the stag’s hocks, gripping it tight to stop himself from reaching for me.

“You are here. Sometimes that’s enough.” I pressed my forehead to his before I continued, quietly, intently. “You don’t question what I do, but simply make sure I am not alone when I do it. That’s what I need, Axe. That trust is exactly what I need.”

“Then you shall have it,” he rasped out. “As long as I take breath. Always

and forever, lass. I'll be there, at your back." A sharp caw had us jerking guiltily apart, as if we were clandestine lovers caught in a forbidden tryst. "And we better get back. Who knows what the Morrigan is up to," Axe growled. "Is she forwarding our position back to Callum or...?"

Or did she stand with me? That was the question. There was no reason to believe she was going to, her treatment of our people at the battle of Snowmere had made that plain, but... I watched the raven hop forward across the leaves. Perhaps there was a way to strip Callum of that power and take it for ourselves.

"WELL, THAT'S A BIG BEAUTY," Annis said approvingly as we walked back into camp. She rubbed her hand down the flat span between the stag's eyes. "Not sure it'll go far though. Soup." The other women around her nodded. "Broth from the bones, soup from the meat, padded out with some of the barley, though we'll be needing some of that soon." A meaningful look shot my way.

"For that we'll have to go into Grania," I replied.

The women all stilled at my words, though what I was saying was hardly news. We'd been edged back, back, back, until it was either cross the border or fall to the Reavers' blades.

"My father's estates first." I nodded sharply. "At least I know what to expect there."

"Grania is the granary of Strelae," one of the women said with a frown. "Good grain that should've always been ours. 'Bout time we took it back."

Easy for her to say, I thought, but I held the words back. The people I was born amongst, they had long past assumed ownership of the land, and the current generation viewed the Strelans as the interlopers, not themselves. We would not be met with open arms. But in my mind's eye I saw again the vision I had caught right before I'd fallen to the ground: the Granian king bending the knee at my command.

"We'll try," I said with a nod.

"Plotting our next move at the cooking fire?" Dane strode forward, raising a wry eyebrow while taking in me and the other women. "It seems the hearth is a more productive place than your council, Your Majesty."

He bowed to me as he said my title, but it felt jarring, wrong, as though it put a distance between us. Worse, he was the one making sure it was there. I

knew he'd meant it as the highest of compliments because it was his birthright, but...

"Women make the decisions, then we persuade men it was their idea all along," Annis said, sending the ladies cackling. But before I could say anything, Gael strode directly to me.

"You're all right?" He took my head in his hands, searching my face then running his fingers over me, as if he couldn't believe anything I said, not until he'd checked for himself. The feel of him, it awakened a terrible joy and pain at his touch. "I woke and you were gone."

"With Axe," I replied. He paused then, shooting his brother a dark look. "We went hunting. You tell me I'm queen. Well, I must provide for my people, mustn't I?"

Although I kept my voice gentle, the fractured blue of his eye blazed bright.

"You send some of the lads into the forest," he said. "You tell them where to go and what to do. Bugger it, I'll go for you. You don't put yourself in danger, not..."

Not after I already had, that went unspoken. I stiffened and Gael's brows creased, his gaze growing more intent.

"Not anywhere near the Reavers, not within *her* reach. Promise me."

I knew what he wanted, to tell him that all would be well; that we would have other children, that we would only think of our first, wistfully, from time to time. But I couldn't do that. I couldn't promise anyone anything. Instead I gave what little I could, running my hand along his face, as though learning the shape of it to store it away in the vault of my mind forever.

"Darcy was with me the whole time," Axe said.

"And what were you doing?" Gael snapped, looking down at the stag his brother had deposited on the ground. "Letting her go into the forest?!"

"I don't 'let' Darcy do anything."

Axe stepped up, going toe to toe with his brother and I watched it all unfold with a jaundiced eye. People had died—so very many people—and many more would again if we didn't get things right. When you considered everything on the grand scale, I didn't matter. Couldn't they see that? Kings and queens could rule from a gilt throne one day, and be worm food the next. What difference did someone's title or position in society make?

I heard the far-off chuckle of the Morrigan inside my head, and I shook myself, needing to be rid of her noxious commentary.

“If I *am* queen here, then I command the two of you to stop arguing: all of you to stop arguing. If you have energy to burn, then find us more meat, because there are many mouths to feed and more likely to arrive today.”

Gael and Axe stepped back from each other, which was what I’d wanted. But their stricken expressions, quickly smothered, pricked at me. But before I could think of how to go about approaching the issue, it became clear that I would not get to dwell on the matter for long.

“Darcy!”

I knew who called my name as soon as I heard their voices and I fixed a warm smile on my face, even while I felt cold and dead inside. I opened my arms as Weyland smiled, escorting Jan and Del as the children came pelting towards me.

“You weren’t there in the morning,” Del murmured against my ribs after he had flung his arms around me. The realisation that I had left him to worry that I might have met the same fate as his parents cut deep. “The lords didn’t know where you were.”

“One did.” I nodded to Axe, then smoothed a hand down Del’s face while I ruffled Jan’s hair. “We went hunting.” I stooped to pick Jan up, the weight of her comforting as she locked her legs around my waist. I found myself wanting to hold her tight, cradle her in my arms, as if that would keep her safe. “We wanted to make sure we had a breakfast fit for a princess,” I told her. She giggled as I tapped her nose.

“I’ll come with you, next time,” Del insisted. “I have my sword.” His hand strayed to the hilt.

“And you’ll need to practise with it with the other boys.” Every lad in the camp over the age of eight had been conscripted into a militia of sorts and my men worked with them, and what was left of the army, to try and train them. Nordred had done the same with me when I had been a child but, to my eyes, Del looked so much younger than I ever could have been. “Now, if you’re looking for jobs, you can start peeling some root vegetables.”

The two of them groaned, but as I moved to sit down on a log beside the fire and pulled out a knife, Del did too. Jan scrambled out of my lap to go and fetch the mealy specimens we’d been able to find in the dormant fields of abandoned farms, and we worked to peel them together.

“We’ll need to eat well, because we must move again,” I told them.

“Again?” Jan whined, flumping down in a heap at my feet.

“Again.” I saw it superimposed over her, a glittering castle, complete

with its court and within it? A man with the strangest amber eyes. “There’s a grand castle we must take in your honour, Princess Jan.”

“We’re going into Grania?” Del asked, eyes wide.

“We’re going into Grania,” I confirmed.

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## Chapter 4

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This was what was left of Strelae's military commanders and aristocracy.

I walked into the hall of the ancient farmhouse we were using as a council chamber while we were camped on the surrounding land. Each man jumped to his feet, waiting until I was seated. It should've been intimidating. When my father had held such meetings, I'd been supposed to make myself scarce or sit there, quietly playing music on my lyre as the men spoke. But as I felt my mates cluster around me, I knew I was the one that had to make the decisions now.

"Please, sit," I said, looking around at those who were gathered.

They all resumed their seats, on old boxes or logs that had been dragged inside. Some were more grateful than others not to remain standing. Many were carrying wounds, still healing, and that was what made this so important.

"We have to cross the border in Grania," I announced.

I heard a series of mumbles around the room, and while there was suspicion, concern and even fear in their voices, there was no note of surprise.

"My queen," the general said, doing his best to school his expression and tone into an attitude of respect. "If you'd asked this of us before the fall of Snowmere, I'd have gone so willingly and with a joyful heart." His eyes met mine all too keenly. "We all were raised on tales that when a queen returned to the throne of Strelae, a true queen, our country would become whole again, but..."

He glanced around the room and I saw several men nodding along to his

words. The general was their spokesperson obviously.

“Our army is decimated. We are training young lads, not in swordplay, but in how to fight on a battlefield. We are weak. You are...”

He’d overstepped, he knew it, and he stopped himself from uttering anything more. My back was already stiffening before I even thought about it consciously.

“Determined.” I bit that word off, then softened it with a smile. “Because we have no other options. The borderlands between the two countries were never especially fertile.” I glanced out the open window. “Too much stone, and slate, not enough good soil.” Then my focus shifted back to them. “But Grania has all of that and more.”

“And a fucking army thousands strong.” This was Lord Berrick, one of the more useful noblemen that had joined us. He was famously blunt in his manner, but I could cope with that, welcome it even. I had no time for the endless dancing around that everyone seemed to want to do at court.

“An army we need,” I said. “If we can convince my former countrymen —”

“Convince the Granians of anything other than looking after their own arses?” Maynard had been a petty officer, but the upheaval after our loss at Snowmere had meant he’d received a rapid promotion through the ranks.

“No. We must convince the Granians that they need to look after their own arses,” I corrected.

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Dane’s smile sharpened, then he nodded. “It is the only way forward. Either that or we quit the country altogether and try our luck over the mountains in the lowland countries.”

There was a moment of silence. Some Strelans had done that after my people had first invaded the country, seeing the hopelessness of the situation and preferring to leave their country than be cooped up in one part of it. We could do that, I thought, the idea sparking something inside my chest—a tiny flame that needed fuel to burn—but instead of encouraging it, I squashed it viciously. Most Strelans had stayed, tied to this country by blood or worship, family or culture, and they had persisted, no matter what the people I was born into had done.

We would also persist.

“Exactly.” I nodded to Dane and he smiled wider, his whole face lighting up. I basked in that radiant expression for as long as I could spare him my focus, then continued to drive my point home. “Strelae has been a thorn in



the side of Grania since the moment they landed on our shores. My father's people were mightily inconvenienced by the fact that people already existed in rich lands that the Granians wanted to take and they discovered just how sharp that thorn was. In Eleanor's time, Strelans fought Granians, tore them apart on the battlefield, making clear just how little use their light armour was, forcing the Granians to develop a heavy plate that could withstand a half-shifted Strelan."

I saw each man straighten then, that valiant fight for freedom seeming to fire something in them.

"And our people very nearly won the day. I'm not sure if it's taught in schools on this side of the border, but the generals needed the alliance with Strelae as much as Strelans needed Granian aggression to stop." I swallowed hard, feeling a deeply entrenched need to keep this information from them, the facts having been drilled into the head of every Granian whilst in the school room. "It's painted now as a glorious victory, but the fact remains that the Granian army was being resupplied by the Farradorian Empire and those supply lines had been broken. If Eleanor..."

That sentence could have ended in so many ways, but instead of going through each one, I fixed my gaze on each man.

"We need to save our people. We need to take our country back, drive Callum out and burn his fucking corpse on a pyre, to ensure that he and his Reavers never rise again. And to do that, we have to get across the border; claim some of those rich lands for ourselves."

I didn't see the men around me or the walls of the old farmhouse. Rather my mind's eye conjured a familiar keep, surrounded by moors on one side and good farmland on the other. It was a place I'd loved and hated in turns, but now felt curiously dispassionate about. It was an asset, held by a weak man, and I needed to take it.

"We'll take my father's lands," I told them, "and hole up there, eat, heal, replenish. If we can succeed there, we can succeed anywhere. And then we can move forward, taking Strelan lands back, piece by piece, and raising a mighty army to sweep back in and smash Callum's skull against the base of my throne."

I was telling them what they wanted to hear, but words alone would not be enough to convince people to take such a drastic step. Even so, the murmurs grew louder, more excited, and I felt as though I was absorbing that energy like a sponge. My eyes found Dane's again, holding them for a

second, seeing the bright gleam there, as well as the fear. How the hell would we achieve this? We both wondered, but that mind that was always ticking away inside his head had found a worthy problem to ponder. We would find a way. We had to.

“Darcy contains the power of the true queen inside her,” he told them and somehow that was enough to sway the gathered council. “With that power, we will succeed.”

“Which means you need to teach me about what that power is supposed to do.”

I said the words gently, then had to fight to stop myself from locking my teeth together, because that’s when I saw it. The blue fire of healing that Gael and I had been able to summon, then that feeling of pack that came from fighting by the Maidens’ sides and last of all this. My bloody hand, those crystals, the transformation of every one of my people into wolves as we streamed through the caverns to here.

“That’s something I think I can assist with.” Selene, head of the Wolf Maidens, was standing at the back of the room, but now she came forward. “If you were born in Strelae, if you were the queen to be, you would have come to us and we would’ve trained you.” Her eyes slid to the men around. “That’s what our order used to do, before we were reduced to being dance masters for pampered girls.”

“Show us then,” the general said, with a nod. “Show us what the power of the true queen actually is, beyond the myths, and then maybe I can find a way for us to invade Grania.”

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## Chapter 5

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Selene strode onto the rocky field we were using as a practice ground with a strange kind of confidence buoying her step, but it was one I didn't share.

And neither did my mates.

"We're going to... what?" Gael muttered under his breath, shooting everyone else dark looks, even as he moved closer to me. "Force Darcy to perform like a fucking monkey in front of everyone, when she should be resting?"

He stepped in front of me, cupping my cheeks in his hands in a heartbreakingly familiar way, but it felt like an age since he'd last done this. I stared into that fractured blue eye, wanting to dive into the cloudy depths and just lose myself, but I couldn't. When I went to pull away, he stopped me.

"Darcy, love..." He was hurting just as much as I was and that's what made it so hard to be around him. Each one of us was an overfilled cup of pain and we kept our distance for fear of splashing on the other. "You don't have to... We could..."

I placed my hands over his and closed my eyes for just a second, letting the war, our situation, everything just wash away. I felt him, felt the bond, like an invisible rope that tethered the two of us together, never letting us get too far away from the other. We had tested its limits since emerging from the caves under Snowmere, but now that I was here, back in his orbit, something inside me settled.

"That." My eyes flicked open to find we had an audience. Selene watched all five of us with what seemed almost a wistful gaze before seeming to realise, her cheeks warming slightly. "That's what you need in order to tap

into your powers and you already know this.” Her tone was slightly chiding, implying that it was obvious, but when I looked at her in confusion, she continued. “Connection. It’s where all people find their power. We Maidens tap into a collective power.” Ayla, one of the other Maidens, sidled up to her and Selene slung her arm around the other woman’s neck. “It’s why we never take husbands, never bear children. Our connection is utterly focussed on each other.”

She gazed down into the other woman’s eyes and, at that, I understood what she was saying. Something throbbed between them, something hot and true. Both women flushed before turning their attention back to us.

“You are a pack.”

I knew it, felt it, in so many ways every day, though many of which I discounted. Lying down beside them in our tent and knowing that they were there, sometimes needing to hear the slow whistle of their breaths before I could fall asleep myself. The way Axe dogged my every step, guarding me even to the point of waiting outside the latrines. The way Weyland made sure the children were all right when I was dragged away by one of the many demands on my time, then delivered them to me at just the right moment, to bring me back to what was important. His easy smile, Gael’s much more guarded one and Dane’s keen, searching look, like he saw something inside me that I didn’t recognise. I nodded then in agreement with her words.

“A pack is like a family, but bound by tighter bonds, stronger instincts. Look after it, protect it, provide for it,” she said. “That sense of pack can extend to a large family group, in the case of a lord, or even to a whole town or county. But for a queen?” Her smile had an edge to it, part mad, part sad. “The whole country must become her pack and she must lead it.” She turned to the general. “What is the objective that you want this pack to achieve?”

He frowned slightly, then, catching her idea, scanned the nearby landscape before nodding to the dilapidated shed over on the right.

“Take that out as quickly as possible.”

Selene turned to me, not the others, and her eyes burned bright into mine.

“You have your objective, now you just need to carry it out.” Axe hefted his weapon in his hands, but she shook her head at him. “Toss your weapons to one side.” Axe made a pained sound. “I’m not saying don’t use them in battle...” She scanned each man. “You’re all warriors, practised in your own individual skills and strengths as fighters, but right now, that’s not what’s needed. You need to surrender those talents to her.”

My eyes dropped to the ground as I studied the grass with undue interest.

I felt like I'd suffered more than the loss of my child in all of this. Each time one of my mates reached out for me, I found it hard to let them in. My childhood was hardly a loveless place, but... everyone who'd tried to help me, support me, had needed to do so clandestinely, including Nordred. That pain, it throbbed again like a new wound, seeping blood everywhere, and my hands were too busy pressing down, trying to staunch the flow, to spare time for anyone else's wounds. But when I looked up, I found the eyes of each one of my mates boring into mine.

Because they were hurting too.

Nordred was a legend to them and someone who I loved, and so they grieved his passing, but... they were mourning the loss of other, fundamental relationships in their lives. Their father... Their mother... And their child... Because that's what the babe would've been: theirs, ours. Another child for us to bestow all our love upon, a sibling for Jan and Del to fuss over and protect. Another member of the family we were each trying so desperately to build. And, as that realisation struck me, that's when I felt it.

Their love, their pain, had been battering at my shields without me registering it, but it was only now that the hard shell I had been hiding inside started to crack. My eyes burned with the effort of keeping my tears back, because I didn't want them obscuring this. I loved each one of my mates with my whole heart and that was what hurt the most.

The symbol of that love—our child—had been torn from us. More than my country had been torn apart; the fabric of our relationships had, as well. And while I was focussed on the survival of everyone and everything outside of our pack, I couldn't focus on us. But Selene's words had helped me to see that the centre—the heart—of our pack needed healing before we could be strong for each other. I shifted my feet tentatively, then took just one step forward, and somehow that made it easier. As I moved toward them, my mates stepped forward to meet me, ready to broach that gap—and I realised that they had been waiting to do so; waiting until I was ready.

"Darcy..." Weyland whispered my name as he pulled me into his chest and I felt warmed through as soon as we touched, a sensation that would usually only be achieved by standing in the sun for an hour. His hands went to my hair, collecting it up and balling it at my nape, as the others drew closer.

"We can do this, lass." Axe's voice was rough, ragged with emotion, and

full of a certainty I didn't feel, but perhaps that was how it worked. Each one of us provided what the others lacked. "You're tough, fight like the bloody devil, and rush in where angels fear to tread, but you need to remember that we're right there with you." His hand landed on my back, stroking up and down my spine.

"I'll go through hell for you—and I'll always come out the other side." My eyes flicked sideways to see Gael standing there, tense, his fingers flexing. Then he reached out and touched me, ran his fingers up my arm, gripped my bicep. "Nothing will stop me. Nothing. You'll wear the Granian king's guts for garters if that's what you need, I promise."

"Darcy." Dane was the one who was always controlled, contained, so the emotion throbbing in his voice made my head whip around. "You've done so much, sacrificed so much..." His brow creased and his eyes began to shine with unshed tears. "You've lost so much and... you don't have to do this."

"I do," I whispered, without pause for thought.

"No, lass, you don't." He looked around us, reconnecting with the real world, the bigger world that never allowed us to stay in our own little reality for too long. "My father raised me for just this role. I can take this burden from you. I put it on your shoulders initially because I recognised you as queen the moment I saw you; but I never asked you if that's what you wanted." His focus shifted back to me. "I'm asking that now. Someone needs to do the job, but it doesn't have to be you. I can..." His voice broke. "You haven't claimed me yet. You can reject the bond. I can step up and—"

"No." I shook my head, able to see it all now, the good and the bad. Dane had locked himself away, back at the citadel, moving pieces of paper around to make sure we were safe, and that distance would grow and grow if he took on the role of king. He'd force himself to do it, not be able to stop for even a second, lest one person be harmed by his inactivity. "No."

Trailing my hands down Axe's chest and pulling away from Gael, I turned to Dane then moved closer to him, unable to stop that feeling of tension when I went to touch him. Because, if I had encased myself in a hard shell, he'd built a whole castle around himself. One full of ramparts and arrow slits, traps and drawbridges. Despite all his efforts at keeping himself set apart, his breath came out in noisy gasps when I slid my hand up his arm. Strelans clasp forearms by way of greeting, but this didn't feel friendly. The word was too mild, insipid to describe this. As my palm swivelled up the taut mass of his arm, his hand latched around mine, gripping it tight and using it

to yank me closer. He lifted our joined hands, to dust his lips across my knuckles in a courtly gesture, then drew my hand to rest above his heart.

“You’ll always be my queen,” he told me. “No matter what you do or where you go. And I will do anything to serve you, including taking any task you can’t bear and ensuring it’s done. I am yours, Darcy.” Those intense blue eyes willed me to see it, to understand him, and I was filled with the need to assure him that I did, lifting my other hand to cup his cheek. “Whatever it fucking takes to keep you safe, I’ll do it, even if the whole world has to burn to make it so.” He nodded then. “Give me that freedom. Let your dog off his leash and send him hurtling towards your enemy, because I will crush your enemies and then bring their bleeding heads back to lay at your feet.”

“That’s it,” Selene said. “That’s the kind of energy we need.” She turned then to Ayla, tipping the Maiden’s chin up to meet her eyes and brushing a thumb across her bottom lip. “Ready, love?” Ayla’s eyes shone. “Take a deep breath, then.”

Ayla did as she was told, her eyes falling closed as she filled her lungs. As I watched, I understood again what I had learned sparring on the training ground as well as when fighting in earnest. There was a big difference between a warrior and a soldier. Where one was preoccupied by his individual performance on the battlefield, the other lent his strength to support a greater collective effort. That wasn’t to say that warriors couldn’t also make great soldiers, but that surrender of ego, that’s what I witnessed right then. Because as Ayla let a breath out, her wolf came forward.

Her slender form became thick with muscle, her hair was replaced by fur and her face transformed, until we saw the wolf, not the woman, her eyes burning blue when they opened.

“I won’t deprive you of *your* target,” Selene told me, nodding instead to a straggly-looking practice dummy that had been hastily erected for her purpose. It looked more like a scarecrow than anything, and then quickly became no more than kindling as Ayla smashed through it with outstretched claws. “The stupid Granians thought we possessed some kind of mind control when they first met us on the battlefield, but that’s not what this is. I don’t command Ayla, but mesh with her, guide her.” Her brows creased slightly. “Through the bond I can feel what she wants—what her nature dictates—and right now she wants to smash every one of those dummies, because each time she does she feels a rush of pleasure. It shoves aside the fear and worry and the pain and replaces it with something much more.”

Selene smiled then.

“A pleasure that comes from striking back, from taking what’s ours, from having strength, but...” I watched Ayla-wolf pull back, her whole muscles quivering as she stood before a dummy, the lean of her body making clear what she wanted to do. But she didn’t. Selene didn’t strain, didn’t enforce anything, just stared at her colleague... no... her mate. And between them they worked out what to do.

Ayla shifted through a series of poses, striking the air with startling speed, raking her claws, slamming her feet down on top of invisible enemies. She became a whirling dervish, spinning through a strange kind of battle fever, but one she couldn’t get lost in. Selene was there, calm, a centre upon which Ayla could depend to reel her back in if she got too caught up, something that finally happened as the Maiden paused, panting. When she leaned forward, putting her hands on her knees, Ayla the woman was back.

Selene turned, ready to teach me. But I realised that I knew. The others hissed as a blue flame prickled across my skin, except for Gael who looked at me and nodded. Then he shook himself, just like an animal shaking off the sensation of being collared, and I felt that release as he let go of the man and allowed the beast to come forward.

It was a relief for him, for all of my mates. I felt it. We’d kept to skin scrupulously since the loss of Snowmere, almost as if the other soul that lived inside us was somehow tainted by defeat. But no longer. Their minds connected with mine without conscious effort, seeking this.

A purpose, a way forward, a means to reach out and grab the future that each one of us dreamed of, right when it felt like it’d been torn from our grip. I fed into that, pouring in my own hopes and dreams and each one of them lumbered forward, buoyed by a common energy.

What would the knights of Grania do against this? I wondered, almost idly. Each one of my mates were no longer men, giving themselves over to the heat that burned inside them. Berserk, that’s what we had called it when I was growing up, both venerating and reviling the mindless beast state. But there was nothing mindless about this at all. And I finally realised what Nordred had been trying to teach me my whole life.

Give into the blade, that’s what he’d said, let it dictate where it goes. The idea of that had seemed alarming to me when I was a child, because of how I’d struggled to hold my wooden practice sword and the way it had swung around wildly when I lifted it. But a growing sense of control never changed



one deep innate sentiment. The burning need to obliterate the enemy, be it a practice dummy or a tree that I bashed at out on the moor, my horse placidly cropping grass, flicking her ears at me as I trained. The body might have been weak, might still be brought down by frailty, but the mind never was. So I twined mine with theirs, feeling that sense of connection, of purpose, of need as I did so, feeding my own, making us more than we could be individually, and we focussed on the target and took it down.

Some of the heavier uprights had resisted rot and I directed Axe at them, knowing his powerful strength could take them down. Weyland kicked what was left of the door in and Gael and Dane smashed up what was left of the walls. We didn't have an especially noble purpose in mind, just creating more kindling for the cookfire, but... it didn't matter, because we were doing something together, finally.

Every smash of their massive fists or rake of their claws had me visualising Callum and his Reavers on the end of them and, at those mental images, my mates roared their defiance. I was supposed to be anchoring them through this experience, but I got caught up in that rush, that destructive, joyous feeling that comes from going on a rampage, laying your enemies low.

"Careful." Selene appeared at my shoulder. "It's seductive. It always will be. You can't afford to get too caught up in it, otherwise the five of you will make a beeline for the capital, full of piss and vinegar, only to get your heads lopped off. Breathe." I did that. "Breathe again." My lungs obeyed without a conscious thought from me. "This is how it works; what you need to do. It isn't so much a matter of bringing their wolf out or facilitating them taking the half-wolf form, but making them believe that they can."

My focus shifted to the long line of men standing on the edges of the field, watching what was happening with frank interest. That's what I had to do. Wars, battles, fights had all been won against unassailable odds before. The men at my father's court loved to sing of them when drinking. But there was one thing that tied each one together: belief. If I could stir our men, make them see what we could do, make the proposal plausible enough for them to invest in then... My hand went to my lower abdomen; the ache there a constant, never subsiding. Perhaps I could create a world where all of my future children, and everyone else's, could be safe.

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## Chapter 6

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So how did we come to be standing in a forest, near a Granian garrison, as the sun began to set? We'd practised all day, working with larger and larger groups of people, until my head hurt and my whole body shook, but General Rath was satisfied we had something we could use in any fight.

Before we could contemplate going to engage in conflict, someone needed to scout out the proposed battlefield first. Rath had been about to direct one of his men to go, but I had volunteered myself and my pack. I knew Grania better than any one of our company and, despite being sure that my father would've been horrified about the idea of using that knowledge against my homeland, I didn't care. Hartley Garrison was one of the less staunchly defended locations on the border and, therefore, the perfect place to cross.

For a Granian soldier, being a part of His Majesty's army was considered an honour, but a northern placement was not highly sought after. While it was where the army was actually needed, to protect the borders, more often than not it was focussed on retrieving cattle that enterprising Strelans had nipped over the border to steal.

Hardly the battles recorded in the great sagas, and unlikely to accord soldiers the glory they dreamed of.

The big garrisons were staffed by third sons of aristocrats, getting some battle experience under their belts before returning to the southern states to perform largely administrative roles. But this place? Hartley was too small to warrant such noble leadership, because basically it was a convict camp.

Men who had committed a crime but were able-bodied could spend time

in prison at His Majesty's pleasure, or could 'volunteer' to do a stint on the border at one of the smaller garrisons. The officers, such as they were, would not be received in polite company, as they were little other than prison wardens. Father always complained about what a lax job Hartley did in protecting the border, so this was where we went now to do a little reconnaissance.

We were in fur right now, our wolves more than willing to come out. On four paws we travelled, lightly, silently, across fields and through trees to stop on the edge of the forest. The trees were not allowed to grow thick too close to the garrison, lest they hide interlopers like us. We stared across the grass, the wolves' eyes picking up things that our human ones wouldn't.

Like the man approaching.

He was doing something he shouldn't, that was clear. The stooped shoulders, the furtive way he looked over his shoulder, made me think he was trying to escape. But what Granian would try his luck in Strelae? The wolf made a small chuffing sound, then got to her feet.

We melted back into the shadows, as the man was coming straight for us. He couldn't have seen us, had not even been looking our way. He wouldn't have been able to do much if he had though. But when he got within the embrace of the trees, his spine straightened, as if he'd shed a burden.

Or was about to.

A bag was pulled from inside his grubby coat. He was not the epitome of the well pressed and polished soldier that frequented my father's court. This man's hair was long and stringy with grease, his clothing stained and hadn't seen a bar of soap for some time, but he didn't care about that. He moved forward quietly, silently enough, to the human ear, until it became clear he wasn't alone.

"You got it?"

The newcomer's voice was coarse and ragged and his eyes were wild as he stared at the first man's bag. It was red-stained—blood, I quickly realised, my wolf's nose working as I caught that coppery scent.

"Got it, and we need to be quick about it," the first man muttered, that furtive look back. "Sarge will have my arse—"

"The directives of an unbeliever mean nothing, brother," the second man said, putting his hand on the first one's shoulder and they both went still for a moment. "Come."

The second man steered the first down a pathway, and we moved as one,

trotting along at a distance, then sliding into the undergrowth when the first man looked backwards. But his focus wasn't on us, I realised. I shifted inside my wolf, trying to direct her eyes, to shift her focus, for I saw that, just like outside my father's estate, there was a small spring. Stone hadn't formed around it like at my former home, but had been placed carefully, and etched into the rock were the same sorts of carvings I'd seen that day with Axe.

"Brother," two other men said in greeting, stepping forward, one with a cheap metal medallion hung around his neck.

I knew what this was.

The church had been particularly useful to Granians when they invaded Strelae, because at the centre of our religious pantheon was a devilish creature. He had horns like a bull, and the toothy grin of a shark, all the better to eat you up.

And the pelt of a wolf.

The wolf that ate the world.

Back in the old, old times, before the church became an institution, the superstitious forebears of my people had seen the darkness that fell every night and conflated it with the wolves that sometimes attacked the fires they huddled around. The wolf that ate the world swallowed it every night, but was forced to regurgitate it every morning by the goddess Hrist, she of the Bow. That relief that you'd made it through another night stirred religious fervour, becoming a key part of religious doctrine that still continued, because priests were nothing if not practical.

They could preach until the cows came home that you must be godly, with little effect. But the threat of the Devil coming to take you away if you didn't? That kept bums on seats in church pews. Granian priests had seen the horror the wargs of Strelae could wage on the battlefield and then took to the pulpit in earnest. This was not a land grab by the Farradorian Empire. The invasion was a fight against the Devil himself.

But the trouble with such a powerful figure like the devil was... no matter what sins were ascribed to him, some would find that power, that freedom, alluring. A shadowy cult of the wolf existed before any of my forebears had landed in Grania, largely adhered to by soldiers: those who looked into the wolf-maw of death often enough were the ones who came to deify and worship it.

Like these men that my pack and I watched, for on that medallion was incised a familiar symbol. A black sun, partially surrounded by a crescent

moon, symbolising the jaws of the Great Wolf.

“Lay your offering at the dread god’s altar, brother,” the man with the medallion said.

“Private Higgins?” The first man seemed surprised to see the man with the medallion. “But you—”

“No rank here before the wolf god,” the second man said. “You know that. We face him as we face death, on our own two feet, alone. Make your offering, so that you might live another day, then say your prayers.”

It was a sheep’s heart in the bag, the grisly remains emerging as it was lifted out and the bag was tossed to one side. My wolf’s tongue flicked around our fangs, almost able to taste it, but we kept still.

“Tell the dread god what you need,” another man prompted, “and see what he is willing to grant.”

This was a completely different approach to the gods than that which was taught in Granian churches. The clergy there preached that we were to surrender to the gods’ will, let them shape our lives. But I felt like I caught a glimpse of the origin of this religion.

There is a moment in battle, and I remembered it all too well, when you’re lined up with your fellows, armed to the teeth. The fighting hasn’t begun yet and, while you wait, your mind races, showing you the likely outcome of this fight. Your side might win the day, but that wouldn’t mean much if you were lying in the dirt, staring up at the sky, eyes glazed over by death, right before the raven stabs its beak into them. As if on cue, I heard the coarse caw of one from somewhere in the forest.

The petitioner before the rough altar started nervously, then fell to his knees, setting the heart down on the carved stone and slapping his bloodied hands down on the rock either side. Old handprints made me think this was part of the ritual. And then out it came, in short, rambling bursts: his prayer.

“Dread god, let me get back to my family. I know I sinned—” He was cut off by a hiss from the others, making me think the concept of sin was a foreign one here. “I stole bread for my family’s table when I couldn’t get the coin to do so.”

“A wolf takes what’s needed,” the man with the medallion said.

“I’ve served out my time on the border, did as I was told and kept my head down, but...” He glanced around, as if scared of admitting what came next. “But, in her letters, my Josie says she needs me back by her side. She’s had the bailiffs around and they’re threatening to take the house. My boy is

getting older, but not old enough to run the farm by himself to be able to cover the taxes.”

“Fucking parasites,” the other men said, spitting on the ground.

“I’ve done two years here and I’ve pleaded with the screws...” He stopped himself. “...with the wardens to let me go free and see to my family. I need a sign, dread lord. Hear my prayer, because my family is headed to the poor house if I can’t get a pardon, my daughters will be due for the streets.”

“The dread lord has heard your prayer,” the man with the medallion said, putting a hand on the petitioner’s shoulder. He hauled him upright and all of the men moved forward, patting him on the shoulder and murmuring words of encouragement.

“We face the darkness each night,” one of the other men said. “And we emerge each time unscathed, due to the dread lord’s grace. And so we will again. Your family will not starve. Your daughters will not have to turn to whoring.”

They all spoke with such confidence. I’d had up close dealings with goddesses and felt none of that certainty, something that had the Morrigan laughing inside my head.

*You have plenty of confidence, she said. You know what I’ll do.* I shifted on my paws at that, the wolf wanting to run towards or away from the threat, but unable to do either. *You just hide in the dark from that knowledge, like a child.*

But whatever else she might have to say, it was driven out.

“You are amongst brothers now,” the man with the medallion said, squeezing the petitioner’s shoulder. “We’ll send word to our brothers in the south to stop in and see how your wife fares, have a word with the bailiffs...”

He steered the other man away, leaving only the sheep’s heart and the man that had met the first one by the edge of the trees, led him to the altar. He dropped down to one knee, made a strange genuflection, then plunged his hands into the spring waters, bringing his dripping hands to his face.

I didn’t consciously take a step forward, the wolf did, and she brought us closer to him, to the altar. The man sensed our presence all too late, jerking his eyes sideways then widening them when he saw my wolf. But he wasn’t our focus. We lunged forward, sending the man scrabbling back, but he paused in his flight when our jaws latched onto the sheep’s heart. Perhaps it was because we were hungry, perhaps animal instinct, but we bent down to scissor the meat from the organ, gulping down every mouthful, before going

back for more, until the heart was completely consumed.

“Dread lord...?” The man’s voice was thin, reverent, as he reached out for us, but we bared our fangs, making clear what a mistake that would be. That jerked him to his feet, and he was moving, a visceral reaction to the danger we presented, before he could think. But he shot a strange look over his shoulder, right before he took off running.

“A WOLF CULT?” General Rath said when we arrived back at camp later that night. “How in the hell—?”

“It’s something Father and I were aware of,” Dane said. “Our... interrogations of Granian soldiers sometimes bore better fruit when we were in wolf form, the prisoners’ fear overcoming their loyalty to their king and country. But there were others who seemed delighted to see us in fur, speaking of how salvation was at hand. That’s when we did some looking into it. The Farradorians were the forebears of the Granians and they had been invaded by the wolf worshippers of the icy north who were the origins of those religious beliefs.”

He looked at me then.

“Our observations of the garrison lead us to believe it’s poorly manned and, moreso, held by men with low morale. I believe we will take it easily.” As his eyes bored into mine, I wondered if I was going to like what he had to say next. “But beyond that. Darcy has shown herself capable of bringing a man’s wolf to the surface, with Gael’s help.”

“And a helluva lot of ‘pure born’ Granians are the result of an ancestor who was born on the wrong side of the blanket to our captive women,” Gael growled. “Darcy, we could...”

But I saw it already, the moment I had transformed all of the remainder of Snowmere into wolf form, as blood coated my hands. Whose blood would it be this time? I wondered, because if some of the Granians had enough Strelan blood to activate, then they’d find themselves at odds with their own people.

And ready to ally themselves with the other side.

“Create a warg army from good Granian soldiers?” I said. “Killing all of the soldiers in Grania was never going to help our cause, but winning them to our side.” I nodded slowly. “That may be just what we need.”

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## Chapter 7

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The refugees arrived the next morning, when we were packing up camp. Every able-bodied person picked up all they could carry or strapped it on the backs of horses and mules. It was as they were doing this, the refugees staggered out of the forest like the walking dead of myth and, for a moment, I froze when I saw them, fancying that was what they were. Bloodied and broken, they shuffled towards us, but as the cries of children and the moans of the injured let us know they were human, not shamblers, I tightened the clasp of my saddlebag and then walked closer.

“Greetings—” I started to say, my mates swearing as they strode forward, rushing to join me, but I was quickly silenced.

“Are you her?” the woman at their head asked in a harsh voice, whilst staring fixedly at me.

I knew her look, one of barely suppressed horror, honed into rage.

“Which ‘her’ do you seek?” Weyland asked, his voice silky smooth as he appeared at my shoulder.

“You know which one.” The woman’s eyes narrowed as her lips thinned, the skin around her mouth tight and puckered. From the look of her, she hadn’t eaten or drunk water for at least a day or two. “You are, aren’t you? The outsider who wants to be queen.”

She tossed a bundle at me. In the same moment, Weyland’s sword was out of its sheath and pressed against the woman’s neck, the rest of her group hissing. But this was all background noise to me. I was transfixed by what she had thrown my way, my hands reaching out, shaking, to accept her ‘gift’.

At some point in time, this poor little bundle had been treasured. The fine



stitching on the blanket, the way it was tightly swaddled around the tiny form. But tears filled my eyes, blurring my view of the bluish body within.

“Darcy...” Weyland’s hands were on my shoulders, steering me away, but I resisted. I couldn’t, wouldn’t look away. The baby’s neck hung at an unnatural angle, purplish blood having clotted around it at some point.

“Join him, that was the message I was charged to tell you,” the woman spat in my face. “King Callum killed my baby and told me to tell you this, lest he kill me too. Join him and become his queen...”

She had more to say and I was honour bound to listen to it in the face of her loss, her pain, but I physically couldn’t hear, the sound of my blood pumping too hard and fast in my ears, drowning everything else out. When I spoke, my voice had taken on that echoey quality it sometimes had in the past and my words carried, silencing everyone else.

“Never,” I assured the woman, meeting her gaze easily now and looking past her, across the distance, to the man, no, that creature that had so traumatised her. “I will never bend a knee to that usurper and I’ll be damned if any other Strelan does. We ride for Grania, to find food, men and weapons, so we can fight back and reclaim our lands. You can ride with us or stay here and wait for our return.”

It felt like my voice echoed across the whole clearing, the only sound that of birds rising in a great flock from the nearby trees, though there were no ravens amongst them. Then one man stepped forward, his eye hastily bandaged with a grubby piece of cloth, stained with old blood.

“You mean to take those bastard Reavers down? And to do it with steel you take from the bloody Granians? Well, count me in.”

More men and even women stepped forward then, swearing the same thing, their enthusiasm helping lift my spirits, if not those of the mother of the dead baby. She shook her head slowly, then bent down, singing a low, shaking song as she collected her child again. She crooned to it as she walked away, tears finally filling her eyes.

WHY DID SHE CRY NOW? I wondered later, as we walked, rode towards Hartley Garrison. Why did she cradle a dead child close to her chest, one she had tossed at me like it was a sack of potatoes? I stared out at the moors of home, seeing the purple heather and the sparse trees and feeling a strange mixture of familiarity and contempt. Perhaps it was this: It was only now that

she could allow herself to grieve for her child, let all the emotions she'd kept batted down inside her out. It seemed an odd thing, to be envious of a woman who had suffered so much, but I was. My eyes were dry, my hands on the hilt of my sword, because that's what I had to do. Del rode up beside me, Jan sitting astride his pommel, cradled between her brother's arms. My time for grieving would come, but it was not yet.

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## Chapter 8

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Garrisons and border castles used to be built differently to the way Hartley was designed. The walls of my father's keep flared out slightly, like the mouth of a pot. The reason for that was because, when the older buildings were constructed, they were made to defend against wargen that could take the half-wolf form, then claw their way up the walls and over the parapets.

As we were about to do now.

The women and children were stationed further back in the forest, away from where the fighting would ensue, protected by those that were wounded. Selene and her Maidens, along with the general and a select group of soldiers, stood at the forest's edge with us.

"Looks poorly defended," General Rath said with a sniff. "Barely more than fifty men."

"There have been few real conflicts of late," Dane replied. "As soon as Father fostered the idea of being 'trading partners' with our usurpers, the Granians became less vigilant." He turned around and faced the soldiers. "A weakness we are going to exploit. Everyone knows what to do?"

This was just like being back in the field outside Ironhaven again, but I wasn't keyed up and excited this time, nor fearful. I felt empty. More exactly, I felt nothing but a sense of dreadful purpose, one that must be fulfilled. This garrison wasn't full of men forced to serve there against their will, the men here were an obstacle to what needed to happen. It was either my people or theirs. And I would always choose mine.

"Take the beacons out first," I added, nodding toward the wide braziers placed up high on the walls. They would be kept stocked with dry kindling

and firewood and quickfire powder. It'd make the fires burn a bright red when lit, more visible at night, which was one of the reasons for our daylight attack. But the fires, more so the smoke, would still be seen by anyone on the lookout for warning beacons. "We don't want to alert every garrison along the border that there is an incursion taking place."

"Well, if we do, we'll fight them, too." This soldier was an older man, with a little grey in his beard, but his rakish smile had the others laughing which was exactly what we needed.

Even though we outnumbered them, we still had to believe we could do this. Otherwise our steps would falter, our sword arms would be raised too slowly. I felt the need rise, the desire to see this done, as I wrapped my hand around my hilt, and I looked around to see if anyone else felt the same. When I caught Selene's eye, she nodded, smiled—a rakish wild expression that blazed across her face—and then stepped out of line to face everyone.

"You are wolves now, every single one of you," she said. "The Mother has returned our queen to us and we are a pack." No other person could've injected the same kind of feeling into that word—pack—like she could. "A pack runs together." Soldiers started to shift restlessly. "A pack stands together." When she pulled her sword from her scabbard, I did too, instinctively knowing what would come next. "A pack fights together!"

Her cry might've been enough to draw the attention of the sentries standing at the gates, but we didn't care. We didn't need the advantage of surprise to win the day. This time the odds were with us, not stacked against us, and we would prevail.

"Taking this garrison is just the first step," I promised them. "We will take land, we will take food, for those we love."

That stirred each and every one of them, even if many of them had lost their loved ones. Humans are social creatures, by nature. They forge bonds no matter what happens, holding tight to them against the overwhelming darkness of night. As I took my place out front, keenly aware of the role I played in tying us all together, I felt every eye upon me. Dane had sworn a blue streak when I'd said I would take the vanguard, but each one of my mates stepped forward to join me there now.

"But most of all," I said, my voice cracking on the words. "We'll take back what's ours!"

When I thrust my sword into the air, they did too. And when I shouted, their voices joined mine. I reached out and touched each one of their minds,

feeling the connections snapping into place over and over. I summoned forth their half-wolf forms, as I did my own, each one of us becoming the wargen beasts that Granian mothers still warned their children about, and then raced forward.

“Take out the sentries first.” I could hear Nordred’s voice, the voice of strategy, in my head, directing my intent. “Don’t let the fuckers shut the gates on you.”

I heard the cries of the garrison occupants, the shouts of orders but, while they were bleating in fear, we moved like the wind. There’s a power that comes from a collective, the one mind, one body, fusing with others to become more than the sum of their parts. And that was what we were now. The immediate objective, to take control of the entrance to the garrison, was communicated down the bond I shared with the others.

Soldiers came pouring out the gates. Instead of doing as they were ordered—to slam it shut—they appeared either ready to meet us head on or to run the other way. It didn’t matter, we greeted them all with sharpened steel. Slash, slash, parry: my sword was an extension of my arm, my will, cutting down anyone who dared to stand before me. And I did it all with the sound of Selene’s howl ringing in my ears.

The bond between the soldiers and me bucked and thrashed, like a newly haltered wild horse, each man or woman’s mind pulling at the bond, wanting to meet this threat on their own terms, but that’s not what happened. I didn’t crush their will, though at times I felt like I could. Instead, I reminded them of the objective, and pushed us all forward. Some Granians finally had the presence of mind to try and shut the tall gates, but we were there before them, my mates and I. Axe strode forward, planting his foot against the wood and shoving at it.

The look on his face when it popped open, that wild grin as he turned to me. I felt his rush of pleasure as if it was my own, as it reverberated down the bond. Callum’s way was to hold his Reavers in some kind of psychic chokehold, removing their free will. But the connections between us here was how it was supposed to be. Axe’s victory was our victory; Axe’s danger was ours too. A burly warden in chainmail rushed towards my mate’s back as Axe was turned towards us, urging us on.

“Fucking focus!” Gael snarled, parrying the stroke and driving the attacker back.

But I understood, I really did. What sung in my heart was a battle hymn,

the unpredictable percussion coming from the clash of steel on steel, the chorus arising from our shouts. We would win this day, I just knew it; a victory sorely needed after such a catastrophic loss. And yet, I heard the Morrigan's snicker in my head, reminding me of that loss, even as people fell before our blades, as we beat back the meagre amount of men manning the garrison, until finally the man who was in command fell to his knees, sword stabbed into the earth before him.

"We yield."

He ground out the words, obviously having never thought he'd say such a thing, but he bowed his head, baring it to me, and that's what had me stopping. The wolf recognised surrender when she saw it and she acknowledged that with a nod. I let my beast recede, leaving instead just a girl, something the commander noted. I watched the thoughts flow through his head as his eyes widened, then narrowed and I saw his grip on his sword tighten, right before I whipped mine up to meet his neck. The point pressed against the soft skin above his clavicle, making him reconsider whatever the hell he was thinking.

"Then I claim this garrison for the people of Strelae," I said.

"Strelae?" The commander looked around wildly as his men began to mutter. "We have a treaty with the Strelans. The king—"

"Is dead." Dane stepped forward, eyes blazing. "Our queen is now our head of state." I didn't need him beside me, but I liked it, and I stood taller. "A new king sits where my father once did, but this new king is one that will lay waste to everything and everyone, including soft, safe Grania."

Perhaps these Granian men wouldn't like the gift I was about to give them, but it had to happen anyway. I'd tried to reason, to provide evidence, to cajole the old Strelan king and it'd gotten me nowhere.

"The wolf that eats the world is coming," I said and, at those words, the whispering in the crowd of captured men stopped, letting me know I had their full attention. "And he will eat you all, unless..."

Reaching out to touch another's mind was a strange thing. It was like offering your hand to a stranger which in Strelae, they did as a matter of politeness. But here I felt minds shy away, jerk instinctively back or just ignore me completely, impervious as stone. But at least one of them was open and receptive.

He of the sheep heart. He who had prayed for help for his family, when he was sure no one actually would. It was he who stared at me now with the

shining eyes of a recent convert. I held his gaze as Gael came closer, putting his hand in mine, blue fire appearing between us the moment we touched.

He had a wolf in him, this convict, this man. It paced and paced and paced, not able to lie down and die, nor to get free. Whatever wargen genetic combination made some Granians capable of taking fur was in him, and I coaxed it forward now. Cries went through the crowd as the man became a wolf. It whined, looked around and then got to its feet, trotting over to join our side.

“Wargen bitch!” the commander swore, ready to fight again, but like a breeze rippling through the kneeling captives, one, two, then a few more here and there of his fellow Granians got to their feet. More and more followed until many of them were standing with their hands open to show they held no ill intent.

“You’re her...” Private Higgins was the man with the medallion who we had seen at the altar in the woods, and he fished the necklace out now and clutched at it as he stared at me in wonder.

“Of course she’s the one,” Weyland said, all of his cocky confidence deployed with a disarming grin, even though none of us really knew what Higgins meant. Play along and find out, that was our plan. “Come forward, brothers...”

We’d talked about this last night, how to exploit the belief system of those who worshipped the wolf that ate the world, knowing that it would help turn the tides and weld them to our side, not that of their countrymen. It was a long shot, but it seemed that it would work. The men here had little connection to their ‘superior’ officers. Those in command were here to keep them put, not to build on the sort of brotherhood that came from fighting side by side.

But we could.

“I know you,” I said, a brave statement for the daughter of a duke to make. “I know how you came to be here. Sent down to the northern border to be cannon fodder in the fight to keep the Strelans out. Us out.” I stepped closer and the commander made a strangled noise, but my blade on his throat kept him silent. “But what if we weren’t the enemy?”

I watched the captured men’s eyes shift, looking at each other for guidance, but with a push from my mind, I caught their attention again.

“A dark force is coming across the border, one that rapes and pillages and destroys everything in its path, but I can make you strong, prepare you to

meet that threat head-on for your lives, your family and the glory of the dread lord you worship.”

“You *are* her,” Higgins said, dazedly pushing past the commander and coming to stand before me. My mates growled at that, but he sank down to his knees. “The one who will free us.” I met his gaze, frankly frightened by the certainty in it, but I couldn’t look away. “In my heart, I am a wolf, ravening and—”

Whatever speech he had prepared, it was now gone. That need to connect, to bring forth what I knew was inside him was an unpredictable thing, and it interrupted him, pulling the wolf out, leaving a massive grey beast panting at my feet. Then others, more and more, took fur, until those who were still in skin were just a small number.

Was this what the first Granians would’ve looked like when they discovered their first warg? I thought they might’ve. They looked around them wild-eyed, as well one might when standing in a pack of wolves. Not one wolf attacked them, but lips were peeled back in silent threat if the humans got too close and still more came to cluster around me.

This was the first moment I allowed myself to feel hope, real hope, since the fall of Snowmere. I’d summoned it for others, to help stir my people, but right now I could see for myself how things might be.

Granians hated Strelans, even though it was us who had stolen land, killed men, taken women. And yet, despite our crimes, our bile had always been directed at the victims. It was only now that the false divide between Granian and Strelan became apparent. My mates had known me for what I was the moment they saw me, but I knew now that many of my former countrymen were the same. Living with a latent ability, another soul locked down tight inside them, waiting to be liberated. A potential pack.

“So what the hell do you intend to do with the garrison?” the commander said, fire still in his voice, though it was mere embers now. “You’ve turned my men into filthy wargen, but for what? We are but a small outpost, poorly defended. The whole place is little other than a prison camp. But others will be along soon, for the supply wagon comes in two days.”

“Let them come,” I said with a cock of my eyebrow. “We will be long gone before then. Hartley Garrison was never our end goal.” I smiled slowly. “Just a stepping stone.”



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## Chapter 9

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The land of my childhood was flatter and had fewer tors of stone jutting out than the land we had come from, making it much better for farming. The land was softer, richer, more fruitful, and Annis and the ladies swarmed over the blackberry thickets as we passed, plucking them bare and scratching themselves bloody in the process. People's hands and mouths were stained with purplish juice, as was mine, when we came to a stop some way from my father's keep.

"So how did you wish to proceed, Majesty?" General Rath asked me, eyeing the keep walls. They were tall and looked well fortified, but I knew of a weakness there.

"You wish for us to take this keep, lady?" Higgins said, appearing at my horse's side. "We will do it, and bring you his lordship's head on a platter before night falls."

I smiled slightly. The new conscripts were nothing if not keen. I'd instructed my people to make them welcome—a reception more positive than any of the Granians had received in months—alongside issuing a warning about these men's past. The king didn't send strong men down to a prison garrison without reason.

"The duke is my father, so I will not need that," I replied, meeting his zealous gaze. "But we will take the keep." I turned then and found Annis. "Everyone who is not strong enough to fight will stay here." Del edged his horse forward, Jan sitting astride his saddle, kept on horseback by her brother's arms. "Del, I'll need you to stay, to ensure they are safe."

He wanted to protest, but the sudden thrust of responsibility on his young

shoulders had him holding his position.

“You’ll keep us safe, young lord,” Annis said, reaching up to pat his leg.

“The rest of you will be with me.” I wheeled my horse, Arden, around to speak to them. “My father’s men are more organised and better trained than those of the garrison.” I searched Higgins’ face for any sign of offence, but he just listened along with the others. “He has trained knights stationed in his keep.”

A ragged cheer went up around the men, and from the looks of their grins, they welcomed that fight, despite my warning.

“Any man that hides in a tin can is no match for us!” one man cried.

“They aren’t,” I admitted. “The Granian army was dismayed to find their fine armour was cut to ribbons when they first engaged with two souled warriors on the battlefield.”

The cheers grew rowdier.

“Armourers were forced to redo designs, making the plate heavier and heavier to withstand the terrible might of our half form.” I breathed out as I held out my hand, watching the fur prickle across my skin, then great claws spring from my fingertips. “Ones that protected the wearer, but at the cost of agility, manoeuvrability. When they took Queen Eleanor from you, they took this too.” My claws receded and so did my fur. “Allowing knights to return to the lighter plate mail that they preferred.”

My focus shifted to them now, all of the people we had brought forth from Snowmere to here. The trust there, the belief, made my heart ache. They were willing to give the responsibility of making these decisions to a young woman, because they had so few options. A sense of discomfort rose in me at their willingness to dump the burden on me and expect that I would carry it.

But what if I dropped it?

I looked back and saw that my father’s men had started to mass on the parapets, no doubt wondering why such a large group was clustered outside the keep. But thus far there were no archers there. And that was when I firmed my decision. We had no other options. Callum had taken away every single one of them. He had only this: desperate hope.

“We won’t be able to climb the walls of the keep,” I told the crowd. “It was built the old way, with defences against the two souled. But we have this. No Strelan has attacked a keep in generations. None have ever come en masse this far over the border. They will not expect us to launch an assault. We stand on the land of your forebears for the first time in centuries and I

think it's past time we take it back."

There it was, I felt it—the throbbing note of hope that burned inside too many hearts to be ignored. As I swung from the saddle, the Maidens appeared around me, already half gone to their wolves. Axe hefted his weapon, staring at the keep gate with wild eyes, as Dane came to stand by me.

"Direct assault of the gates?" he asked in a low voice. "How strong are they?"

"Not strong enough," I said, with a certainty I didn't feel.

I didn't command my people to attack, because I didn't need to. Bound together now by our minds, we all felt, saw, the objective. Smash through the gate, hoping that the knights inside weren't as fast as they should be, and then take the keep as ours.

"We could do with a more solid plan," Rath grumbled. "Contingencies."

"You'd have us plotting out the steps we take to go for a piss!" Axe roared, then shook his axe in the air. "Who's with me?"

We all were.

The half-wolf form was the best of both human and wolf, making us faster, stronger, more vicious. My father's men moved too slowly to counter us as we rushed the gates. At first they were in shock. Then, finally realising they were under attack, they ran for the gates to close them. But there were only two men on the actual gate. They saw my host, my pack, coming leaping towards them, and turned and ran to close the heavy wooden doors, but not before we got there. Our bodies slammed into the gates, shoving them wide, and that's when it all fell apart.

My father's knights performed well in battles which they were prepared for, but the keep gates were almost always kept open, allowing traders, workers and visitors to pass freely. The days of manning the walls to keep the Strelans out were long gone. In fact, my father had invited Strelans in, the last time they'd been here—the men who were now my mates. So while the knights' instincts were good ones, going for the halberds that would've stabbed great holes in us while keeping us at arm's length, the ensuing atmosphere of panic that accompanied our attack made a mess of their attempts at defence.

As a rule, knights don't grab at weapons in order to provide a united front, but rather to heed that long ingrained instinct to protect themselves. I watched as some fought to grab a weapon before others, but even when they got one, they were swinging them at friend as much as foe. I saw blades

flying through the air, women screaming, claws slicing, and that's when I called for order.

“STOP!”

I felt like my father's daughter in this sense alone: before that moment, he had been the only person that could get everyone in the keep to heed him.

And apparently I had inherited his gift.

My voice echoed through the courtyard, somehow getting louder, not softer, until everyone obeyed my directive.

“I am Darcy—”

*You are nothing*, was the thought that flickered through my mind.

“—daughter of the duke of Elverston—”

*A man who tried his level best to end you, a father who never loved you.*

“—queen of all of Strelae—”

*Oh ho, and how well did that work out for the last queen? Whose sword will you see the wrong end of?*

“—and you will take a knee or face the edge of my sword!”

*Well done...* the Morrigan murmured, part of the poisonous chorus inside my mind.

The knights wanted to rebel, for everything in my statement was anathema to their worldview. In Grania, a duke's daughter didn't waltz in and bark orders. A woman didn't assault the gates of the keep, sword in hand. She also didn't consort with Strelan devils like my mates. And yet, one by one, down they went, all of them kneeling at my feet.

“Gods above...” Weyland murmured, shooting me a wary look, but I couldn't spare him a moment of my attention. I held the minds of these men in the palm of my hand. But their minds were not naturally compliant and I felt them buck and jerk against my control.

I wasn't going to let go.

I couldn't bargain or beg for help for my people. That wasn't how it worked in Grania. My forebears had taken this land as if they had a right to it and then had kept on insisting until there was no one left to tell them no.

And I was going to do the very same thing.

My legs quivered, the muscle memory I'd built in training ready to spirit me away if I lost control, but I stayed firm. A mother will do terrible things to ensure the survival of her children, placing little value on her own life or the lives of others, if that's what it takes to keep them safe. I felt the power of the Mother beating hard in my chest as I did what I had to do in order to provide

for those who depended on me.

“You there,” I barked, gesturing at several knights. “Go and find my father,” I ordered. The men moved before I’d even finished my sentence, as if anticipating my wishes.

“Well, that was a depressingly short fight,” Weyland grumbled. “I was quite looking forward to the prospect of beating some of these fool tin-heads.”

“You’ll have plenty of time for that later, brother,” Dane said, his attention on me. “Darcy, can you turn these men like you did those at the garrison?”

I looked at him—my mate: the queenmaker, the power behind my bid for the throne—and he met my gaze without flinching. My brow furrowed as I turned to look at the men gathered in the courtyard.

Part of me didn’t want to. I knew some of these men personally. Men like Harold, who used to joke with me on the practice field. He was married; he had three children. Who knew what they’d think when they saw their father like this? But I summoned his beast anyway. Plate mail clattered on the ground as a wolf emerged from within the man’s armour. I heard the prayers of a young knight invoking the name of the battle god to keep him safe, before his feverish words became a yip and he emerged from his armour on four feet.

“Darcy...?” Grant was one of the foremost of my father’s knights and he stared up at me now with both wonder and fear. “Lass, we heard you were taken by the wa—”

Grant became a beautiful wolf with thick black fur. My eyes burned in my head as I stared at each man, heard their pleas and their curses, before I revealed their true selves to everyone.

When I was finished, there were only a handful of men left and they huddled close to each other, eyes wild as they fought to understand what had happened.

I was struggling with it myself.

Just as I was about to speak, I felt a sharp prick of pain in my nose, then a hot rush. Lifting my hand, I caught a flow of blood.

“Darcy...!” Weyland said, striding over to me before tipping my head back. Blood rolled down my throat, pleasing the wolf while revolting the woman.

“Give her here,” Gael said, blue fire prickling across his fingers, but I

jerked away.

“No, you’ll just make it worse.”

“Before I make it better.”

An intense spike of pain hit me at his touch but, before I could even scream, the blood stopped, only a single drop more falling to the earth—proving both of us right—and leaving us sharing a moment of rare intimacy. We’d barely touched each other since... Every time he’d tried to touch me, it had seemed as though he’d managed to hurt both of us in ways he couldn’t fix. And that’s why, in this moment, there was such relief in his eyes.

He could heal this, take this one small thing away, and I could see that it made him feel better. His eyes searched mine, boring into them, our whole world reducing down to just the two of us—no one else existed in this tiny little bubble. I could hear his heartbeat and mine, pulsing in time together; feel our connection. But our idyllic moment was interrupted too soon.

“You *are* the chosen one!” Higgins gloated. “You see!” He turned to his people and mine, throwing his hands wide. “She is the herald of the dread lord, praise his name!”

“We need to talk about what this might mean later,” Dane muttered to me.

“Or we could just see if he’s willing to dive down the throat of this dread wolf,” Axe said, with a wink.

“Lady Darcy...!” One of the knights came running partway down the stairs and then faltered to a stop when he saw the chaos; men and wolves and piles of armour strewn across the courtyard. The knight seemed to feel like if he stayed where he was, he’d at least have the higher ground. Dragging his attention back to me, he finished his message. “Your father awaits you in the great hall.”

“IS THIS TO BE MY CASTLE?” Jan asked, as she and Del walked into the courtyard. Our men had secured much of the keep, and had locked up the small number of my father’s men with no wolf in one of the empty granaries. The non-combatants from our side had been moved to the keep, and the children had been eager to join me.

“You’d want a much better one than this,” I told her. “This is a sad place.”

“This wasn’t much of a fight,” Selene said, appearing beside me. “Tell

me the rest of Grania isn't so weak."

"This was a bloodless victory," I told Selene. "Not one fit for the mighty Wolf Maidens."

"Not one where you wanted to risk us shedding blood, you mean," she said with a tilt of her head. "Orla and her Maidens have completed the sweep of the forests back in Strelae. The Reavers appear to have pulled back, consolidating their number in Snowmere."

"Trying to get the shrine below it, no doubt," I said, visualising the crystal walls of the Shrine of the Goddess.

"And what now, milady?" Selene asked, looking up the steps towards my father's hall. "You've taken a Granian keep and turned all the soldier boys into wolves." I nodded. "So what lies within?"

"This was my home once," I told them. "I left this place broken into a million pieces, but I was put back together." My men shifted restlessly around me, eyes trained on the stone walls, as if they could see knights about to leap out at us. "Now it's time to see how my father fares. We will need him for what is to come... but I broke him too, last time I was here."

"The father of our queen?" Selene grinned then. "I can't wait to meet him."

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## Chapter 10

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“You...”

It’s funny how things live on in our memories, growing bigger and more grand than they ever had been in reality. That was what struck me as I stepped into my father’s hall, a room that was largely empty now. It’d seemed big and cavernous when I was growing up, even on the day I’d left there: a grand place for a grand man. And my position had been determined by my father’s expectations as much as his lack of interest in me. Nevertheless, I’d played the dutiful daughter in this hall, and sat at the little pillow that still lay near my father’s feet.

But he would not be commanding anyone to sit anywhere now.

My eyes travelled up from his feet to see his lip curl as he caught sight of me. As we walked into the hall, all the serving women shrank back at the sudden appearance of a host of Strelan warriors. I told them I had no quarrel with them and dismissed them and the whole time, my father just stared. When he deigned to speak, it was to spit his displeasure.

“Ordering my staff around. Taking my men away. Turning them into filthy wargs.”

My father’s eyes contained all of the contempt that had always been there for me, but now it burned with an arrogance that took my breath away. Especially when I considered his change in circumstance. He no longer sat proudly on his seat of power, as generations of our family had before. The throne was well padded with furs, many wrapped tightly around him to keep him warm and perhaps to make him seem bigger than he was. Because my father was skinny now, his broken hands tucked up under his chin, having set



at unnatural angles, the bones threatening to protrude through too thin skin.

“You’ve certainly come up in the world,” he sneered at me, before throwing a sidelong look at my mates, as if to impugn my position.

They growled in response, lunging forward, but I stopped them with an outstretched hand, walking what had once seemed like a long distance to my father’s throne, my boots echoing on the stone floor.

“I have. I left here with the promise I would become Strelae’s next queen.”

“Queen, pah!” A glob of spittle landed on the flagstones, just short of my boots.

“And as I *am* queen, you will show my people due courtesy, open your granaries and your stores and feed them.”

“Strelan scum come across the border all the time,” he said with a cruel smile. “Once the garrison gets word of this, they’ll descend on this place with far more ferocity than your wolves.”

And that’s when my sword found itself in my hand, the tip coming to rest on the sagging skin of his neck.

“Where do you think I got some of the men I brought with me?” I smiled at the confusion in his eyes.

“Gods, I shouldn’t be aroused by this, should I?” Weyland muttered.

“Shut up, you idiot,” Gael hissed. “She is our queen.”

“She is ours,” Dane said, much more mildly, “and I think we can be forgiven for being transfixed by everything she does.”

“Your little lap dogs licking at your toes,” my father simpered. “If all it took to tame the feral Strelans was a strip of a girl, I’d—”

I pricked his skin with the point of my blade, suddenly interested in finding out how deep to cut without slicing anything important. You might wonder why I had not cowed my father like I had his knights, but I had my reasons. I needed him, needed his connections.

“You’ll do nothing without my say so.” My heart sang as I spoke those words, a familiar red burn flaring hot in my heart. I saw him and Linnea, whipping me bloody, but I held the whip handle now. “I can have you strapped to a chair in your chambers and still have you fulfil your purpose; make sure you are left alone by everyone here, just fed enough gruel to keep you alive until the job is done. Or I can beat you bloody.” A thin trickle of blood slid down his neck, staining his snow-white shirt. “You can still do what I need you to do with broken bones and bruises a-plenty. Just as you

intended for me.”

The point of my sword twisted on its own accord, opening a wound, though not over his artery. Blood streamed free, but in a slow drip, not a spurt. Then I jerked my weapon back, sheathing it still stained.

“You will write a letter to the king, seeking permission to visit the capital. You will travel with us once my men are rested and fed, and you will gain us access to the king’s court.”

“And then what, hmm?” He looked me up and down. “Whatever witchery you’ve been dabbling in, it won’t get you far there. The place is protected by thousands of the king’s knights. How will you sway all of them?”

I wasn’t sure. My nose was still crusted inside with blood and I felt tired, so very tired. Once my defences were down, it all came rushing in. The ache of my womb, the rapid pulse of my heart beating rabbit-fast and this... that I would dare do something no other woman of my upbringing would. I saw in my father’s expression that he caught wind of that doubt, smiling wider at the sight of it, wanting to fan its flames.

But I was about to douse them completely.

“Bring my father pen and ink,” I told one of the serving maids who had not retreated too far, hovering just inside the doorway to curiously watch this encounter. “And his writing desk. We have a letter to compose.”

The woman bobbed a curtsey, scurrying off to do just that. I turned to the others.

“You can go to the kitchens, alert Cook to the fact she will need to feed several hundred people tonight and that supplies are needed for many more. Let everyone here know that the keep is secured and any attempt to go in or out will be met with the harshest of penalties. We mean you no harm, if you do not seek to inflict any on us.”

“Do you think that will work?” Axe asked me, under his breath.

“Most people want to live, to continue as they were and it matters not who is in control, if they are no more cruel than what came before,” I answered him quietly as the first serving woman returned, setting the desk and quill and ink before Father.

“So what do you wish me to write, Daughter?” My father’s voice was unctuous, dripping with scorn.

“Your Majesty,” I corrected his mode of address to me, something I would never do with my own people, but who knew Granian psychology better than me? It was either their boot on your neck or vice versa and there

was nothing in between. “How long do you think a sizable contingent would take to travel to the capital?”

“Several weeks, if your horses were fleet,” he replied, eyes narrowing.

“Are your horses fleet, Father? You lost Nordred, so I cannot speak to the quality of your stable any longer.”

He lost that canny look then, snatching the quill from the ink pot, an act somehow ruined by the way he was forced to grasp it. His hands were curled around like claws, the quill wedged between them.

“So you’ll want me to inform His Majesty that my party will be in the capital within the fortnight then, I assume?”

I smiled then.

“So you’ve retained your faculties, despite your other... frailties.” He paused in his actions at my comment, shooting me a sidelong look. “Just that, Father, and only that.”

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## Chapter 11

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“Darcy...!”

I’d only been back in the family’s keep for a few hours and I already needed to escape. As I strode down the stairs—forcing myself not to run—away from my father’s domain, away from him, I heard my name called. Jan ran towards me, a very stern looking Del at her back. His hand remained on the hilt of his sword the entire time, his eyes wide. The lad was now in a Granian stronghold. He no doubt expected to find men leaping out from behind doors or around corners, ready to spill good Strelan blood.

But they didn’t.

I hadn’t allowed the children, my children, to come into the hall and be subjected to my father’s ire, and when Jan ran to me, I swept her up into my arms and held her close. For her, I told myself, my heart beating faster, this was all for her. Every mother across Strelae wanted the country secured against the ravages of the Reavers, but I was the one destined to do so.

“How’s my little princess?” I asked her, putting on a brave face when I looked down at her. “Were you good for your brother?”

“No,” Del grumped and he slunk closer with all the reluctance of a disgruntled cat. “And you are safe? The bloody Granians didn’t give you any trouble?”

“Not a one, young wolf.” Dane clapped him on the shoulder and I could see the tension leach from Del’s shoulders. He was being thrust into the role of a man too soon, but he craved the attention, the regard of the warriors. “Your lady made sure of that.”

“And now I’ll introduce you to Cook!” I said with a bright smile for Jan.

“I used to sneak into her kitchen and nick sweets when I was your age.”

“Sweets!” Jan crowed, her enthusiasm for simple things lightening something in me.

“Gods, don’t give her sweets. She’ll be running around in circles, chasing her own tail like a puppy,” Del groaned.

“And you’ll be there to pick her up when she falls in a heap,” Weyland said, as I walked down the hallway, Jan nestled in my arms and chattering about everything she saw.

I’D ALWAYS ASSUMED I’d return here one day, to lead my children up the keep’s hall to see their grandfather, or the new duke when my cousin took control of the estate, but I hadn’t anticipated this. I took my children deeper into the bowels of the building, where the bustle and savoury smells alerted us to our destination before we got there.

“Milady...”

Cook said my title, my old title, as if she wasn’t sure if she was dreaming. I watched her gather her skirts ready to drop down into a curtsy but I stepped forward to stop her, slipping a hand out from around Jan to take Cook’s hand in mine. I didn’t need her to give me that sign of respect and in some ways I didn’t feel like I deserved it.

“Cook, it’s so lovely to see you again,” I said. “I admit I wasn’t sure if I would. How are things with you? And in the kitchens?”

“Oh, you know, same thing every day, and no point in complaining.” Her eyes narrowed as she looked out across the kitchen. “There are always those with ears too big and hands too slow.” Her minions seemed to spring to more animated life, chopping, carrying, stirring and washing dishes with more vigour in response to her comment. She looked at me again and squeezed my hand in hers. “When you left with the princes, we weren’t sure if we’d see you again.” She blinked and looked past me to where my mates stood.

“They are my husbands, now,” I told her. “Kings of Strelae, too, as their father is dead.”

“Oh, my goodness...” She went to curtsy again but I smiled and shook my head. “So, you are queen, then? And, this little one is...?”

She looked from my face to Jan’s, those canny eyes cataloguing my girl’s features and then matching them against my men. Jan couldn’t have been my natural child, that was obvious, but I could see Cook wondering if she was

one of my husbands' by-blows...? I looked down at Jan, who'd gone suddenly shy. She'd tucked her head into my shoulder and I rocked her slightly in my arms.

How big was a mother's heart, to love the children who are with them, while at the same time grieving the child they've lost? For that love to co-exist with that kind of pain? I felt an ache deep inside me, one part emotional, another part physical, but then I smiled and answered the question.

"This is my daughter, Jan, and my son, Del." I wasn't sure how they'd feel about it, but both children just stared at me, eyes wide. "I didn't give birth to them, obviously, but they are mine just the same."

"Then we must get them something to eat. They're just skinny little things," Cook tutted, shaking her head at such a state of affairs, then bustling around. Before too long she'd produced bowls of aromatic soup packed with lamb, barley and vegetables from the gardens just outside, and a loaf of bread had been cut into thick slices and set out alongside pats of fresh, creamy butter.

"Do I get a bowl of that, too?" Axe asked, edging closer.

"You can all have a bowl if you'd like," Cook replied, with a pleased smile. "It might be simple food, but it'll stick to your ribs."

And just like that, any awkwardness about rank or circumstance disappeared as Cook fell into familiar rituals. While we sat around her big preparation table, I got the news from her in dribs and drabs.

"You left so suddenly, milady," Cook said, pushing a bowl my way. I didn't want it, my stomach always felt sour, my mouth filling with bile whenever food was around. I ate only when I absolutely needed to, when I was wavering on my feet and hollowed out with hunger, reasoning others needed food more than me and a few missed meals wouldn't kill me. But the familiar scent, that comforting smell, tempted me and I picked the bowl up and sank my spoon into the thick broth. "We feared you'd been taken."

"I left of my own accord," I assured her. "I had to. Linnea—"

"*That one.*" Cook hissed the words out like it was a curse. "Always had high opinions of herself, right up until the end." Then she blinked, seeming to remember I had a hand in that ending.

"She and my father conspired together to beat the flesh from my bones, to kill me," I said, and it was as though the kitchen went as silent as a graveyard at my words. I set down the bowl of soup, although my belly was complaining that it wasn't being filled, then I loosened my jerkin and slipped

the neck of my shirt down over my shoulder, turning to show her the welts left there.

“Gods above...” the woman said, incredulously, performing the gesture Granians did to their gods. “His own daughter... A lady of the blood...” Cook seemed to straighten up, grow taller. “And him upstairs, an invalid now and bad with it, always ringing the bell, demanding my staff dance on his commands.”

“Feel free to ignore them, now,” I said, and we traded a conspiratorial smile. Then I looked down the table past her and caught the startled looks on the children’s faces.

Gods, I was not fit to be a mother, I thought to myself, as I drew in a breath of self-censure. Sure, I needed Cook and the rest of the staff onside, but letting the children see such things...

“Your da did that?” Del asked, his jaw clenching, his fist tightening on his spoon.

“Peace.” Weyland set a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Your mother is tough enough, strong enough, to beat down any man who would dare raise a hand to her. Don’t go seeking to fight her battles for her.” His eyes met mine then and it seemed to me there was an air of sadness within them. “We don’t.”

“It’s a good lad that seeks to stand up for his mother,” Cook said. “Listen, now. I’ve got some barley sugar, freshly made. Your mother used to try and sneak in here when she was Jan’s age to get at it. One morning she did. Plastered head to foot in icing sugar and groaning from a sore stomach, so that we had to call in the horse master, Nordred, to see her to rights. A couple of fingers down her throat and then vomiting up the lot behind the bushes in the gardens...”

Cook told the children more tales of my misbehaviour. While I heard their laughter, it came as if from a great distance, because my mind was caught up in memories. Nordred beside me, teaching me the prayer to the Morrigan. Nordred fighting by my side, and then Nordred, burned on a pyre to deprive the Morrigan’s birds of their meal, his ashes floating up into the sky.

“Milady?”

I came back to myself, abruptly, and saw Cook looking at me expectantly.

“I was just telling Cook that we will have a contingent joining us at the keep and supplies will need to be ferried to those that wait beyond the walls,”

Dane said smoothly.

“I’m sorry for the imposition,” I told her with a small smile. “And I can’t even tell you it’ll be a short one. My husbands and I need to ride for the capital, but my people...” Strelans was what went unsaid and I wondered if Cook knew it. “A great danger lurks within Strelae and it’s one that will sweep into Grania if something isn’t done. But I cannot take all of them with us when we go.”

“If they’re your people, we’ll look after them,” Cook said, with a gentle smile, before her eyes narrowed again. “And that bastard of a father of yours —”

“Will say nothing to contradict me,” I finished for her. “Now, eat up, children. Wasting food is a criminal offence in this kitchen and I’m still to show you the stables and my old room.”

Cook left us to finish eating and went back to her work, the hypnotic sight of her working great mounds of bread dough helping settle me enough to keep the soup down. And when I was done? I felt a brief rush of warmth, of wellbeing. I stroked Jan’s head before showing her and Del where to put the dirty dishes. When we went to say our farewells to Cook, a small twist of muslin bulging with sweets was handed over to the children with a wink.

But while there was peace here, there was no relief.

I’d played at being a soldier and a mother and I’d managed to kill hundreds of people as a result, and a child, my child too. My hand went to my stomach, still cradling that slight swell, that pain, as I led my other charges into the courtyard.



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## Chapter 12

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My father was banished from the great hall for dinner. Cook had outdone herself, putting on a banquet for the soldiers and lords who joined us. I'd made sure those outside the walls didn't miss out, and had kept a close eye to see that carts full of food were sent out. But before I could rest, I went for a walk out to the camp now set up beyond the keep walls, to make sure it arrived. Annis caught sight of us and rose to meet us.

"All is well, Your Majesty," she said, then brushed at my shoulders, removing invisible specks of dust. "You have provided, as you always do."

But would I be able to continue to do so? I kept that thought to myself, not willing to steal the pleasure of a full belly from everyone, so I inspected the cook pot instead.

"Barley broth?" I asked Annis.

"Made from the bones of that stag you brought down," she said, with a gentle smile. "And barley from sacks which that woman, Flora, brought out to us."

"Flora...? Oh, yes," It took me a second to realise she meant Cook, because the essence of her role had become her name within the keep. "So you are all well fed?"

"And snug as a bug in a rug," one of the other women said, nestling down into her bedroll with a cackle, sending the other women into a round of laughter.

"Seems strange that the Granians have the same stars as us, though," another said, staring at the night sky warily.

I looked up too, tracing with my own eyes the same constellations I'd

seen back in Strelae.

“I’m learning just how similar our two peoples are,” I told her before bidding everyone goodnight.

I WAS TIRED, bone-tired, but before I could try to rest, we had two dirty children that needed a good bath.

“Do we have to?” Del eyed the serving women coming in and out of the room, toting buckets of hot water.

“You can wash in the copper downstairs like I used to,” I told him firmly. “We’ll dunk you in, push you under and swirl you around like the laundresses do the sheets.”

Jan giggled at that before pulling at her clothes. I dropped down onto one knee and started to undo the toggles.

“Let’s leave the ladies to their ablutions,” Weyland said, putting a hand on Del’s shoulder. “The bathhouse that the knights use is downstairs. It might be colder, the soap rougher, but you’ll be in the company of warriors who are all glad to wash the stink of the day off them.” He winked at me as they walked out, Del suddenly much more amenable.

Which left Jan with me.

I paused in what I was doing and took a slightly shaky breath. I claimed I was these children’s mother, but my apprenticeship in the craft of childcare had been brief and too fast. Jan had been watching my movements intently, and when she caught me looking at her, she covered my hands with hers.

“I’m glad you came back for us.” She was uncharacteristically serious, though her eyes twinkled with that irrepressible spirit that was never dampened for long. “I’m glad you’re...” Her pause seemed to acknowledge the awkwardness. “I still miss my mummy, but... She always told me to pray to the goddess and everything would be all right. I prayed for you, Darcy, and you came.”

Tears filled my eyes, despite my attempts to hold them back.

“I’ll always come, if I’m able.” I couldn’t promise her anything else, but I would promise this. “Whenever you need me, you just shout and I’ll fight everything on heaven and earth to get to you, every time.”

“That’s how I know the goddess sent you.” She threw her arms around my neck and held me tight and I hugged her back just as hard. “You’re the princess with the swords. You protect us; you always look after us.”

I shut my eyes, not able to say a word as my feelings overwhelmed me. Instead I just treasured the small weight of her as I stroked a hand down her back. I swallowed a couple of times before I got my voice back.

“And right now, looking after you means giving you a bath,” I said. “You smell like horse and that’s not proper for a princess.”

“And you smell like horse and a dog’s bone, kind of bloody,” she shot back, wrinkling her nose, then burst out laughing when I did the same. She stripped down and hopped into the tub and chattered away to me about all her hopes and dreams as I scrubbed her hair.

Had I ever done the same? I looked around the room, hardly able to imagine being able to do so with Linnea. Even Nordred’s gentle but stern presence as he accompanied me around the keep had been wont to silence my childish babble, but I was glad for the sound of Jan’s carefree babble. She required little more from me than just nods and murmurs to keep her going. Then, after her bath, I worked painstakingly to comb her hair smooth, holding the hair close to the scalp to stop the roots from pulling until she turned to me with a smile. Once Jan was dressed in a snowy white nightgown, at which she clapped her hands in delight, turning this way and that to admire it, there was a firm knock at the door to signify that the menfolk of the family had returned.

“Pretty as a princess,” I said, after I’d called out for them to enter.

“And this princess needs to be in bed.” Dane walked in, Gael behind him. Jan stared at Dane with wide eyes, still somewhat intimidated by this particular mate of mine, and I understood why. His tone was gentle, but brooked no argument. She scampered off, throwing herself into Weyland’s arms as he appeared with an equally clean Del.

“I’ll read the children a story,” Weyland offered, and there was a round of good nights. Before he turned to go out with Jan and Del, he looked at me intently. “You need to wash up.” His eyes flicked to Gael. “Both of you.”

And logic dictated that we should do that together while the water was still warm.

If Linnea had still been in charge, she’d have ordered the maids back up to empty the bath and start again, with no regard for the fact that they needed to be up early to begin their day. But I saw how high the moon was in the sky and noted there were some plumes of steam rising from the water’s surface, indicating that there was still enough heat to bathe comfortably without the need to disturb anyone from their rest.

“I can wait—” Gael said. My hand moved without me even thinking about it to grab his wrist and stop him from moving away. My heart thudded in my chest and it felt like the whole world stood still. “Darcy.” The way he said my name—gods, I would beg him to say it like that always: deep and warm and with a rough edge to it. “Darcy, I know—”

I moved closer and pressed my fingers to his lips to silence him. I couldn't bear him, anyone, talking about it, not now, not yet. I mutely begged him with my eyes and he nodded slowly before pressing a kiss to my fingertips. We moved then as one, unclasping buckles, shedding our physical armour and, with it, the illusions we'd fought so hard to preserve.

When the two of us had shucked off our layers, it was as though more than just our clothes had been removed. As we both stood before each other, we weren't just exposing our physical bruises and lacerations. I felt as though the deeper pain, the anguish we'd all been covering up, seemed to be closer to the surface than either of us had allowed it to be, particularly as I dealt with the last item I needed to remove before bathing.

Linnea would have expired on the spot when I removed the pad of old rags I'd used to staunch the blood flow between my legs. Women weren't even supposed to acknowledge something like our moon flow in front of men. But I didn't flinch away from his gaze, which meant I caught the moment his eyes widened and then grew impossibly sad, and the way they burned brighter and brighter blue as he stepped toward me.

“Lass...”

He yanked me to him, keeping me pressed against him by the arms wrapped around my shoulders, but he needn't have bothered; I wasn't about to pull away. I clung to him, despite the fact it showed vulnerability, needing something, anything, to hold onto. Before, it had been my sword, my composure, the illusion that I was queen, but he had to understand that when that was removed, and I was simply Darcy, what was left was this: one sob, then another. His grip tightened to the point of pain, but I leaned into it, needing all the strength that he could give me.

“Darcy... Darcy, love.” His hands moved restlessly through my greasy hair, but he didn't care. They felt like they shaped me, remade me, cast me anew, right before he pulled back. “Fuck the bastard Reavers,” he swore. “Fuck that wretched prick, Callum. Fuck history, fuck my father, fuck the Granians, all of them.” He held my head in his hands, his eyes burning into mine. “Fuck our people...”

All the heat went out of his voice and I watched a single tear fall, right along with mine: our pain in perfect sync.

“Fuck them for taking everything,” he finished, dropping his forehead to mine.

“Not everything.” My voice was little more than an ugly croak. I lifted my hand to his cheek. “Not everything, promise me that? If we do this, fight this war, tell me it *won't* take everything.”

Us: that's what I wanted to preserve, everything that burned between him and me and his brothers. I had to have that to survive, even as my heart quailed away from the idea of latching onto anything or anyone again. But I had never been able to hold out against them before, and I couldn't now.

“Never.” The certainty with which he said that somehow filled me—the process of believing, of trusting again, hurt at first, then settled. “Never, lass. You'll always be mine until my last breath. I'll burn the fucking world down and leave Callum the king of ash before I'll let anything take you away from me.”

“...from us.”

Weyland had returned with Dane and Axe, and the bathing room suddenly felt very small. Dane stepped forward, shaking his head.

“If I'd had any idea... If I'd thought for one second...” He drew in a deep breath. I reached out a hand and he took it, squeezing it tight, before continuing. “I never meant for this to happen. Never. I should've been the one to make the sacrifice. The crone could have the blood from my bones—”

I heard the flutter of a raven's wing somewhere in the courtyard below.

“No, she can't.” On that I was sure, the pain inside me somehow easing. “She can't have any of you, because if you die, I won't be far behind you. We got into this mess together and we'll come out of it the same way. Won't we?”

I felt like Jan just then, a small child consulting with her elders, begging them to tell her that the shadows in her closet were just that and not monsters.

“I'd walk through hell for you,” Axe said, his smile bittersweet. “You know that. But if what you need is me by your side—”

“Just you try and stop us,” Weyland burst in, his usual jesting expression replaced by one that was deadly serious. “We'll bring all of Grania and Strelae to its knees if that's what it takes for us to be together.”

“Is that what you imagined?” I asked Dane, ever the political animal, but it wasn't my cool-eyed advisor who was with us right now. That mask had

cracked and shattered on the floor.

“You.” That was his only reply. “I just imagined you. And even then my mind underestimated your strength, your brilliance. If the five of us together is what you imagined, then that’s how it’ll be, Darcy. I won’t settle for less.”

For once, all of us were in complete agreement. We knew it’d probably take all of our skills and strengths to make that happen but, just like soldiers on the battlefield, we had to believe that we could win the day before we began the struggle.

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## Chapter 13

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I sank into the water, immersing myself fully, luxuriating in the simple bliss provided by the massive tub of warm water. When I came back up, blinking and pushing the soaked hair out of my eyes, Gael was stepping in, too. He sat facing me, a groan leaving his lips as the water soothed his muscles. I stretched my arm out toward the soap, but before I could put it to any use, Weyland was there. He plucked the bar from my fingers and said, “What’s the point of having four mates if you don’t put them to good use?” then cocked an eyebrow at his brother, “Axe? Wine.”

“Milady.” Axe returned with a glass filled almost to the brim with good Granian wine, and proffered it with a bow, and I found my mouth watering in anticipation of tasting it again.

“You can wash your own damn self,” Weyland said as he tossed a fresh bar to his brother at the other end of the bathtub. Gael snatched it out of the air before splashing water over his torso and smoothing the soap over his broad shoulders and across his chest, and my eyes followed his every movement as if I was hypnotised. Then Weyland ran his soapy hands across my neck and shoulders and the thick, lemon-scented lather and the fingers that massaged it into my skin had me shuddering with delight. “That’s it.” As Weyland washed my shoulders and arms, Axe stepped closer as well, grabbing the tilting glass of wine as my hand became lax. After setting it aside, he picked up a bottle of liquid soap and then started to work it through my hair.

“So, was this how it was supposed to be?” I groaned, head down, my hair dripping in points. Gael had grabbed hold of my feet and, using the same

dexterous hands that could grip a sword hilt so tight, began to loosen the muscles in the sole. It was all I could do to gather my thoughts to devise a coherent sentence. “Because I must say, I’d kill your father twice over for making me miss out on this.”

“I think you’d find all four of us are willing to do whatever it takes to ease your pain.” I opened one eye a crack to see Dane crouching beside the bath, gripping the side like he wanted to pounce on me. “Anything, Darcy. If it’s in my power to grant...”

His voice trailed away as my eyes slid down the front of his shirt. He’d shucked off his armour, leaving only a crushed linen shirt and my eyes were drawn to the tawny expanse of tanned skin there. He sucked in a breath and so did the others. They were breathing in my scent.

“She likes that.” Weyland’s voice sounded choked off. “Whatever the hell you’re doing, keep doing that, Brother.”

MY ATTRACTION to all four of them, my need for them would never be a secret. My perfume would always advertise to each one of them how I felt. But alongside the scent of my desire, they had to also have caught this: the way I was stiffening against Axe and Weyland’s hands, pulling my foot gently from Gael’s grip, though not jerking it free the way I really wanted to. I felt like I was packing myself back up again, re-erecting my barriers, when Axe spoke.

“You bloody idiot.”

A dull smack and yelp from Weyland made clear how Axe had dealt with the situation, but something uncertain still remained, hanging in the air between us all.

“I don’t think...” I didn’t look up, but even to me I sounded like a coy maid, spluttering over her words as she tried to fend off unwanted advances. “I don’t—”

In Grania, a woman didn’t deny her husband the solace of her body, or so the priests had preached over and over. In reality, women didn’t have a say in it. Even though my men had given me no reason to think they would ever act the same, those deep-ingrained messages were the reasons behind my hesitation, why my words came out so slowly. Before I tried to articulate my thoughts one more time, Dane grabbed my hand and clung to it, and I lifted my eyes to his.



“No one wants anything from you, Darcy, especially...” He went terribly pale, glancing around at his brothers. “Only what you are comfortable giving. Perhaps...”

“I just need to hold you.” Gael’s words were blunt, his tone naked with his need. “Just hold you in my arms.”

“And mine,” Weyland muttered.

“If I can have that, I can get through...” Gael sighed. “Anything. Anything for you.”

I had been sleeping alone in as many ways a woman can in a tent full of men. Mostly, though, I’d rolled myself into my blankets and away from them, creating a cocoon they’d dared not breach. Did it hurt a butterfly, emerging from its shell? I felt that it must, because it was hurting me to try it. But a problem shared was a problem halved, that’s what Nordred always said. And so I raised my head to meet the eyes of each one of my mates and nodded.

“Together,” I promised, clinging to that word as much as they did, something that became an actuality when we got into bed.

EACH ONE OF my mates was now washed and cleaned. Weyland and Axe had gone down to the soldiers’ quarters and Dane had used our bath. By the time they returned, I was laid down on a big bed, Gael beside me. That had been a strange experience, even though it shouldn’t have been. It had felt like the first time, as though Gael’s body and mine were strangers to each other. We’d struggled to find the way we fit together at first, both of us making small sounds of frustration, until he’d laid back and let me work it out. I stared down at him, seeing that same shuttered expression which I now knew hid hope and need. I touched the side of his face, feeling that sharp slope and the bristles of his stubble, and he sucked in a breath. It was as though he couldn’t stand my constant observation, as he turned his head and pressed a kiss to my palm. Then I was leaning down and kissing his mouth, chastely, but with no less passion than if we were about to make love.

“Got some of that for me?”

Several sets of footsteps approached. Weyland appeared by the bed first, hair damp and scraped back.

“Of course it’s you; demanding more attention,” Gael groaned, but he chuckled as he held me close. “Put the poor bastard out of his misery, lass.

He's insufferable when he thinks he's being ignored."

"Typical middle child," Dane said.

He watched with keen eyes as Weyland lay down beside me, tilting my body gently his way, yet content to just place my head on his chest. I moved slowly, as if out of practice, slinging my arm around his waist and then nestling in.

"That's it." Weyland's voice was part croon, part sigh, as if he was satisfied for both of us, and I found myself sighing too.

"This is what's needed." Dane nodded in satisfaction. "And perhaps we should leave you—" He turned to Axe, but I interrupted.

"No."

"Darcy, you're not there with us, yet. Not like you are with—"

"No." I moved to lean up on my elbows and, while Weyland grumbled about Dane not being able to keep his mouth shut, I felt the strangeness of having a very serious conversation while completely naked. "You know I love each and every one of you."

But they didn't because, as soon as the words were out of my mouth, they stared at me in surprise.

"Well, no—" Dane said.

"You do?" Axe looked completely taken aback by my words, and I felt a pang of pain. I couldn't let that stand. "Darcy, we still have a way to go—"

"And we still will," I said, sitting up and drawing my legs to the side. I stared intently at them both. "You must know that I didn't claim Gael or Weyland because they were the only ones I cared about... As soon as I accepted all of you as my fated mates, my heart was... taken." I shrugged my shoulders. "The claiming marks are really just a commemoration of a moment, when that feeling rose up way too hard and fast for me to hold back and I just..." I looked quickly from one to the other. "I'll bite each one of you now, if it helps."

"So practical." Dane was one part amused, one part proud. "No." He glanced at Axe, who nodded as well. "Call us selfish, but we want one of those moments—where you can't hold back—for ourselves too and I think we're willing to wait."

"But we're not willing to wait much longer for sleep." Weyland sounded as plaintive as a weary child.

We all felt that exhaustion once it had been acknowledged, and we collapsed together down onto the bed in a big puppy pile, the likes of which

my former countrymen accused Strelans of sleeping in. But they didn't understand the pleasure, the solace, that came from resting within the arms of people that love you, who you love back with every fibre of your being.

"BUT HOW MANY CUL—" Dane stopped himself as we conducted a meeting with the wolf cultists and our people across the breakfast table the next morning. "How many adherents to the dread lord do you think exist within Granian borders?" he asked Higgins.

"More than you could easily count, my lord," he replied, with a smug smile. "The reach of the brotherhood is great. And now that your lady has wakened the souls of some, surely she can do so with others?"

Turning ordinary Granians into people ripe for indoctrinating into his cult, I thought, but kept it to myself. I had other problems to worry about. Everyone who was gathered around the table, which included General Rath, the lords and some of the officers, were staring at me, waiting for my answer. I'd had one night of peaceful sleep, but my burdens had awaited me at the door when I got up.

"I believe I can," I told them. "Though the question remains whether or not I should."

Every man's throat worked at once, all of them ready to tell me their thoughts and opinions, but before any of them could speak, one of the knights I'd transformed came clanking into the hall with a sheepish expression.

"Apologies for disturbing you, milady. I mean—"

"Your Majesty," Dane corrected stiffly.

"Majesty, but there's a messenger—"

The messenger himself hadn't waited, instead he'd already scaled the steps and strolled into the great hall, like he had a right to be there.

But that wasn't what had me stiffening.

What power had been gifted to me by the blood of my child, I had caught a glimpse of this.

It was him.

That mop of curly hair, dark brown with flecks of bronze and gold in it, the gleaming highlights mirrored in the colour of his eyes. And what eyes! The messenger had a smirk on his face that seemed not in keeping with his role and his plain livery, but his eyes were what captured my attention. Golden, like a newly minted coin, they would've struck almost anyone as

unusual. Several of the men around the table reacted to the stranger, muttering and shifting to their feet, though I wasn't sure if it was his attitude or the uncertain nature of his mission which gave them cause for concern.

"Who the hell are you to march into a duke's keep without so much as a by-your-leave?" Dane snapped, hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Rake... sir." The simple honorific was hastily tacked on as the man sketched the briefest of bows. "And by whose authority? The highest in the land." He produced a scroll with a flourish from within his doublet, but rather than offer it to Dane, he stepped forward and handed it to me with another bow, this one much deeper and sustained.

"You have a message for my father?" I asked, trying to remember how to school my voice to sound like a proper Granian lady again.

"Not your father, milady," Rake corrected, a quirk to his full lips. He held my gaze, even as he stayed bent over. "Every noblewoman in the country has been summoned to court. The king is on his deathbed and, with Crown Prince Bryson still unwed, all women of noble birth are being asked to present themselves at court to find our next queen."

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## Chapter 14

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“If you go down to the kitchens, my people will give you food and water while I read this message,” I told Rake after I had taken the scroll.

He bowed again, then turned and did as I’d instructed, yet I had the strong feeling that the messenger wasn’t doing anything other than that which he wished to do. There wasn’t a submissive bone in his body. Once the man was gone, my mates clustered to my side.

“Who the hell was that? And what business does the Crown Prince have with you?” Weyland demanded.

“Perhaps it would be wise of Darcy to answer the call,” General Rath said and several other of the lords nodded along.

“For what reason?” Gael’s voice was as sharp as a keenly honed blade. “Darcy is our mate—”

“And she could use this... gathering as a means to get close to Grania’s crown prince,” Lord Berrick said. “Not to marry the interloper, but to use her abilities to gift us what we need.”

His plan was a cunning one and tantalising for its simplicity, except its success was entirely dependent on my ability to bring the crown prince to heel.

“Is the crown prince a devotee of the dread lord?” I asked Higgins.

“Word is he’s sympathetic,” he replied, “though I couldn’t be sure. That information is pretty far above my pay grade, but I could put out some feelers once we get to the capital.”

Aramathia. Not just the capital, but the seat of the royal court. It was the custom of every northern duke to take his daughter to the capital as soon as

she was of marriageable age. She'd be introduced to high society to hopefully draw the eye of a powerful and advantageous suitor. It was how my mother met my father. But not every duke's daughter was presented at court. Linnea had complained loudly and bitterly when that opportunity wasn't given to me, until my father pointed at me. As soon as she took one look at my slovenly attire and the weapons strapped to my hips, her eyes had narrowed just as Father rolled his.

But for me to go there now, ostensibly to join the matchmaking exercise?

Rake couldn't leave the keep alive if I chose not to go—no one could know of my refusal—but... We'd intended to find a way to the capital, to gain access to the king and try to persuade, plead, cajole or force him to pit his army against Callum's forces, to try and use the same soldiers that had subdued the Strelans of yore to crush Callum now, but... I pulled the ribbon free and read the scroll.

"What does it say?" Weyland asked, looking over my shoulder. "Lady Darcy of Elverston, you are summoned..."

His voice fell away as he took note of what it said. I read the contents, knowing what my answer had to be. I was struck by a strange feeling of dissonance—as if two different Darcys had to co-exist together at the same time. When I'd left the keep, I'd left a whole other side of myself behind, burned her when I threw my stays in the fire. And it was as though now I was being asked to put back on the sooty remnants of my former constrictive life. I took one breath and then another, though my heart was still beating too fast as I struggled to accept what I must do.

"I have to go."

"Darcy, no—" Gael started to say.

"I just asked my father to write and ask for the exact thing that this message tells me I must do," I said, waving the scroll in front of me. "In some ways this will make the process easier. The king knows of me, knows of my relationship to you four. It really shouldn't be an issue if I walk into court with four wargen warriors at my side—because the king sold me to them for iron." Gael flinched at my words and I stepped forward, a hand outstretched toward him. "That's not how *I* view things but..."

"She's right." Rath's face took on a grim cast as he broke in with his pronouncement. "You know she's right. Highnesses..."

"Well, if that's the way it's to be," Dane said, that cold mask back in place, "then we will go to the capital in a manner befitting the sovereign of

Strelae, with an honour guard, handpicked to keep our queen safe.”

They would protect me with their lives, I had no doubt in that. But as they discussed the details, arguing over who was best to go with me, I moved quietly to the edge of the room, then swiftly made my way downstairs.

The kitchen had always been my safe place—that and the stables. Linnea hadn’t liked to sully herself by going into either place and so I was out from under her keen eye. So, being back in the keep, and feeling overwhelmed, I had revisited old habits by going to ground where I felt secure. But when I walked in, there he was.

Rake.

He was sitting at the same prep bench we’d sat at yesterday, munching on a bread roll stuffed with corned beef, cheese and pickled onions and complimenting Flora like he was the one who was lord of the manor rather than my father. I drew up next to him with no fanfare, simply glaring down at the man until he registered I was standing beside him.

“Lady—” he started to say.

“Return to your masters after you are rested.” I thrust the scroll at him. “I will, of course, answer the crown prince’s summons with my husbands.”

“Husbands?” His brows shot up. “So it is true then. A duke’s daughter has lowered herself to consort with beasts like that.”

“You’ll not speak of milady like that in my kitchen,” Flora said, grabbing a wooden spoon and wielding it like I would a sword.

“It’s alright, Cook,” I said in a calm tone. “He’s right.” Rake would have eyes and ears everywhere. I took him to be one of the vast number of minor nobility in this sort of role at court, always keeping their eyes out for the latest titbit that they could whisper into the right ear in the hopes it might raise their status. So I would let him take this bit of information back to the Crown Prince. “I do consort with those wargen, each and every one of them, as soon as the sun sets. I would never have thought to answer the prince’s summons, seeing as his father wedded me to those ‘beasts’, but here we are. Do you think, perhaps, that the prince will want to join their number? See if the legends are true and a nip from them or me is enough to turn Prince Bryson into a slaving beast?”

I shoved the scroll into his hand.

“If you could let His Highness know—”

“I’m afraid not,” he said, then smiled impishly as though that overrode his interruption. “Prince’s orders. Some of the girls come willing-like, filled

with dreams that they'll be queen, but others..." He slid his eyes sideways and dragged them over me, insultingly slow with it, so that my hand went to my sword without thinking. "Well, others? They're less willing, thinking they have sweethearts, fiancés and even..." his gold eyes sparkled, "even husbands. The prince was most insistent that each woman on the list present herself at court. He's sent a messenger to each noble house to deliver his edict and..." he winked at me, "to ensure the lady arrives promptly. I won't be telling His Highness anything you won't be able to when you're in his presence."

I stared at the back of his head as he turned back to his sandwich, dimly aware Flora was unsettled, but unable to reach out and reassure her while my field of vision went red. Rage, pure and unadulterated, throbbed inside me. The irony was that it was an emotion that could not be acknowledged, let alone acted on, here in Grania, but could be expressed freely if I just ran across the border, back to Strelae. I ground my teeth at the recognition that there were powerful men on either side reaching out their hands to grab me, like I was no more than a doll—Callum and his Reavers on one side, and now Crown Prince Bryson had added himself to the mix on this side of the border.

But they would all realise soon enough that there was more to me than the embroidered smile and the malleable frame of a child's toy—Darcy of Elverston had never been the biddable young woman that Granian men seemed to wish for, and Queen Darcy of Strelae was a different creature altogether. I took in a breath and actively unclenched my jaw so that I could unleash my ire at this messenger—his audacity earning him the position of target on behalf of all those other men.

"Who the hell are you?" I ground out, expecting him to be taken aback. But Rake seemed to think my jibe hilarious, judging from the stifled snort that met my question. "I've met hundreds of messengers from Aramathia, but none like you."

He turned to face me and was about to reply, golden eyes beginning to shine with a restless light, but as his lips parted, footsteps had us both turning our attention to the door that led out to the kitchen gardens.

"Who's this one?"

Selene and Ayla came strolling into the kitchens with Orla in tow. My mood shifted the moment I saw the Maiden we'd sent on patrol. I strode over and hugged her tight, and she slapped my back once before letting go. Selene, however, was staring at Rake with a fixedness that had me turning back to the



messenger, although I didn't want to have to go back to dealing with his... whatever it was.

"Rake, ma'am," he replied with a tug of his forelock, all deference now, at odds with his impudent attitude when speaking with me.

Her ice-blue eyes held his golden gaze, not looking away for a second as she summed him up. He met her scrutiny head on, something many Strelan men wouldn't have dared to, although he couldn't know that. He came from a city where women were chattels, subjugated by the church, by their fathers, their brothers, by the whole of society, so no doubt he thought he could do as he wished with impunity. And as if to prove my thought, that grin reappeared on his face, only growing wider the longer she looked at him.

"With me," she barked, as she turned on her heel and marched back out the doorway they'd come in through.

SELENE DIDN'T SAY anything until we were well clear of the kitchens, of the central keep buildings themselves, and stood in an eerily quiet courtyard. The knights no longer needed to spend their days sparring and training in armour and mail. They had a different master now, and their goal was to learn to control their wolves, not something that could be done out in the open with the crown prince's messenger at large in the keep.

"That one isn't right," she said, stabbing her finger in the general direction of the kitchens. "There's something wrong about him."

"You can say that again," I replied. "He's terribly rude for a messenger."

"No, not that." She frowned slightly, staring at me. "Can't you feel it?"

"Feel what? A burning need to smash his face into a bowl of horse mash?" I replied. "Certainly, but—"

"That one's a wolf," Ayla said, shouldering forward.

I laughed at that, only sobering when I realised that all three of them were staring seriously at me.

"What?"

"It doesn't feel right, whatever is in him, but he's got a wolf."

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## Chapter 15

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*“He’s got a wolf.”*

Selene’s words reverberated around and around in my head as we rode forth the next day, leaving my father’s keep under the command of the general. Our party consisted of Selene and Ayla, Higgins and one of his cultist followers, my mates and our children. I’d wanted to keep them from this trip, giving them over to Annis’ capable hands, but they would not hear of it. Their cries, the way they clung to me had had us delaying, then changing our plans quickly. But once we were on our way, travelling farther south than I’d ever been before, I had time to regard this... Rake... and wonder what the hell he was.

He sat too tall in the saddle for a messenger. Most were rangy, bow-legged fellows, their bodies adapting to spending too much time in the saddle, but Rake’s spine was ramrod straight. Someone had made sure he developed a good seat and that was usually the result of expensive tutors, far beyond the reach of a simple messenger.

“Do I need to be worried?” I glanced sideways to see Weyland had sidled his horse closer. He smiled at my confusion and then nodded in Rake’s direction. “You’ve been staring fixedly at that man since we left the keep.” He leaned out of his saddle to angle himself towards me. “If you’ve attention to spare, give it to me.”

I couldn’t help but smile. Sometimes my mate was such a child, always looking for more attention, but I met him halfway, pressing a brief kiss to his lips—all that the rocking gait of our slowly ambling horses would allow—and that appeared to be enough. Weyland glowed whenever he got what he

wanted, his smile growing as smug and satisfied as a big cat, which was why I kept indulging him.

“Selene says there’s something wrong with him,” I answered Weyland belatedly, in a low tone, hoping it was out of earshot.

“What?” came the comment from the riders of the horses closest to me—letting me know that my mates had been paying close attention to our conversation.

Suddenly poor Arden was hemmed in by each of my mates’ horses. His head jerked up and he let out a nervous whinny, but my men paid little attention.

“Selene says he has a wolf,” I replied in a hoarse whisper, realising, as our horses jostled each other, that we had everyone’s attention.

Including Rake’s. He turned in the saddle, eyebrow rising as he saw the kerfuffle playing out behind him, but my men paid him little mind.

“You didn’t say anything about that before,” Dane replied, brows lowered.

Between the packing and preparation, the meetings and discussions about how everyone would be kept safe, along with trying to plan how I might woo the crown prince to our side, it hadn’t come up. He acknowledged this with a nod, then kicked his horse forward, going to take position ahead on the road beside the Maidens.

“He doesn’t have the feel of one of the two-souled,” Axe said, consideringly.

“He could be some kind of mongrel.” Gael’s voice was little more than a growl. “Speaking of which, you’ll see more of them around. We’re headed to Middlebury, the waypoint between the south and the north, and it’s the place a lot of half-breeds go. If they stay on the border they’re likely to be shoved across it, or else hung at the closest crossroads.” When his eyes went to his reins, my hand reached out and clasped his. “My mother lives there in the town.”

Ulfric’s fated mate, left to fend for herself inside a country that would always hate her son. I squeezed his hand hard.

“We could go and see her, if you like; if you think she’d welcome having us visit her home. We can introduce her to the children,” I said. He stared at me then nodded, a half smile crossing his lips.

“She’d like that.” He glanced over to where Jan was chattering nonstop and Del was doing a very good impression of a stoic warrior. “A little girl to

spoil.”

“A little warrior queen in the making, more like,” Axe said. “I’ll give young Del a break and have the princess ride with me. He looks about ready to shove her in the dirt.”

And we weren’t even a day into this damnable trip. I let out a sigh so long both Gael and Weyland chuckled, which brought my attention back to what was worth focussing on.

The sun was shining, warming my back, chasing the chill from my bones. Birds swooped from tree to tree—and not a raven in sight. But most of all, here there was no threat of Reavers. Whatever Callum had planned, it didn’t extend this far, yet. I could only hope that I could get through to His Highness, make him understand the threat and have him mobilise his troops in time to stop Callum’s forces entering Grania or, better yet, join with ours to drive them out of both our countries together. Crown Prince Bryson was a shadowy, vague figure in my head, from my visions, standing by my side, just like my mates did. All I caught a glimpse of was a flash of gold, someone tall and strong.

We stopped for a midday meal, something Rake complained bitterly about—shaking his head and grumbling about time constraints—but the children weren’t used to this kind of time in the saddle. I’d been firm but polite about it, then firmer and less polite.

“YOU WALK AROUND ARMED in your father’s keep?” Rake asked.

“Do you walk around armed in your father’s keep, milady?” I corrected, hating that I sounded like Linnea, but unable to stop myself. There was something about Rake’s insolent manner that set me off. “And yes. His horse master...” I paused, just as I did every time I thought of Nordred. “He was the one who taught me how to use both a sword and a bow.”

“Maybe you could scare us up some meat then.” He glanced at the rest of the company with a baleful eye. “Weren’t told I was bringing a whole bloody contingent with me.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan,” I said, grabbing my bow and quiver from my saddle and then stalking off into the undergrowth.

“Not without me.”

Axe appeared beside me, dropping his voice down to barely a whisper and the two of us crept forward.

We were quiet so we could listen to the noise of the forest. When he heard a loud crack, he grabbed his axe from his back, holding it close as we moved. Small skitters were dismissed. They were lizards or rabbits—far too small to warrant our attention. We didn't want anything big either, a stag would be a waste of meat out here, as well as technically being the property of the king. A particular sort of bird call was what determined our path. Grouse always made this strange churring sound when calling to each other and that was the sound we followed.

“A few fat grouse would make for a damn fine meal,” Axe whispered. “You can easily bring some of those down.”

That casual confidence in me—he didn't know how much I needed it. Sometimes I felt like an emotional desert, sucking in all of their love and affirmations, feeling as though my need was so great that I would surely leave them all bone dry. But his certainty had me creeping forward, arrow nocked.

Grouse are drab-looking birds, with feathers patterned in different shades of brown, making them nigh invisible amongst the leaf litter and undergrowth. But the wolf inside me ensured my eyes were keen. As I drew my bow back—ready to aim as soon as I caught a movement—I saw the moment they shifted, the flutter of wings being resettled. It was hard to hold the crouched position, and not a good one to be taking a shot, but if I was to stand I would scare the whole flock. I shifted slightly, adjusting to the position I needed to adopt to make the kill, and then let the arrow fly.

I felt like my consciousness flew with that arrow, burying itself in the bird's breast rather than a damn Reaver. I could feel the electrical prickle of adrenalin, its limbs stiffening for just a second in an attempt to get away, right before all of that died. The bird fell down into the dirt. Axe's weapon landed at the same time, cleaving another poor grouse in two, then he leapt forward with a whoop to pick up both birds by their feet.

And that was the moment when a wolf emerged from the bushes.

Apparently we'd all been on the same hunt and, by the look of the wolf, he was none too keen on relinquishing his prey. His rib bones showed through his coat as he pulled his lips back to snarl at Axe. My mate mimicked the expression, taking a defiant step forward and throwing up his arms, the aggressive gesture enough to make the wolf reconsider. He stared at the two of us with eyes of purest gold, a glint of what seemed like anger flashing there for just a second, before wheeling away.

The sight of the wolf's eyes stayed with me even after we'd returned to camp.

When Rake ambled over, inspecting our kills with a hungry look, I couldn't help but note the similarity between his eyes and the beast's. But any further investigation was deferred due to the need to pluck and dress the two birds.

We enjoyed a meal of roast grouse, turned on an impromptu spit made from sticks, over a hastily created fire. Then, once we were done, my mates and I worked together to clean the children's fingers and faces of grease.

"That was delicious!" Jan crowed.

"Hope you still think so in a few days," Del said, with the weary tone of an older brother. "We won't be stopping at fancy inns."

"That we won't." Rake got to his feet and then kicked dirt over the fire, quelling the coals. "And you will all need to keep up. I was tasked to bring her ladyship to the capital, not all of you."

At the man's abrasive words, Dane rose slowly to his feet, ready to make his position clear.

"And we care little for the job you've been given. This is a formality only. The king himself gave Darcy to us in return for Strelan iron. She belongs to us; not your prince. She'll present herself at court and be gone that same day."

My questions about Rake's heritage doubled then, because rather than look away or spit some kind of racist diatribe, the messenger stared my mate down. I watched the muscle in his jaw jump, his eyes gleaming brighter gold as Dane's became chips of blue ice.

"Is that right?" Rake drawled, smiling slowly. "Seems to me that you're pretty cocky, walking into another man's court and thinking you can make calls like that. The king might've made a deal with what passes for a Strelan king, but the gossip I heard in the keep says the man is dead. Which means the deal is dead, too. You're a deposed prince, now."

Dane's brothers leapt to their feet to stand beside him, but Rake didn't change his posture.

"A dead king, a dead deal and four Strelan... 'princes'... won't be enough to stop His Highness from taking what's his if he decides her ladyship is our future queen."

"No?" Dane moved so quickly I didn't see him unsheathe his sword. One minute he had his hand on the hilt, the next the point was pressed against the

man's neck. "Then perhaps good Strelan steel is what's needed to make our claim clear. Darcy belongs to us. That is written in the stars themselves and needs no ratification by your prince, your king or anything in this blasted country."

"Come on," I told the children, seeing their wide eyes and stricken expressions. "Don't worry about that. Dane's just making clear where things stand."

Jan wrapped her arms around my neck, clinging to me like a baby, but the muscle jumping in Del's jaw had me putting a hand on his shoulder and turning him around.

"Are you all right with Jan riding double with you?" I asked Del when we drew level with his horse and he hauled himself back in the saddle.

"I'm fine," he said.

But, just like my men as they walked toward us, there was a stiff vigilance about the way he held his sister close, making sure she didn't slip from the saddle.

"SEE," Selene said, once we'd got underway and our group had fallen back a way, leaving Rake to ride ahead. "There's something wrong with that man. He doesn't speak right, nor act right for a man of his station. Cursing us out for being filthy wargs? That'd make sense, but—"

"But nothing," Dane said. "The man is irrelevant. We'll be rid of him the moment we get to Aramathia and then we need to focus on the real issue. If Crown Prince Bryson thinks he can tear us apart, he'll get a lesson in just what happens to men who corner wolves."

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## Chapter 16

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As the sun was setting, I forced Rake to stop. He wanted to protest, to tell me no, but something in my manner gave him pause.

“The children are falling asleep in the saddle,” I said.

“Children that were never meant to come on this journey in the first place,” he pointed out.

“Says you.” I drew myself up to sit taller in the saddle, but could not match his considerable height. “A man with little authority other than that which the prince bestowed upon you. And I saw nothing in the scroll to preclude me from bringing an entourage, as most noble women would.” I shook my head. “Any other woman of my station would be travelling by carriage and the process would be long and arduous, pulling wheels out of ruts—”

“So you say, milady.”

“I’m informing you that we are stopping for the night—as a courtesy—and you’re welcome to share our fire and our meal, if you can keep a civil tongue in your head,” I replied, keeping my tone mild.

Rake was insufferable, but I couldn’t spend the long ride to the capital at odds with the man. After the journey was done, we’d never need to speak to each other again and I clung to that fact.

“Just like that, hmm?” He smiled, but it was softer than his usual acerbic one. “Breaking bread with a commoner.”

“I care little for rank and much more about who you are as a person.” I flushed when I realised I’d contradicted that statement when I insisted on my title. “Perhaps we should try for a fresh start. Darcy of Strelae.”



I offered him my hand in friendship, but got something quite different when he took it.

WHEN I WAS TAKEN from my father's home, distraught, broken, there'd been something about the way my mates had accustomed me to their touch. Affecting me more than that of any other man, every time one of them had taken my hand or held me to him, it had filled me with a pulsing heat that had taken my breath away. It had been one of the reasons I'd given credence to their claim that I was their mate, that the reaction was the physical evidence of the bond between us. But that didn't explain this: the fact that there was a similar wash of heat between the messenger and me; the same pulsing sensation... as with my mates. Rake seemed to note the connection between us, his golden eyes gleaming brighter, but I snatched my hand back as if scalded. I stared at my palm, searching for evidence of what had malfunctioned, but there was only smooth skin there.

"A pleasure to meet you, Darcy of Strelae."

Rake's voice seemed to change as he responded, the nasal accent softening into a throaty burr that made my ears buzz. But before I could investigate anything further, he wheeled his horse around.

"We'll make camp for the night," he announced, like it had been his idea, not my command. "There's a clearing not far from here and a river to water the horses at."

"Thank the gods..." Del sighed, which brought my focus back to what was important.

MY BOY ASKED to come when I went hunting. Axe followed us at a more sedate pace, keeping an eye on him. I felt a thrill of excitement when Del asked to join me. I knew exactly how my father would've reacted if I'd asked the same, so I made sure to do the opposite. To do as Nordred would've. To check in with Del and make sure he felt confident with the bow. He showed me how proficient he was, hitting the burl on a tree he'd pointed out.

"A live target is different though," I warned, not to crush his confidence, but to help build it. "Grouse don't normally sit still, waiting to be hit."

"Grouse?" He wrinkled his nose. "Surely we can hunt for a stag. A big

one with twelve points—”

“And where will we put the meat that will be leftover? And how much time will we have to spend butchering the beast? Del.” I turned him to face me with a hand on his shoulder. “We are about to take the life of an animal so that we might eat. We must if we are to survive, but we need to do so with care. Meat left to spoil and feed the flies is a waste, an insult to the animal’s sacrifice.”

He nodded slowly, eyes big, as the two of us turned to face the forest.

Walking like this, the two of us in perfect sync, was beautiful yet painful. It wasn’t hard to imagine a different child joining us, a boy—or a girl perhaps—with Gael’s eyes, or mine. A child brought up surrounded by love, inheriting a little of the spirit of both of us, using the knowledge they’d been learned at our knees to keenly rake the undergrowth for signs of our next meal. But Del was no substitute for the child who’d hardly had a chance to be. Del had been there before I’d even known I was a mother and his and Jan’s presence reminded me that I needed to be one, no matter what loss I had suffered. So when I reached out and took his hand—squeezing it to let him know to stop, to look around at what the forest was telling us—and then pointed to the birds drowsing in a nearby clearing, when he squeezed back, I felt a rush of pride.

Of love.

Meeting my mates had made clear to me that my heart was far bigger than I’d thought. And each person I’d made a connection with since had seemed to enlarge it further. But I was realising that Jan and Del had burrowed their way into my heart faster and deeper than almost all others. The love and pride of a parent was different—my role with them was to be their support and to see them take their steps toward independence. So it was Del I focussed on right now. I nodded to him and smiled, indicating he was to take the first shot. He might miss and send the birds fluttering, the noise startling away other game in the forest. All would be well. We had dried meat and bread and cheese in our saddlebags. We would survive without fresh meat. But I needed this, to watch my boy pull that bow, stand straight and true before aiming and letting his arrow fly. I needed to walk the same steps that Nordred had done with me, and I thanked the gods that I’d had his guidance in my life. I needed to be him now, even as I navigated these challenges without him. He had died and passed the baton on, and it was only now I felt like I was actually picking it up.

Del's arrow hit true, but not well. The bird let out an ungainly squawk, sending the rest fluttering off, but I was on my feet and running across the ground at speed. Grabbing the madly flapping bird by the feet, I put my foot on its neck and ended its life with a quick twist of my hand.

"We must kill them quickly," I told Del as he rushed up. "Be merciful in your kills, don't prolong an animal's pain. Their bodies fuel ours, and we must treat that as the gift it is."

"My da used to say a little prayer to the Morrigan when he brought down an animal," Del said, eyeing me.

We stared at each other, squatting beside the dead bird and I knew he was waiting for my permission. But if he was my child now, he was the child of his birth parents before, and I would make sure to honour them.

"Then you should say it," I told him.

He nodded, bringing his hands up and clasping them under his chin.

"Thank you for this gift, dread lady," he said. "Thank you for the strength of my arm, for allowing my arrow to fly true. Thank you for this bounty, this gift of one of your creatures." And then he performed a strange little gesture, one unfamiliar to me—a fluttering of his hands—before standing up.

Axe nodded to me as all three of us walked back to camp. It might be that we were a little light on meat tonight, but we would survive. Axe smiled a broad smile and then put his hand around my waist, pulling me in closer as we walked.

"That was well done, lass."

My spirit grabbed on to that praise, holding it like a stub of candle whose light flickers in the night air, but my hands went around it, protecting it from the darkness and the wind.

"You'll be sick of grouse before we get to Middlebury," Rake said, returning to camp from the other side of the forest with several birds in tow, "but we'll reach the town tomorrow and you'll be able to eat fresh lamb stew from the inn."

"Won't taste as good as this though," I said, winking at Del as I showed him how to pluck the feathers from his kill.

"A STORY!" Jan demanded, when I told her she and her brother needed to go to bed.

"I'll tell you a story," Axe said, swooping in and grabbing her before

throwing her in the air. I winced, my mothering mind knowing this kind of stimulation made it harder for her to settle, but then her sheer happiness and her giggles kept me silent. Let her take what pleasures she can, I thought. Del was terribly serious and still, but his sister seemed much more resilient, happy as long as she felt safe. “Of princesses and dragons and evil kings.” Axe winked at me. “And how she overcame each one of them. But first a kiss.”

He leaned Jan down to me. She presented a cheek and I kissed her quickly, then ruffled her hair.

“Go to sleep and be good for Axe,” I told her with a stern stare, one I found hard to maintain. “We’ll be riding all day and you need to be well rested.” Del studied the fire with undue interest, obviously hoping to linger. “You too, Del.”

“But—”

“You’ll need all your patience to deal with your sister tomorrow,” Gael said, nudging his shoulder. “A warrior is always alert and ready to act, but he can’t be if he doesn’t get enough sleep. We’ll be in bed shortly.” He yawned theatrically. “Everyone’s dead on our feet.”

Gael’s words seemed to act as a reminder because everyone started to move, gathering bed rolls, banking the fire’s flames and cleaning up the mess of dinner. But when I got up to go and hobble the horses, Rake did too.

“Milady...” His tone was quiet, respectful now, but also pitched so no one else could hear. Good things rarely came from such conversations. “No matter what happens in the capital, if you need to be extricated from this arrangement with the wargs—”

“Extricated?” I frowned.

He glanced from me to where Axe was walking off with Del at his heels.

“I’m sure the king never meant to force you into an alliance where you would be required to care for your... husbands’ by-blows.”

I laughed at that, then smothered my response, lest it bring the others back.

“I’m fairly sure the king didn’t give a rat’s arse for my fate,” I replied, crossing my arms. “And anyway, Jan and Del aren’t anyone’s illegitimate children. Their parents were killed by Reavers—”

“So it’s true...”

Rake hadn’t meant to let that out, I could tell. His cheeks flushed, his eyes widened, but I plunged on. Men like Rake frequented ale houses everywhere.

The news I was about to impart might therefore be spread far and wide, putting more pressure on the Granian king to act, whoever ended up in charge.

“Of course it’s true. Why the hell would we be in Grania if it wasn’t for Callum and his Reavers?”

“Callum? Prince Callum?” Rake stepped closer, but I put a hand up to stop him from getting any closer.

“You know a lot about your history, messenger,” I said.

“Perhaps.” It was as if the polite, thoughtful man who stood before me was packed away and replaced by the smirking prick from before. He regarded me with a lazy smile. “A messenger’s gotta be able to read, don’t he? No law against reading history books.”

And no inclination to do so, either. Many of my father’s people had their letters, but they preferred novels or the newspaper, not dusty tomes about the past.

“No, I guess not. Then you know about the threat the Reavers pose.”

“They were supposed to be a myth.” I watched him struggle to accept what I’d said, just like everyone else. “Agents of the old queens.”

“Well, this time they’re agents of a prince we thought long dead. Callum wields the power of the Morrigan, the Crone. He gains power from death, resurrects the newly slain as Reavers.” Rake’s eyes went wide, as well they might. “Whatever troops are sent against him, he’ll do his damndest to kill and then repurpose as his own, growing his host. He took Snowmere and there’s nothing to make me think that will be enough for him.” I shifted slightly closer to the man. “You’re obviously no ordinary messenger, but a courtier with the ear of the prince, so I need something from you. I’ll give you what gold or jewels I can strip from my father’s estate to pay you with. When we get to Aramathia, tell Crown Prince Bryson that the Reavers are coming. Make him see that there’s much more pressing matters to attend to than taking a wife.”

I stared intently at him, willing him to agree. But those golden eyes flicked from side to side, not focused on me at all, but either dissecting the news I bore, or contemplating the gold I offered. Then he looked up and nodded.

“I’ll see it done, milady.”

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## Chapter 17

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Middlebury was a bustling town because it was the entrance into the northern region of Grania. Goods traded from north to south, or vice versa, came here first and men like my father sent their stewards, or came here themselves, to buy them. It was also where my mother was born.

Linnea had complained to my father more than once about the fact Father never took me with him when he went to Middlebury for trade. It was her home town as well and I think she would've liked the opportunity to visit them, using me as an excuse for her presence. But Father had just scoffed and left without listening to her pleas.

The streets were filled with people from every walk of life. As our horses picked their way between them, I noted that every casual glance in our direction became an outright stare as we passed. "Not many two-souled ever come this far south," Gael told us, nodding to one girl with bright blue eyes standing there. "Cept those that make it their home."

And what kind of home was that? I wondered. When the surprise and curiosity at our appearance wore off, people went back to their errands, but gave the girl a wide berth. Her cheeks flushed as she put her head down and scurried off.

"I suspect lodgings are going to be hard to secure," Dane said, then looked at Gael. "You know this town. Where do you suggest?"

"The Prince's Arms will put you up, by royal decree," Rake said, holding up a pristine roll of paper, complete with royal seal. "They'll do so without complaint or they'll hear from the crown prince himself. That should be enough to keep a civil tongue in most people's heads."

WOULD IT? I wondered at that as we entered the stables, dismounting and handing our reins over to the stable lads. One just stared at me, and it seemed that having caught sight of my blue eyes he needed to actually force himself to take hold of my reins.

“Sheep, all of them,” Higgins announced, sweeping forward. “They know not of the wolf that comes. This is the dread lord’s chosen bride—!”

“Higgins.” I placed a hand on his shoulder. “I appreciate you acting as herald here, but I think we need to be more circumspect about this.” I leaned closer. “A wolf hardly announces his presence while on the hunt.”

“Right you are, Your Majesty,” he said with a wink. “If it’s all right with you, I’ll slip out with James here.” He pointed to the other wolf cultist that had come with us. “We’ll see if we can’t make contact with the local chapter; let them know of your arrival.”

I mustered a weak smile that was more of a grimace, but didn’t say anything in response. It seemed as though it was a necessary evil, and both the necessary and the evil parts felt wrong to me. He took my nod and smile as consent and off they went, passing Rake, who was returning from inside the inn.

“I’ve spoken to the innkeeper and there are rooms and access to the bathing facilities for everyone,” he said, hoisting a bag of gold pieces. “Go inside. You’ll have no trouble. I’ve made it clear that we are on the crown prince’s business. And while I am on that subject, that is something which I find I must also conduct while here. The Duke of Freeling has left word I am to attend him as soon as I get into town. He has an urgent message that needs to be sent to the capital.”

My mates and I all went still and exchanged glances.

Rake had said his role was to escort me to the capital. So, while picking up messages from other highborn lords seemed an efficient way of doing things, I think we all wondered what the duke might have to say. Dane stared into my eyes, making clear his interest in the manner.

“The Duke of Freeling?” I said, turning to Rake with the kind of smile Linnea had trained me to perfect. “My grandfather. It would be remiss of me not to visit while I am in town. We’ll come with you.”

Rake wanted to say no. I saw it in the flex of his jaw, the dangerous shine in his eyes, but even as those full lips of his pursed, he nodded slowly.

“Of course, milady, though I don’t think His Grace would be able to receive your full retinue at such short notice.”

“We’ll stay with the children,” Selene offered. “Make sure they wash behind their ears.”

“Might need to check mine too,” Orla said, with a sigh. “Didn’t have a chance to bathe before we left the keep.”

“If you’re certain?” I asked the Maiden as well as the children. Although I noted the mulish set to Del’s mouth, he nodded, while Jan happily took Orla’s hand, chattering about what it would be like to stay in an inn and what they all might do while they were here.

“You don’t have to answer the summons right away, do you?” I asked Rake, bestowing another cultivated smile upon him. “I’m sure you will allow a lady the opportunity to freshen up first.”

“I’M FAIRLY SURE THAT ‘MESSENGER’ was about to burst a vein,” Weyland said with a chuckle, as we made our way to our rooms.

The inn was conspicuously empty, which seemed out of the ordinary as such a hostelry would usually be catering to the late afternoon crowd at this time of day, but we were greeted by silence and wide-eyed looks from serving women as we climbed the stairs.

“Regardless, I need to change,” I said.

I’d packed dresses in my bags, shoving them in with distaste, but wanting them there in case of situations like this, where it would benefit our cause for me to look the part of a Granian noblewoman. After finding one to suit the purpose and smoothing it out on the bed, I walked over to the washstand, pouring lavender-scented water into the bowl to wash my face and hands, then doing away with the tide line of road grime down my neck, as well. Then it was off with my leather armour in quick, practised movements. I removed each piece with haste, despite anticipating the physical and emotional discomfort that would transpire once I redressed in the ‘appropriate’ clothing of the country of my birth.

Once I’d stripped down, I threw the dress over my head, instantly feeling constricted and suffocated. I found myself fighting, caught up in the yards of printed twill, until Axe stepped in.

“Here.”

His voice was soft and gentle as he helped me with the layers of fabric so



that I could find my way through to the bodice, then he worked the sleeves down over my arms. I really didn't want to be wearing it. The dress was too tight in some areas and too loose in others, not having been moulded to my form like my leathers were. I really needed stays to make myself look decent, but the thought of being cinched back into those restrictive undergarments made my teeth lock together, so I opted for a voluminous shawl instead. I kept my teeth gritted as I brushed my hair out, then pinned it up in a style I'd worn often back at the keep. Too loose for a married woman, it would send the right message to my grandfather.

"What do you know of the duke?" Dane asked me.

"Not a lot," I replied. "He came to the keep a few times when I was just a little girl; caught me practising in the yard with the knights. Linnea whipped me with a birch branch when she found out, but..."

I paused, lost in the memory, seeing the horde of richly-dressed men, escorted by knights in shining armour, riding into the keep courtyard, all of them looking far grander than any of our neighbours. My wooden practice sword had hung loosely in my hand as I stared openly.

I hadn't rushed inside to make myself presentable, as Linnea had screamed at me later. Nor set my damn sword aside and curtsayed in the way I'd been forced to practise over and over. No, I'd just stared as this massive man slid down from the saddle and moved closer.

"*You must be Darcy,*" he said, smiling as he leaned down and put his hands on my shoulders.

"Father always kept us isolated at the keep," I replied to my men, coming back to the room with a snap. "We saw few people, other than our immediate neighbours. I was never one to protest when we didn't attend fairs or balls at the estates further along the border from ours. Linnea tried to blame that on me, claiming my father was too embarrassed by my behaviour to let me mix with others of the same social strata."

I blinked then, frowning slightly.

"But what if...?"

"What if?" Dane prompted, stepping closer.

"What if that was for another reason altogether?"

WE ALL WONDERED at that as we rode over to my grandfather's estate. Middlebury was his town and, while the king's highway bisected the centre

of it, the main road which formed a crossroads with it, led to his lands. We rode up and then through the tall gates, past beautiful gardens, though the flowers and bushes here weren't brutally trimmed into the formal shapes favoured in the southern estates. No, someone had worked very hard to create perfect simulacra of beautiful fields of wildflowers in each flower bed. Despite all these distractions, it was the man riding at the head of our party who had our attention. Rake seemed to grow stiffer and taller the closer we got to the main house—a massive construction of embellished grey stone.

And the question rolled around my mind again: was Rake really a messenger?

A messenger, a porter, even a lowly merchant, would never, ever seek ingress to a nobleman's manor-house via the front door. The serving classes entered through the side entrances only. But when Rake jumped down from his horse's back and handed the reins to a stable boy who appeared from nowhere, he didn't veer off towards the side entrance. He walked up the rough flagstone steps to approach the massive iron-bound oak doors, and once there, grabbed the brass knocker that had been cast in the shape of a wolf's head, giving it a rap.

Wolves as a motif were a common thing in Grania. It was as if the moment my former countrymen became confident in their ability to hold the land, then they started to romanticise elements of the Strelans. All of the older buildings in Grania had been built in the style of the Farradorian empire, the motherland, but at some point local lords decided to adopt their own style. So there were wolves running along friezes, stone wolf sculptures set up as guardians beside doorways and knockers like these. But whatever thoughts I had about architecture, they were quickly shoved aside when the butler appeared. His eyes merely widened slightly as he caught sight of Rake, then us, before stepping aside to let us into the foyer.

"The duke asked to speak with me," Rake told the butler. Not requested my services, nor summoned me here, as if the man was his equal.

"Of course," the butler said, stepping aside. "I'll take you to His Grace. He's expecting you."

"And you can let him know his granddaughter is here as well." My voice felt like it echoed around the space, bouncing off hard marble and a high, vaulted ceiling. I stared at the butler and he nodded his head, deferentially.

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## Chapter 18

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“Of course, milady.”

The butler turned and quickly set off to deliver the messages.

“This is where your mother grew up?” Gael asked, eyeing the gilt frames of the oil paintings, then the chandelier above us. “It’s a far cry from the keep.”

But before I could answer, a familiar figure appeared.

Older, that was evident, as his hair was almost white now, rather than the salt and pepper of my childhood, but those eyes hadn’t changed. Brown flecked through with green—I remembered them for their warmth. Many years ago, my grandfather had knelt by my side when he found me practising and asked me about my training with far more patience and forbearance than most men, then asked to see me attack the dummy as Nordred had instructed.

“*She grows well, Nordred,*” my grandfather had told my father’s stable master when he reappeared.

“*She does indeed, milord.*”

For some reason remembering that small compliment made me feel a degree of vague affection towards a man I’d rarely seen, so when he stepped forward now to pull me into his embrace, I let him. But I found I couldn’t reciprocate straight away, and so my hands stayed raised either side of him.

I knew what I needed to do—hug my mother’s father, pretend that we shared a bond between us, in front of the small audience we had—but... I felt stiff, awkward. My father had eschewed all forms of physical affection with me, preferring to ignore me as much as he dared, then put me back in my place when he was forced to deal with me. Because of that, receiving

physical affection from a father-figure felt strange, as though it would be twisted around and I'd be made to suffer for it. And the thought of responding in kind just seemed wrong. But, as the hug went on, I felt it: a strange kind of warmth.

Not the pulsing, wild thing that came from touching my mates, but a sensation not unlike sitting before a crackling fire on a winter's night. It seemed to drive the cold from my bones, so that when my grandfather finally released me, I felt warmed through.

"This is indeed a surprise! When I left word for you—" my grandfather said, turning to Rake.

"I came as soon as I could, Your Grace," Rake said, cutting across the words of a man most of Grania would've said was his better. "But I've been tasked to bring Lady Darcy to court." He retrieved a scroll from the leather bag he kept strapped across his chest and then handed it to my grandfather. "The king is on his deathbed and a queen must be chosen."

I watched the duke closely, wondering at his reaction to this news. Was this common knowledge? It seemed like it would not be information the crown would want the commoners chatting about over their evening meals. Sure enough, I saw a gleam in my grandfather's eye.

"A queen..." His focus shifted straight back to me, which had me stepping backwards. That drew his attention to the men who moved up behind me—the men the Granian king had bade me to marry. Freeling frowned slightly, then a smile. "This is a red-letter day, receiving news from the capital and surprise guests. My apologies for not introducing myself." My grandfather stepped closer, hand outstretched. "I'm Richard, Duke of Freeling."

"Dane," my mate said, not shaking his hand, but clasping my grandfather's forearm, something no Granian lord did, though Freeling did the same to Dane with ease. "Prince of Strelae."

"King," I corrected and Dane smiled.

"King to your grand-daughter's queen," Dane amended, "as are my brothers." He made the introductions and each man stepped forward to clasp forearms with my grandfather before stepping back.

"So it is true." My grandfather stared openly, and while there was surprise and fascination in his gaze, I didn't see the disgust I expected from a Granian. "The king sold you—"

"No matter what the king intended, Grandfather," I said. "I am where I'm

supposed to be.” I took Dane’s hand, then Axe’s. “These are my mates.”

The word mate evoked horror or ridicule in our local church or within the circle of my father’s friends, as being further evidence of the Strelans’ bestial nature. But my grandfather just looked intently at my men, then back at me, before nodding. A wry smile crossed his face.

“Gods, you’re like your mother. Come, come, night is falling and I am told my kitchen is capable of producing exemplary food. Sit and have a meal with your grandfather and tell me all about what you’ve been up to.”

WHICH WAS how we came to be seated around a massive table in the formal dining room. I smiled at the servers who brought in platters piled high with a range of dishes. As I sniffed appreciatively at the different aromas rolling off them, I thought how much better it was than charred grouse cooked on a makeshift spit at the side of the road. As the duke helped himself to the food, he turned to Dane.

“So each one of you sees himself as my granddaughter’s husband?”

“By Strelan law—” Dane started to say, but Gael cut him off.

“Yes.” My mate stared at my grandfather and then nodded to the bite on my neck. “She’s marked, that’s plain to see, as ours and ours alone.”

“I see.” My grandfather turned to me with a look full of emotion: compassion and sadness at the forefront. I frowned in response, wondering where the hell that concern had been when I’d been living under my father’s roof. “You’ll have to forgive me,” he continued, “but a bite mark seems somewhat barbaric—”

“More barbaric than the ‘ladder to heaven’ my father left on my back?” I asked, setting down my cutlery. That’s what men of the church called the scars left on a woman’s back from beating her. “And Linnea, too.” I stared across the table at Gael, his gaze meeting mine, feeling an echo of the night we’d claimed each other. “I can assure you the process was considerably less painful and infinitely more meaningful to me.” I forced my eyes away, aware that I was revealing something terribly private in front of two men who were basically strangers to me. “I have no regrets whatsoever. It’s why this whole trip to the capital is a farce.”

I turned to Rake then, ready to harangue him further, as the crown prince’s proxy, but when I saw his expression, I paused. Those strange golden eyes were burning even brighter, with an intensity that seemed to rival

the sun. It took me some moments to realise what his gaze contained, then it came to me suddenly.

Longing.

He looked at me like a starving man might gaze through a tavern window, staring at those eating within, long past the point of politeness. My mates started to growl, like dogs at the threshold of their territory, determined to protect it. But from what? Rake didn't move closer, or approach me, or do anything other than stare—until the sounds of those growls had him forcing his eyes down.

“The crown prince has ordered it,” he replied, belatedly. “I don't get to discuss the wisdom of such things, just ensure they are done.”

“But how did you know?” My grandfather's question was intrusive for even the most prejudiced of Granians. I turned back to face him, saw a similarly hungry expression, but with him it was for information. He didn't give *me* a chance to answer, instead turning to Dane. “You took a gently-reared noblewoman—”

“Gently?” It appeared that, once I'd crossed the border, I'd lost what few social graces I'd ever had. “There was nothing gentle about my father or Linnea.”

“I know that.” I stared at my grandfather, realising that the flush rising up his neck and over his cheeks was one of shame. “I tried to intervene, to have you sent to me, once your mother died. Your father had little use for a daughter. I asked that his stable master bring you to me.”

“Nordred?” I asked, that information making my whole body alert. “You asked for Nordred?”

“He said he would bring you to me, if your father agreed. It's why I came to the keep that day, to try and negotiate at least a schedule of visits,” my grandfather continued.

“Why Nordred?” I asked, sensing that there was something there. The man had been playing a very long game, looking for the next Queen Eleanor... no, the next true queen of Strelae in Eleanor's descendants.

“You trusted him, seemed to see him as the father figure you needed, rather than that wretch you had.”

I blinked, still shocked when someone criticised my father, but doubly so when it was a fellow Granian. No one had ever spoken ill of Father in the world I had inhabited, so I was both shocked and strangely gratified about this turn of events.

But then the anger surged up.

“You knew?” The wolf was with me, pushing forward now, standing forth and sniffing the wind to determine what this man was about. “You knew what he did to me?”

“Darcy—”

Men always said my name like this when they knew they’d done the wrong thing and didn’t want to face the consequences. Be reasonable, the duke’s tone said. But where had that ever gotten me? Nowhere. My grandfather’s eyes flicked to Rake, as though somehow the finer feelings of the damn messenger needed to be taken into account here.

But what about mine?

Now, then, at any time: when had my feelings on a matter made any difference? When I shoved myself to my feet, my mates moved with me, Weyland’s hand taking mine.

“I’ll get you out of here, lass, you know that. Away from this estate, from this town, from the whole damn country.” He smiled slightly when he caught my attention, holding my gaze with his. “We can still make that run to the port.”

I smiled then, despite myself, my grin growing wider even as tears filled my eyes. The pain of the past is always so hard to leave behind because it digs its claws so deeply, it feels like no pleasure will ever penetrate its pall. Thank the gods that time shows that it can. That’s what each one of my mates had gifted me, getting me across the border.

Only to be forced to come back here and revisit all this pain.

“I think we’ll—” I started to say.

“Don’t.” He didn’t order that as Lord Freeling, but pleaded as my grandfather. “Please don’t leave, Darcy. There’s so much I need to tell you and...” Rake cleared his throat. I wondered, was it because he was uncomfortable with this unseemly display?

Or reminding my grandfather of something else?

“I have some business to conclude with Rake but, please stay.” He reached for a small bell near his wine glass. “I’ll have the maids make up your mother’s suite for you. You must want your mates to stay with you, and I’ll make sure that’s catered for. I need...” Rake shifted restlessly in his chair. “Please, go to your mother’s rooms and I’ll have a bath drawn and some food sent up. Rest now, and we can talk more about this issue in the morning.”

I didn’t want to. The wolf couldn’t find the use in any of this talk, just

seeing all of it as yet more convoluted human rubbish and dismissing it out of hand. But the cold, hard part of myself that knew I needed to find a way to bring an army to fight for my people, it saw this: My grandfather was one of the most powerful men in the northern part of Grania, which was why my father had married my mother. Father didn't do much with that alliance, but it had been attractive enough to my paternal grandfather to make the match. But if the Duke of Freeling was willing to extend an olive branch, especially when he saw my mates and didn't burst out into a sermon against the ungodly heathens, I had an obligation to explore what this connection could do for us.

Which is what I told my mates as we were ushered into a grand bedroom.

"Perhaps he can help us," I said, as I approached a grand four poster bed. "Perhaps we can feel him out, get a sense of the opposition we'll face when we reach court. My grandfather is the leader of a powerful faction..."

But not the one my father was a part of, I realised with a frown. What had caused them to be so divorced from each other? My father was notoriously close with the king and...

"And it's a faction at odds with the one my father leads," I said, turning to face them.

The room was pretty, airy, even as the sun fell below the horizon. The walls were painted white, broken by accents of gold and pink. I looked around me for evidence of the mother I'd not known. This was where my mother laid her head each night, until whisked off to my father's estates. Had she lain awake the night before her marriage, dreaming of a long life filled with love and laughter? I wasn't sure she got much of either. As I mused on all of that, I stepped closer to stare at the portraits on the wall.

They were of my mother, I quickly realised. Linnea had kept one in her room, the small watercolour forming almost a shrine, but more than that. I'd seen that slope of a cheek, the full bottom lip—in the mirror when I bothered to look at it.

"She looks like you," Axe said, appearing at my shoulder. "I see none of your father in you. But who's this?"

A small portrait had been placed on a bureau, the artwork contained within a gilt frame that had lost some of its lustre from being held, from being cleaned over the years. But it wasn't that which had me picking it up. I stared at the painting, of a woman, not a girl, her proud stance at odds with her expression.

One I'd seen before.



“Eleanor...”

“The queen?” Dane strode across to me and stared at it over my shoulder. “Why would your mother have...?”

But we all knew. The stories of the Strelan queen, forced across the border into Grania and submitting to the first of our kings, was told over and over in schoolrooms across Grania. It was symbolic to my former countrymen, the first sign of their defeat of the savage wargen. But they didn’t know that when the queen came, she brought with her a child unborn. Nordred’s child. My forebear, somehow, because her blood and his pulsed in my veins and— I set the painting down abruptly and then stepped away.

“Nordred knew.” I felt like I’d been saying that my whole life. My father’s stable master had been the font of all wisdom when I was a child, and that hadn’t diminished as I’d grown older. Instead I’d learned more and more about exactly what he knew. I frowned slightly and then turned to the others, sharing what I knew.

“He said he’d been through the same process with other girls,” I told them, my voice cracking with emotion. “That he’d trained them. Over and over.” My eyes flicked wildly around the room, as if searching for a sign of him in it. “That I was the last, because I was...” I gulped in a breath. “He said... He said...”

Dane took my hands in his and pulled me close to him, holding me when I fought him, then cradling me against his chest when I surrendered. I wanted it, wanted this, his strength and certainty, because they were things I didn’t feel at all, hadn’t felt once since Nordred had died.

“He said what we knew the moment we met you,” Dane said in a low voice. “That you are the one both our countries need. The one to unite us.” I shook my head, my throat working as I thought of just how we’d failed at Snowmere. I’d lost the first real battle in this war. “The one that will deliver us.”

“Dane...” I managed to get out.

I forced my eyes up to meet his, staring into those blue depths and not seeing a hint of doubt there. I wished his belief in me could be enough. For now, it would have to be.

“You don’t have to win a war; reclaim our country,” he told me, gently stroking my face. “You don’t have to...” he swallowed as his eyes slid down, then he forced them back up again, “make these kinds of sacrifices. A general directs his troops in a battle, and we are yours. You’ll have all the blood in

my body, if that's what's needed next time—”

“And mine,” Gael broke in as he stepped forward and then smiled somewhat ruefully when he caught my eye. “Whatever I have, you know it's yours.”

“Mine as well.” Weyland managed to inject some heat into that promise, then he grinned. “Though I admit, I much prefer mine staying in my body for as long as possible.” His smile faded then. “But not if it means you have to shoulder the burden.”

“I'll give you anything you want, lass.” Axe's hands went to the hilt of his weapon, then he forced them back again. “Cut down any of your enemies. Give in to battle fever and get lost in the thrill of killing in your name. Whatever you want, just tell me, Darcy. Please, tell me.”

When his voice cracked, I pulled away from Dane's embrace, feeling the reluctance to let me go in his grip, but I couldn't leave Axe hurting.

“Axe—”

“Let me slay it for you.” How could such a big man make such a plaintive plea? “It's been killing me, watching you shoulder one burden after another.” His outstretched hands tightened into fists, betraying his frustration, but I walked into his arms and cupped my hands either side of his face. “You don't deserve this, Darcy. History's fucking mistakes are not yours to right.” His hands covered mine then drew them down to hold them over his heart. “I'll fight the battles; take on every single one of these fucking southern lords who won't recognise what I know.”

I nestled into his chest, closing my eyes and allowing myself to take in his energy, just like I had with Dane. Regardless of what they said, I found it hard to believe in the idea of me as queen. I had been raised to become some border lord's wife, not a ruler of a country. But then, as I pondered it all, I corrected myself. Linnea, Father, had informed me of my duty, but Nordred had known all along what I would become.

“There is a reason for my name, because I am your axe. I'll have them kneeling at the feet of Darcy, Wolf Queen,” Axe growled. “Or I'll lop their fucking heads off.”

“You are.” I barely whispered that. “Mine. You are mine.”

I opened my eyes, lifted my head, then reached up and brought that mouth down on mine.

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## Chapter 19

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Axe would complain later about having an audience for this, but in the moment it was as though my kiss opened a floodgate within him. His massive arm went around my waist and tugged me closer. Then what started as me kissing him, became him devouring me.

He plundered my mouth, that was the only way to describe it, taking my lips, my mouth, my tongue, as his with all the same consummate skill with which he wielded an axe. I felt like I was melting into him.

Ever since the fall of Snowmere, I had felt as though I was locked tight inside myself. Every muscle in my body, every fibre of my being had been on guard to protect me from facing my pain, my anguish, from being heartsick at the lost lives, the lost opportunities, even the loss of my confidence that I could lead us to victory. What would happen if I let go of holding onto all that responsibility and let myself surrender to his promise of retribution, to his skill and his strength, to unleashing the massive body that would lay waste to my enemies if I just said the word? The outcome might be the joy of victory, but it might just as easily be the despair of losing him, of losing all of them.

But it was more than that, for Axe was so much more than his weapon, and the thought crossed my mind that his parents should be doubly cursed for their reductionism in naming him so. I shook my head to try to draw my thoughts back together, even as I was caught up in his kiss, for the other element of letting go was to surrender myself to him: to let him in. And to do that, I would have to give ground, open myself up. It was the thought of that which had me pulling away and pausing, while I took in great gulps of air.

“We’re going too fast,” he said, pressing his forehead to mine. “Lass, I’m sor—” Bright blue eyes watched me as I pressed my fingers to his lips.

“Is there such a thing as too fast?” I asked him, but didn’t let him speak. “And if there is, we’ve been hurtling along at this pace the whole time, so why stop now?” I pulled my fingers free, allowing him space to make his case, but he just smiled.

“Your pace, Darcy,” he said, his expression so sweet and full of love that the something in me that was hard, black and dead wanted to pull away.

But I didn’t.

Perhaps it was madness that had infected all five of us since the moment we’d met, leading us out of my country and into theirs, resulting in the death of a king and a queen. Or perhaps it was more. Something that had endured through our defeat at Snowmere. No, more than endured; had been tempered by it. As I stared up at him, the feeling grew harder and stronger until I could feel every pulse of my heart in my chest and I knew that each time it beat, it did so for him. As if sensing that, Axe grabbed my hand and placed it inside his shirt, over his heart, and when I felt his heartbeat, I realised it did so in time with mine.

“We’re in sync, Darcy.” His voice cracked then and his eyes implored me to understand. “It’s been like this since the moment I met you. I feel your heartbeat when it grows faster from excitement, anger or need. Mine slows when yours is at rest. You are my whole world, lass and—”

I silenced him with a kiss, unable to let myself listen to what he had to say, even as my heart craved it. I needed it too much, that was clear to me. I needed him, needed his strength, which made me feel like a vampire of myth, ready to suck him dry. And he’d let me. It was as though feeling our hearts beating in time had given me the physical proof I hadn’t been able to fully accept in my heart. I knew that everything he had to give was mine and Axe told me that as he held me close. Then he lifted me up into his arms and carried me to the bed, like I was his wife and this was my wedding day.

In some ways, that was true.

My hand reached out, much more hesitantly now, stroking down his cheek and then running it through his beard, before I dared to meet his eyes.

“Axe—”

“I know,” he said, with complete confidence.

“No, Axe, I...” I swallowed hard then frowned. I’d barely let anyone touch me since that night in Snowmere and... I didn’t think I could now. My

womb was this persistent presence in my life that it'd never been before. I ached like the worst of my moon time, and then some. "I can't..."

His hand slid down my body then, far bolder than it ever had before, but there was something curiously sexless about the gesture. When his palm came to rest right over where it hurt, a deep, pulsing warmth washed through me, not of desire, but of healing, of relief. I let out a shaky sigh, eyes wide, as that nagging pain eased.

"I don't need to be inside you to mate you," he told me gently. "It isn't breeding fever that brings us together. I want you, Darcy, not just your body, but all of the parts of you that you're willing to give." He moved in then, his beard prickling my lips, right before he pressed a kiss there. "I want it all before we're done with this life, but right now... Give me this, lass. Ease my pain and I'll ease yours every time. Ease this longing inside me and I'll ensure you never shed a tear again. I'll fight anything and anyone, including my bastard brothers."

"Only one of us is an actual bastard," Gael drawled.

"Especially him, because he's a grumpy prick," Axe told me. "Just..."

I tilted my head to one side, baring my scarred neck to him. My grandfather had blanched at the bite marks there, but he didn't understand. Humans made bonds with rings of gold and pretty words, dresses with trains that went on for miles, but I cared for none of that. My love had fangs and claws, and would not be contained by beautiful rituals. Instead, I needed this.

For a moment, there was only the sound of my breath and Axe's coming hard and fast, as if the two of us had run until our legs had given out. Instead, the moment seemed to take a life of its own, growing bigger, bolder, sucking all of the oxygen out of the room. Perhaps that was why I was short of breath when he made his move.

"I'll love you forever, Darcy, my Wolf Queen," he said, stroking my forehead, pushing back my hair, right before his fangs dug into my neck.

My body arched up off the bed but his hands were there to catch me, holding me like a ragdoll against his chest. The pain of the bite was a bright spark, there and gone again, then replaced by this. Blue flames licked our bodies, in reality as well as in metaphor, setting the two of us alight, right before this. I hadn't been able to countenance sex. My body had betrayed me, it felt, and sex had been the means of my downfall. But this? It was the purest of pleasures, utterly divorced from anything other than what beat true in my heart.

He was mine. I'd rightly mourned the passing of Nordred, but I'd never walk alone again, not with Axe by my side. He'd meet me in battle, in court, stand by my side in front of the high-born and the low, never leaving me alone. I clung to him with my cheeks wet with tears as the truth of it hit me. When he pulled back, his were the same.

"Mine," he croaked out, but then his brow furrowed and his hand went back to press against my pelvis, feeling my pain as his own. "Mine, and, gods be damned, why the hell haven't you healed Darcy before now, Gael?"

"You've been hurting?" Gael asked, a wary tone to his voice.

We all had, that was the problem. I hadn't been able to let any of them close to me. I'd barely dared to look Gael in the eye, unable to bear the sight of my own pain mirrored in his, but I did so now. He frowned, clambering onto the bed and trying to push his brother back, hissing when the big man refused. It seemed as if Axe knew that the moment he moved his hand, the pain would be back. Gael paused then, searching his brother's face before nodding and covering Axe's hand with his.

I jolted.

The sensation was as though light filled me, golden and hazy, in the same way it had illuminated the chapel of the Mother, when we'd passed through the crystal cave beneath the old Snowmere castle. But that part of me that didn't want to rely on anyone else, that didn't want to put my faith in someone only to have them hurt me—that innermost part of me that had been taught not to trust and, especially, not to trust those who were supposed to care for me—that part of me didn't want to count on it, this relief, this radiance, because I wanted it so damn much.

"Try not to scream, lass," Gael said between gritted teeth as he, too, felt the level of pain I'd been carrying. "Don't want the duke's men coming running in here but, damn me..." His fractured eye burned into mine as he stared. "You should've told me."

"And both of us should've known." Weyland climbed onto the bed on the other side, taking my open hand in his, then sliding his other hand in between his brothers' in the pile. Dane joined us, not to be left out, moving behind me and gently placing my head in his lap.

"We've hurt you, dragging you into this mess," Dane said, stroking my face. "And I'll go to my grave regretting each insult, each pang. But, Darcy, if we are the cause of that pain, we deserve to be the ones to make things right." He glanced at Gael. "You can heal her?"

“Can’t stop from doing that,” he replied through gritted teeth. “Something’s pulling at my power. Bite down, lass, because this will hurt.”

I’d seen women in childbirth, heard their screams, watched with fear, frankly, as they gnashed their teeth, but it was only now that I understood what they were doing. The pain had to go somewhere, and for the ever-restrained women of Grania, that meant it broke through societal conventions and came rushing out, just like mine did. I took Gael’s advice and my scream was muffled through my clenched teeth. But it was choked off, because, although the pain spiked unbearably, it was there and then gone again, thank the goddess, and my whole body went limp.

I was healed.

No more blood seeped from me, there was no more ache inside. Part of me mourned it, because of what it meant. As I sobbed out my breaths, each one growing slower and slower as the relief set in, this was our final mourning of a child that might have been. With the pain went the little one’s potential, this moment between us all the only funeral which that small scrap of life would get. My men seemed to sense that too, pulling me into a great tangle of an embrace, touching me, caressing me, not to rouse but to settle, and finally we all dropped off into sleep.

“DARCY.”

I woke some time later at the sound of my name, the moonlight streaming in through the windows to illuminate her. She smiled, a much softer thing than in my dreams, even as the moonbeams pierced her form. My mother stood before the window, a ghostly presence. “Come.”

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## Chapter 20

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You might imagine I would've woken my mates at the sight of my mother's ghost, but I didn't. When I fought my way free of their grip, they just snorted and then rolled back into the space I left, dreaming on. It helped add to the feeling of unreality I experienced as I padded closer to her.

"Mother...?"

I barely remembered her. She'd died so young, trying to birth my brother, but I remembered this. A longing to feel her gaze on me. Soft hands that drew me closer. That when I'd been pressed against her body I'd felt like it was the safest place in the world and perhaps that's why I moved closer. She was there and not there, all at the same time, and somehow that broke my heart in two.

"Mother."

"My girl..." She reached out for me, then snatched her hands back, seeming to realise that we could never touch. What she was, what I was, were antithetical to each other and that just drove the knife of pain deeper into my chest. "I knew you would grow up tall and strong, no matter what your father threw at you. I knew..." She looked far too young, I realised, as she took a step closer. And, contrary to all my memories, she now had to look up at me. I was taller than her, stronger, too, I was willing to bet. She nodded as though in response to my thought, then she spoke again. "I knew you would be the one."

"The one what?" People kept making vague pronouncements and gifting me visions of goddesses that walked amongst us, causing chaos. If I had a chance to demand answers from the past, I would. "One *what*, Mother?"



“The one to free us,” she said with a smile that seemed to pain her. “The one to save us.”

“You can’t be serious,” I told her, then moderated my voice when I heard one of my mates shifting on the bed. “Free us from what? Save us from the Reavers?” I shuddered when I saw those bastard things clawing their way up the walls of Snowmere, then the memory of the refugee woman tossing her dead baby towards me hit me again. “Save us from Callum?”

She seemed to fade just then, her stricken expression all that remained until she came back into view.

“Don’t talk about him, not here.” Her eyes searched mine. “He’s not what matters. This does.” And without explanation, the ghost walked towards the bedroom door, going through it so I was forced to twist the knob and slip out into the hall after her.

HOUSES ARE eerie places after dark, especially big empty places like this mansion. The maids had loved to terrify me with tales of the ghosts that haunted the keep, focussing mostly on the ones about the family whose position had been usurped by my forebears. My great-grandfather had done a favour to the king of his day, revealing the impending treachery of the then Duke of Elverston. The northern estates had always been difficult for the king to maintain influence over, being so isolated from the southern court. The former Duke of Elverston had started fomenting dissent amongst disgruntled lords and wolf cultists who’d been sent to the border to protect it, finding he had a sympathetic ear everywhere he turned.

Except in the case of my great-grandfather.

A word in the king’s ear from my forebear and the nascent rebellion was crushed before it even got started. The man who had been duke was executed for his crimes as were all of his fellow conspirators. It was made clear then what fate the new northern lords could look forward to if they rose again, but... Threats alone are not enough to quell a rebellious spirit. *The north protects and the south does fuck all*: I’d heard my father’s men say that too many times not to remember it, and I wondered what that might mean now.

“Come, Darcy,” my mother’s ghost said, leading me deeper into the house.

The only sound was the soft pad of my feet, the occasional creak of an old house settling. The sudden squeak of a door opening was startling in the

quiet. I ducked into the recess of a doorway, some instinct making me hide myself so that I could see who else was roaming through the corridors at night. I held my breath as Rake appeared, but he didn't show any sign of noticing either me or my mother as he glanced quickly around and then stealthily crept down the hallway.

To where?

And why was he here at all? And, more to the point, why was he housed in one of the Duke's best rooms? If he was an ordinary messenger, he'd be in the servants' quarters... But nothing about him added up. In fact, all the evidence seemed to point to something else altogether. The king, like most leaders, had a spy network and I thought of that as I peered around the doorway after him. But even that didn't make sense. If indeed he was a spy, anyone who saw him being ushered into such a fine room would have questions about why a man such as him was being raised above his station. And that would do nothing except put him in danger of being exposed.

So what was he?

"That's right, this way," my mother murmured as I continued along the hallway, sticking to the thick carpet runner down the centre of the corridor, using it to muffle my footfalls. I followed him, her, down, down, down one flight of stairs, then another, going from the top floor of the house to the living area, then down further. Past the kitchens to where the cellar door stood open. I shrank back again as Rake turned around, looking a little more carefully for witnesses this time. When he didn't spy any, he turned back to the dark doorway, taking a big, heavy gilt key from his pocket before disappearing into the bowels of the cellar.

It occurred to me that I shouldn't be doing this on my own, but caution was quickly smothered by curiosity. Admittedly, there were several reasons to be cautious. I didn't have my sword with me, the lack of that weight on my hip now sorely missed. I was about to step into a darkened space I was not familiar with, following a man I didn't know, whose identity I questioned. Whatever he was up to, surely I had time to scurry back upstairs and retrieve my mates? With them at my back, I could walk into hell; a cold, dark cellar in the dead of night would be a walk in the park. But just as I had almost convinced myself to overcome my curiosity with a healthy dose of self-preservation...

"Darcy, it's time," my mother urged.

"Time for what?" I hissed, not wanting to alert Rake, but I needn't have

bothered. She just floated further away from me, toward the cellar. “Mother, time for what?”

“Time to reclaim the power stolen,” was all the explanation I got, so onwards I went.

How the hell had he found his way down here? I wondered as I took the first step. It was daunting, because in that velvety darkness, only the threshold was visible. Perhaps he waited below, aware already that I had followed him, and was about to lure me to my death. Perhaps I’d fall headfirst and break my neck, ending whatever prophetic dreams Nordred had for me. But my mother walked with me, a silent, radiant presence. Where she stepped, I saw light, so I followed it blindly. The further down we walked, the more I felt like a child clinging to her mother’s hand, despite it being an experience I didn’t remember. The darkness felt like a massive maw, ready to swallow me whole, and she was all I had to keep it back.

Was this what it would’ve been like if she had lived? I stared at the ghost with hungry eyes. When I’d cried at night and no one answered? When I shrank back in my bed when Linnea did? Would my mother have brought light to my darkness, coming and sitting on my bed, holding my hand, assuring me that everything I feared was untrue? Her ghost turned and smiled at me, then pushed forward. Past racks of wine and stores of grain and root vegetables, it was like any other cellar in Grania, of that I was sure. Although I was willing to bet none of the others had anything like this in their depths: a familiar looking massive heavy door, complete with intricate bands of iron to strengthen it. Another point of illumination appeared, a crystal in Rake’s palm coming to life as he raised it up, then pressed it against the lock mechanism. Something clicked and the door swung open.

“I was first brought here when I was born,” my mother told me. “Then again, when I was old enough to understand. Over and over, my mother, my father, brought me here, to bathe in Her light.”

My focus jerked sideways, back to her, and she smiled at that.

“You will have thought that all Granians hate the wargen, the two-souled. They do so in your father’s keep, certainly. The priests do, preaching from their pulpits every Sunday, but...”

She blinked.

“Why do they expound forth so violently about the sin of seeking other gods, of the dreaded wargen, of the Mother’s grace, if not because they fear this? Not every Granian believes that the Strelans are evil. Not everyone who

attends church believes what is preached there. Some, indeed, believe something else altogether. Eleanor bore her husband many children, but only the eldest boy could become king. What then, of the others? Did they follow the faith of their father or... their mother?"

The answer came as the door clicked open and I saw a familiar hazy radiance.

"No..." I barely whispered that, moving my lips more than my vocal cords. "No..."

My mother's ghost was saying something and I should've been hanging off her every word, because we had spoken more tonight than in all of my memories of her combined. She had history here, knowledge of and a sense of this place that I did not, but it didn't matter. Gael had healed me, with the help of his brothers, it was true, but as my hand slid lower, I felt a phantom ache there and I recalled the cost, the blood, the last time I had been before such an altar. I didn't have anything left to sacrifice, but I couldn't help but stare at that brilliance as Rake slipped inside.

The door had been left ajar so he could come back out again and that glow drew me forward, even as my feet dragged on the rammed earth floor.

"This is your birthright," my mother insisted, but I could only shake my head over and over. "Her power is your power."

I didn't need to know which *her* she meant, because I heard the persistent rustle of a raven's wing in my ears, then the far-off caw of one in the distance.

"No..." That denial was audible, and I clung to it. Gods and goddesses seemed of the one mind, to exact their due from their petitioners. The Morrigan had claimed what was most precious to me last time I'd walked into one of her sacred spaces, so I had to ask what would she take this time? I heard her low chuckle, that of a school yard bully about to strike you down yet again, and still I moved forward. "Mother," I pleaded with my mother, with the Mother aspect of the goddess, "please."

"I knew this would be hard," she told me, her eyes filled with empathy. "Even I underestimated how much. But we'll come out the other side, Darcy, I promise. We always come out the other side."

And so, once again, I needed to let go and trust. It seemed I was about to put that promise to the test. I gripped the door, feeling its solidity, its age, and as I did so, I knew somehow that the door was far older than this estate. Than my family's claim to this land, I was willing to bet. I could see it, streams of

women coming to this place, opening the door and walking into the light, over and over, until the Granians came and cordoned the space off, claiming it as theirs.

Or protecting it.

So many Strelan sacred spaces in these lands had been destroyed by the church, by the Granian army, that it was hard to know what would've happened to this place if my family hadn't built their estate over it. As I hovered, my hand on the door, my eyes adjusted to the light and I could see what lay behind the door. It wasn't a massive complex of caves, like under the citadel. Here it was just one, the walls covered with clear crystals that were glowing softly as I stepped in.

I'd been careful to hide from Rake, wondering at what he was doing, but I was exposed the moment I walked inside. His head jerked up, those golden eyes glowing just like the crystals behind him.

"What are you doing here?" he snapped, not a hint of servility in him, right as his hand reached out to touch a sword encased in a tomb of spiky crystal.

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## Chapter 21

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“What is one of His Majesty’s servants doing in one of my grandfather’s guest rooms?” I countered, though there was little heat in my voice. Rake didn’t really have my focus; the sword did.

It sang to me like a siren, drawing me closer. It was a long, slender blade, by today’s standards, not made for cleaving the heads off wargen or Reavers, but somehow it didn’t look any less deadly for it. My mother was trying to tell me something, but I couldn’t hear her words. The sound of a thousand voices, joined in song, filled my ears, with the sound of a raven’s wing beating as its percussion. It lured me closer and closer until the two of us stared down at the sword.

It was as if living rock had swarmed from the bowels of the earth itself, growing up and over the dais that supported the sword, then surrounding it in a caul of spiky quartz. The sword itself glowed within the stone’s grip. A chunk of crystal had been set into the pommel and it brightened as I stepped closer.

“You’re not a messenger,” I said, without thought, knowing now that it was true.

“And you’re not a duke’s daughter.”

Rake’s tone caught my attention. It had my eyes swinging up and locking with his and when they did, the song inside me rose up a note, and somehow I knew it would be doing the same to him.

“You’re not even a spy,” I said.

“And you’re not yet a queen.” Those golden eyes took my measure and found me wanting. “Those mates of yours are falling all over themselves

trying to prove their love but you...”

I hadn't thought of Rake in terms of him being a man, not in the full sense of the word. He was simply an agent of the king, an emissary of the crown prince, a symbol of their authority. To me, he was merely a means to an end; an annoying one at that. But as he stepped closer, fingers lightly caressing the sharp points of the crystal, I felt the impact of his male energy. His height—towering over me; the breadth of his shoulders—the powerful set of them. The bulk of his muscle, the way he held himself, perfectly poised to leap into action—none of that were attributes of a messenger, no matter how gently born. They were elements of a warrior.

...Or a prince.

My mother's voice was rising along with the song, the sound of all of it becoming transcendent, making this moment of confrontation all the more jarring. My eyes narrowed as I raked through my memories. An insistent thought—that I already knew who he was, before I'd even seen him in the flesh—made me drag up the vision of the Granian throne room which I'd seen the moment I'd slapped my bloodied hand on the chapel wall.

“What is this place?” I asked him.

“You know.” His eyes bore into mine, a fine line forming between his eyebrows.

“And this sword—?”

“You'll find that out... if you're fit to wield it,” he said.

“And you?” The song paused then, leaving silence, one we filled with our heaving breaths. “Who are you?”

“Ra—”

“No, that's not it.” I shifted closer, facing down this man who was so much taller, so much stronger than me. But I didn't flinch for a second. I stared into those golden eyes, seeing them beneath a golden circlet, watching me from behind the king's throne, right before the whole court was brought to their knees. “You're Bryson.”

I'd heard the crown prince's name often enough. Linnea had been wont to summon him, like some kind of patron saint, telling me what I could aim for in the marriage market, if I just behaved. But I never did and so I'd never been dragged off to court. And that had meant that it was totally unlikely I'd ever enter his social circles.

But... what if, somehow, he burst into mine?

My eyes flickered over him. I took in the uniform, well made and

pressed, which made clear he hadn't slept in it. But that was to be expected of a royal messenger—a representative of the crown while wearing the uniform. It wasn't the clothes that drew my attention, but the man wearing them.

“Crown Prince Bryson,” I said, finally, willing my theory to be wrong.

“Heir to the Lion Throne,” he said, with a sardonic twist of his lips. “First of his name. My forebears were the ones who cut down your people on the battlefield like grass during the invasion and...” As his hand slapped down on mine, the song in my head changed pitch and volume. “I am a direct descendant of Queen Eleanor of Strelae.”

The song reached its crescendo immediately, the voices singing with all they had. Quartz crystal is terribly hard, perhaps brittle if struck hard enough, so it shouldn't melt away like ice. But as soon as our hands connected on top of the crystal structure around the sword, that was what happened. The song grew louder, and the stone at the pommel of the sword began glowing so brightly I couldn't look at it.

“Take the sword, Darcy,” my mother said, appearing on the other side of the dais that held the weapon. “Take it and claim your birthright. Bryson is right. He is descended from Eleanor, just as you are, but he misunderstands what that means. He thinks himself the saviour that we need, but in his hands this sword is nothing but cold steel. Take it and—”

Her voice cut out the moment I clasped the sword, and suddenly nothing in the world felt more right.

The song was gone or, rather, it now sang in my blood, a throbbing tide of power. Not just because I held a blade in my hand, but because it was this one. I'd been taught to wield a sword since I was old enough to hold a practice one. Each time I had, a growing sense of power came with it. That had grown and grown as I'd become more proficient, something I'd had to hide from my father. But now, holding this sword, I wasn't going to hide a thing. I whipped the blade up and set the tip of it against the prince's throat, because I had a moment of clarity.

His father was dying. Bryson was heir to the throne of Grania and would expect to lead their army where he willed. But why would I allow that? I frowned slightly as I tilted my head, considering him anew. He should have been on his knees before me, something I quickly corrected.

“Kneel.”

My voice echoed through the cave, bouncing off the walls, the sound growing louder and louder, the flap of a raven's wing seeming to spur it on,



right as this ‘Rake’ dropped down.

“Darcy—”

“Queen,” I corrected and suddenly, despite my earlier reluctance to take on everything that that mantle brought with it, I knew that it was true. The historians talked of the origins of the Farradorian Empire, of the priest kings that had led them in the beginning, tied to the power of the land, and I knew now what that felt like. I was the whip of the wind, the slice of a blade, the crackle of fire, the heavy weight of the earth. I was—

“My queen,” Bryson agreed. When he pulled out his sword, I stiffened, but he did so simply to proffer it to me, as if offering it in fealty, and lay it down on the ground before me. “That sword you wield was brought over the border by Nordred himself, left here for safe keeping so we would know when she came.” He dared to look up at me. “The queen to come.”

“Hmmm. That doesn’t answer a question I have,” I said, as I stared steadily down at him. All doubt, all concern, felt like it’d been driven out of me, leaving only a dreadful purpose in its wake.

Callum was a plague on the land, infecting and destroying everything in his path, powered by a bastardised version of what pulsed in my veins, but I knew now I had what I needed to best him. We would yet meet on the battlefield, that I knew, though not before I gathered an army.

“Why should I spare you?” I asked Bryson, knowing that with just one twitch of my wrist, I’d open the big artery in his neck. “I need your army, not a prince who drags me halfway across the country under false pretences.”

“You’re right, my queen. You don’t need me,” he said, baring his neck in a way that put me in mind of what I had done with Axe, just hours before. “Not really. Of course, I can help you gain access to the court, help you navigate what goes on there, but...”

He paused, took in a deep breath, then forced a grim smile to his lips. The expression transformed his face. The light there was a match to the radiance of the crystals.

“Your princes said they knew you were theirs before they even met you. That your love was written in the stars, well...” He let out a sigh, his shoulders sagging somewhat. “I didn’t need to take that statement at face value. I know what it’s like to have sensed the other half of your heart, to know she walks out there, out of reach. The reason you should spare me, my queen, is because you are my fated mate.”

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## Chapter 22

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“No!” I said, recoiling in rejection of the very idea. As I did, my sword hand twisted slightly, resulting in a thin trickle of blood slowly sliding down the prince’s throat. His eyes went wide, his throat convulsing, but he bore the pain without comment. “Take that back,” I demanded, full of regal authority then. “Take it back!”

“I can’t.” With a growing sense of horror, I watched him move to place his hands behind his back, interlocking his arms and denying himself any chance to protect himself. Instead his golden eyes bore into mine as he murmured, “I can’t, Darcy.”

“Don’t call me that!” I snapped. Though what else would he call me? Your Majesty? It was my title but it sounded wrong in his mouth.

It sounded the same as when my mates said it.

“What—?”

But before he could get his question out, he was interrupted. Keeping the sword trained on him, I turned my head, only to see my mates arriving.

When the gently glowing walls flared brighter as my men spilled into the crystal cave, I wasn’t surprised. A feeling of intense emotion rose up at the sight of them, and tears pricked at the back of my eyes at the beauty of it.

Love.

That was what I felt, what filled me as they stumbled in, wild-eyed, worried. They took in me, the sword, the glowing stones, then their expressions changed to suspicion and mistrust when they saw Bryson and the fact I had the sword to his throat.

“What the hell did you do?” Gael demanded, the crystals taking on a

bluish cast as he grabbed the prince by the shirtfront and then shoved him back up against the wall of the cave. “What the fuck did you do to her?”

“Nothing.”

The prince and I said the word at the same time, and I flushed as though there was some significance to us speaking in unison.

“I caught the crown prince creeping down the hallway,” I explained, “and I followed him.”

“Of course you did. What...? Crown prince?” Dane’s head whipped around and he stared at the man much more closely. He stalked over to where Gael still held Bryson against the crystalline wall. Only the slight flare to his nostrils betrayed his anger. That and the jerky way he pulled his knife out of its sheath on his belt. “The very man who sent orders to retrieve my mate from her father’s estate?” The tip of his blade pressed against the small cut I’d left. “What the hell are you trying to achieve, Your Highness?”

“What is going on here?”

My grandfather strode through the doorway into the mouth of the cave, a stern look on his face. Despite the kerfuffle, when he saw me with the sword in my hand, his expression softened. Then he looked past me to where my mother hovered, and a terrible look of pained longing rose in his eyes.

“Eloise?”

I turned to her, to ask her to stay, to have the chance to get out all the questions that burned in my mind. Even more than that, to have the chance just to talk to her. I didn’t really have any memories of her death, so the pain of it was a soft, abstract thing. But as I watched her smile and raise her hand in recognition of her father, then fade from our view, that pain of her loss now was far sharper.

“No!” I leapt forward, grabbing at her form, but it was already dissipating like a curling plume of smoke being teased apart by the wind. “No...” I growled. “No!”

“Darcy—” the duke started to say. I whirled around and pointed the sword in his direction and that was enough to silence him.

“You knew.” I stared at him, then dragged my gaze around the cave—at the glowing crystals and the sword and the door and the prince, then, finally, at the space where my mother’s ghost had stood. “You knew. All of it.”

“All of what?” Dane asked, warily eyeing the duke while keeping his blade against the prince’s neck.

“You knew,” I insisted.

My grandfather straightened then, becoming every inch the duke, despite being in his nightclothes, and he nodded.

“All of it, darling girl, and I’d be happy to share what knowledge I have.”

“Though perhaps without a knife to my throat...” Bryson choked out. Dane removed it with a jerk, but didn’t sheath it.

“When it became clear what you were to become, I petitioned your father to foster you. I even turned to the king himself,” my grandfather said.

“That was a mistake,” Bryson said, touching the cut on his neck, then inspecting his fingertips. “Your petition alerted my father to the fact that it would be in his best interests if Darcy was to remain in the border country. Away from court, left to her father’s tender mercies.” His eyes met mine. “Away from me.”

“You’re saying there was a plot?” Dane looked affronted by this information, as if it was impossible that this could have been happening without him knowing. “A plot to do what?”

“To stop what must be,” my grandfather said. “Come, we can take this upstairs. I’ll have a fire set in one of the drawing rooms and—”

“What must be...?” Weyland asked, a deadly note in his voice. “What did the usurper king have planned for my mate?”

“To stop her from fulfilling her destiny,” my grandfather replied seriously, before his eyes slid back to me, and the sword in my hand. “Strelae has always been ruled by queens. She is the conduit to the power in this land. My people were only ever able to get a foothold in this country because Eleanor was weak—not a fit wielder of this.” He gestured to the sword.

“And why the hell would you work against your own king?” Gael snarled. “You stay on this land, enjoy its wealth, grow fat off it: all due to his position.”

My grandfather smiled then, but it was a bittersweet thing.

“My forebears thought that by forcing the Strelan queen across the border into Grania, that by making her marry the leader of our forces, we were cementing our position in this land. Women are chattels, little more than children, in the eyes of many of my countrymen. But they misjudged things badly. Eleanor might not have been able to wield the land’s power sufficiently to hold us back, but she did bring something else with her when she left her homeland.”

His eyes met mine and held them.

“A child of Strelan blood—the child of Eleanor and Nordred—to form

the head of the next dynasty. Eleanor used her time in the nursery, and in the new court of the Lion Throne to tell the stories. She told them to her children, to those in the court who might make a difference. She told the stories that Nordred told her. Of the queen that will come. And so, even some of her other children grew up to support their mother's cause, and found others in the court who believed the same."

Each one of the men stared at me and the air seemed to thicken with the intent there.

"She who will bring us back to the times of yore, when the power of the land is shared with all that live upon it. She who will protect it from the darkness that threatens to rise."

Part of me wanted to snort, to chuckle, to point my finger and laugh outright at this secretive cabal and its aims, lurking in the heart of Grania. But I didn't. Because as my hand clasped the hilt of the sword tighter, I felt the power that they spoke of.

It flowed through me as naturally as the pulse of my blood. But it wasn't generated by the beat of my heart, but by the power of the land and everyone within it. It was as if I could feel every person's heart, if I so wished. And, as I had the thought, my consciousness spread outwards. To the maid who slumbered in her bed, her pulse slow and steady, to the less regular skitter of the old gardener, sitting on the stoop of his cottage, smoking a pipe. Then outwards to Middlebury itself, my awareness touching men, women and children, until I found the ones I sought.

The Maidens were all asleep in the children's rooms, curled up on pallets on the floor beside Del and Jan's beds. And as I saw them, I caught the moment Selene's eyes opened. They blinked for a second, then flared bright blue as she smiled. Her pulse rate picked up, getting faster and faster, urging me onwards.

I felt as though I skimmed across the rooftops like a bird, then strode across the plains like a wolf, zooming so fast I could barely register what and who I passed. Through a garrison of too-lax men, then onward, into Strelae. I felt the sore hearts of those who were making for the border, hoping to escape their ravaged land. Then I continued past their pain, to the dark, rotten blight that now lurked in the heart of my country.

Callum lay sleeping under black sheets in the king's bed. He appeared almost innocent in his repose. I heard that familiar flap of wings, underscored by the chuckle of the Morrigan, right before I reached out, as I realised that if

I could draw power from the hearts of men, I could crush them, too. I dimly became aware of cries in the background, distracting me from my goal. Hands slapped down on my shoulders, my hand, trying to wrest the sword out of my grip, and I became aware of another sound. Blood spattering on the stones, dripping from my nose.

“Darcy!” someone shouted, trying to pull me back, even as Callum’s eyes flicked open, staring into mine. His lips curled for a second, in a victorious smile, right before I plunged my disembodied hand into his chest. I was like my mother, made up of pure energy, so muscle and bone made no difference to me. And I found out something I hadn’t known before.

To stay alive through all these years, Callum pulled energy from the land. He was a parasite stuck to its side, feeding greedily, but I could stop it. I could stop him.

“Darcy!”

I searched for it furiously, the means to stop his damn heart from beating, spurred on by seeing Callum’s smile fade and his fingers start clawing at his chest. I felt the ball of muscle in his chest stutter in my grip and I squeezed it, as if to wring all of the blood out. I watched Callum’s face turn grey, the bones of his skull seeming to press forward, turning it into a death’s head.

“Darcy!”

I came back to myself, to the cave with a sudden snap, to find Gael standing before me, one hand on my shoulder, the other trying to staunch the gush of blood from my nose. Everything hurt, in ways I hadn’t experienced for some time, and my cries of pain were muffled by the slide of blood down my throat.

*You want to wield my power?* the Morrigan said, inside my head. *Then you must prove yourself worthy. You are but one possibility, little queen.*

I couldn’t say a thing in response, as the darkness that always followed her seemed to rise up and swallow everything, pulling me down, down, down into its depths.

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## Chapter 23

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I woke sometime later, feeling very warm.

As I blinked, I groaned and shut my eyes again quickly. My head felt heavy and hard to lift, and my eyelids felt the same way. My body felt swollen, sore, wrong, right up until I forced my eyes open. Axe held me in his arms, gazing down at me with such rapt attention that when I did waken, his hand moved to caress my cheek.

“There she is,” he said, with a gentle smile.

“She’s awake?” Gael looked careworn, like he hadn’t slept a wink but when he clambered on the bed, he was all business. Checking my eyes, my nose, my throat, until I made a small sound of complaint. “Where does it hurt?” he asked urgently. “Tell me where it hurts. I’ll fix it—”

“No.” I croaked on that, but as blue flames appeared on his fingertips, I felt a yank deep in my core, sapping what little energy I had. “No...!”

“Stop it, Gael,” Dane ordered. “The power you’re drawing is hers.”

Gael closed his outstretched fingers into a fist, the flames extinguishing in seconds and I flopped back against Axe’s chest to focus on breathing.

Why was that so hard?

My chest felt heavy, like it took conscious effort to keep my lungs inflating, but as Weyland crawled closer, then Gael settled against me, I closed my eyes for just a second. That hot, pulsing sensation that always followed once I touched them seemed to have quite another purpose. It felt like it was filling me up, rather than arousing me, helping soothe aching muscles and my head.

“This revives you,” Dane observed, peering at me. “It helps you feel

better?”

I nodded.

“This is when you tell me why,” I croaked out.

“I have nothing concrete,” he replied, flushing when I let out a sigh. “My father... he investigated what benefit he could gain from bringing Gael’s mother across the border. Not as his queen, obviously but—”

“As a power source,” I replied with a mirthless smile.

“Exactly that. Father was taken with the idea of tapping into what was purported to be the limitless power of queens...” He stopped then, all of us remembering just how far the king had been prepared to go to gain access to that.

“Not limitless,” I replied, shifting restlessly. An urge to move, to do something, plagued me, even as my body resisted. “I had Callum’s heart in my hand. I was squeezing it when I was pulled back.”

“And you were haemorrhaging blood,” Gael replied. “None of us want that bastard to live, but—”

“I could’ve ended it,” I insisted. “I could’ve made us all safe.”

“Not all of us.” Weyland stared at me, his expression uncharacteristically serious. “The children have lost one mother. Don’t let them go through that grieving process again.”

I blinked at that, the muscle in my jaw ticking as I gritted my teeth before nodding.

“I have a sword.” My fingers flexed, feeling the need to have it in my hand. Gael shook his head at my reflex action, but retrieved it, and we all noted the way the crystal flared to life when I grabbed the hilt. “And I have power. So what now?”

“For those answers we need to talk to the duke,” Dane said, raking his hand through his hair. “I admit, I find it difficult to reconcile myself to asking a bloody Granian for advice on such things, but...” He sighed. “The queen went across the border and took what power she had with her, reducing us down to our human forms for the vast majority of the time, lest we get lost in fur or battle fever without her guidance to bring us back. Her descendants went somewhere. We’d always assumed they became good little Granian citizens, members of the very aristocracy that strove to keep their ancestress’ people down, but...”

His eyes met mine and I knew we were of the same mind. Nordred had been father, stable master, legend, and cunning as a weasel, moving all of the



pieces around on a board hundreds of years old. I sat up and scrambled out of bed in my haste to get answers, then instantly regretted it as my head started swimming, the edges of my vision going black. Dane offered me his hand.

“I’m not sure if I’ll be as useful, not being formally mated...” But his voice trailed away as he raised me up. He always would, I realised that now, whether I wanted to or not. He’d shown me he believed in my potential in much the same way Nordred had, and I treasured that.

Because, once again, I was being forced to adjust.

My father’s view of me, and Linnea’s, had shaped my own, for so very long. But now? I gripped Dane’s hand, keeping hold of it when he went to pull away. I watched his eyes light up, gleaming a brighter blue in response, in the way all of them would if I was to reach for them. The protection of the people of Strelae had felt like a burden I must shoulder, a responsibility I must honour, if we were all to survive. But perhaps it could be like this. A connection born of love or affection, something that would grow beyond its individual parts. The sensation lit something inside my chest that carried me out of the room, pulling on Dane’s arm to make him and the others come with me to corner my grandfather in his study.

“DARCY.” My grandfather got to his feet immediately, something my father would never have done, even when he was capable of it. He set his quill down and then came out from behind the desk to look me over closely. “You are recovered? You’re still pale, my dear. Perhaps you should rest—”

“I can rest once I know more,” I said. “You and R—” I stopped myself. “You and the crown prince seemed to know quite a lot about all of this.” I shook my head. “About me. Perhaps now would be time to share that knowledge?”

“Yes, of course. Take a seat and I’ll call for some tea.” He pulled a velvet rope, which from experience I knew would set off a specific bell in the servants’ quarters. As he settled, he regarded me steadily. “You have so much of your mother in you.” There was a fondness there, but it was somewhat unnerving that it was inspired by another woman, not me. “I saw it the moment you walked in here, but... Seeing Eloise last night.” He shook his head as his eyes strayed to the window, as if he could see her still. “It drove that home so much deeper. Perhaps that’s why your father was such an... indifferent parent.”

“Because he loved my mother?” I asked, hardly able to believe that.

“Because he was forced to marry her at the king’s behest,” my grandfather replied, with a sad smile. “His Majesty made clear that he thought the alliance was a worthy one and sent word to me to consider no other suitors, because he knew.” His fingers laced together across his stomach. “Eloise had shown herself to be a very capable, very accomplished young woman, beyond the confines of what was seen to be seemly in a lady of Granian heritage. People started to talk and the king himself saw her when he came to visit my estates. Strong young women of Eleanor’s line have been dealt with in the same way for generations. Married off to men who had proven themselves loyal to the crown, men who would ensure those women kept their place.”

“But you are a duke, with massive resources at your command,” Dane said. “Only Darcy’s father could rival you in rank, and his lands, his stature, are nowhere near as grand. Why not strike back against the king? Or did you fear the king would have your daughter executed by royal decree?”

“Granians do things differently,” my grandfather replied, looking up as the maid entered the room, then set a tray of tea things before us before bobbing a curtsy and leaving. “Our kings don’t rule through divine right. A watered-down version of that doctrine exists, for as the church gained in power, the priests set out their reasoning that this king and the next would not be able to ascend to the throne without the gods’ blessings, but,” he smiled slightly, “the fact is that a Granian king needs the support of the nobles. He comes to us for support when he wants to raise taxes.”

My men all made a noise at that, and my grandfather’s lips quirked before he continued.

“Even more importantly, he needs our bannermen if he is to go to war. The emperors were seen to be god kings—invincible, demi-gods—but Granian kings have never been able to muster the same resources to maintain their position. They need us and so—”

“You give your support conditionally, then?” Dane frowned at that. I could see that he was struggling to put it all together in his head.

“We do,” my grandfather said, with a slow incline of his head. “The kings of the past relegated a lot of their third and fourth sons, their daughters, to the north. The taint of the warg was always something that was talked of. That stain was washed away from the direct line of kings by strategic marriages with the southern lords, building their power base and influence as the kings

built theirs, while we were left to our own devices.”

He opened a drawer and pulled something out, all of us leaning forward to look. A votive of sorts it looked, though for none of the gods I'd been raised with. Wolves were killed if they came across the border, but they were buried under cairns of heavy rocks, lest they rise again, or the bodies were burned immediately. Their skulls were definitely not picked clean and preserved, like this one, which had strange markings painted along the white bone, and a familiar crystal hanging from a twine of string. One that glowed as I got closer. My grandfather watched me and nodded.

“Some of us have attempted to study what the old queens were capable of.” He tapped the crystal and then pointed to my sword hilt. “It seems to be tied to the crystals. There're caves full of them all over Grania, something the church in its former days used to work hard to root out, and for good reason. The current pantheon that is worshipped every Sunday is not the same one that would've been worshipped a thousand years ago or even five hundred.”

My grandfather's gaze held mine.

“Each god or goddess is representative of a once-sovereign country now conquered by the Farradorian Empire. They cluster them together, weld them into a united force for good and order, bringing local gods under their control just as they do people. It's been an effective strategy everywhere but with the Strelan goddess worship.”

His long elegant fingers caressed the skull.

“Her religion is tenacious, clinging on when all others have failed and faded away,” he said. “Her faithful, when captured, do not repent, no matter what the inquisitors of the church do to them.”

“Because she's real,” I said, seeing the caves, then Pepin, then my mother, then... “She's real, I've seen her, spoken to her.”

“Yes,” my grandfather said, with a tight smile. “I am sure you have. Because that's what you are, Darcy. The first queens were intermediaries between the people and the divine, pleading the case of their people, and wielding the goddess' power as she saw fit. That's what you'll be called to do, if you're to be successful at all. To learn how to use the goddess' given power and quash the threat of the Reavers.”

“And if I don't?” I said, staring intently at him.

“Well,” he said, his tone much more gentle than his words. “We'd best pray long and hard then.”

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## Chapter 24

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My mates had more questions, and their voices rose as they all tried to verbally wrestle to be heard, but I silenced them with my words. “Show me,” I said, getting to my feet. I didn’t bother to clarify what I meant, because the request was open ended. I stared at the wolf skull on the table and then dismissed it outright. It was a votive I couldn’t use, for a religion I didn’t understand. “Show me something that proves what you say is real. Show me how any of this will help mothers and their children.”

I saw the refugee woman in my mind again.

“Show me how having a sword or a bloodline or anything will stop people being killed.” I saw that little doll, crushed into the mud in Wildeford. “Will this sword help me to cut out the heart of Callum and then stab it through? Can I use it to defeat him? Otherwise, what’s the use of it?”

“I can’t show you that.” My grandfather seemed somewhat apologetic about that. “If you’d been allowed to come and live here. If you’d been able to visit the caves—”

“The answer is there?” I nodded sharply. “Then that’s where I’ll go.”

“That’s an unpredictable power.” My head whipped sideways to see Gael staring at me. “One you’ve already used and...”

Paid a high price for it, were his unspoken words, but I dismissed them with a frown. His concern was valid, but I couldn’t allow that to rule me, not right now.

“And what would’ve happened if I’d been allowed to grow up here?” I asked my grandfather.

“Nordred would’ve trained you,” he said, leaning forward. “We can send

word..." His voice trailed away as I let out a sharp bark of laughter. "No?"

"Nordred?" I pulled back as if stung. "Nordred is the answer?"

"You trusted him," my grandfather said. "He swore he would do his best to protect you from your father. He—"

"Died in battle," I said, hearing the crackle of flames and the caws of the ravens from that day and it felt like the tiny mote of hope inside me died then. "We burned him on a pyre; commended his soul to the Morrigan. We'll get no help from him."

"Did he leave behind any books?" my grandfather asked, urgently. "Letters? Anything?"

"Just pain." I forced my lips to curve into a smile, which hurt all the more. "He never spoke of any of this to me, not until the end, and when he started to tell me about it, he was away more than he was with me. Raising an army for me, he said. If this was his grand plan for me, he shared very few details of it." I shook my head. "Is this what all your hopes are pinned on? Because, I'm sorry to say, that's misplaced. Perhaps he didn't believe that I was truly the one."

"I don't think—" Dane started to say.

"Perhaps I'm not." I stared at each one of them. "Has that been considered? All of these powerful men pinning their hopes onto one woman, but—"

"That might be the problem."

We all looked up when Rake, no, Crown Prince Bryson strolled into the room. He'd thrown aside his messenger uniform, replacing it with princely clothes in unrelieved black. His eyes glowed bright gold under my inspection and I heard his words again as I looked at him.

*"Because, my queen, you are my fated mate."*

I kept hearing his words inside my head, my memory dragging my focus back to it like a sore tooth, until, jaw clenched, I shoved it away. Bryson smiled, as if he heard my thoughts, but though my mates growled, he simply twisted a gold ring around his finger before continuing. "Perhaps it isn't men who have the answers here."

"What do you mean?" Dane said, getting to his feet and coming to stand by my side, the others quickly doing the same.

"My mother was the one who schooled me on what I am, what was to come. She was a northern lord's daughter, forced on my father when his support in the north began to wane. Their relationship was... cordial, at best,

because he knew. She was a perfect queen, gave him sons, was beautiful and accomplished and an asset at court.”

“But she was of Eleanor’s line as well,” I said.

Aristocrats were always teetering on the edge of becoming completely inbred, because they forced their children to only ever marry from the same class, over and over. That limited the potential partners, ensuring that whatever magic was in Eleanor’s blood, it was well distributed amongst the highest in Grania.

“Just so,” Bryson replied, with a nod of his head. “The queens of old wielded immense power, but they did so with—”

“The Maidens.” I barely breathed that out, remembering Aurora’s plan to have me made one of them. They were a religious order of sorts, living within the temple walls, but tasked with the protection of the king.

And, before that, the queen.

Who had taught me more about how to fight as a two-souled person? Who had helped me weld our tired and sore soldiers into a fighting unit? Who had helped me forge a pack?

“Selene,” I said. “Ayla—”

“I’ll go and grab them, bring them to the estate,” Weyland said, making for the door.

“And the children.”

While I was glad they hadn’t seen what had happened last night or this morning, it felt wrong not to wake up with their voices in my ears, to feel their arms wrapped around my neck. By now we would have made sure they’d eaten well, cleaned themselves up and got dressed for the day. Jan would’ve been telling long rambling stories about everything she’d dreamed. And Del? Well, he’d have grumpily told her to stop, all the while watching her closely to ensure she was safe.

While I watched him.

“Of course.” Weyland strode over to my side, grabbing me by the back of the neck and then pulling our heads together. “I’ll keep them safe, bring them here and then we’ll find a way to beat this damn thing, I promise. You have to believe that, lass. You have to.”

I couldn’t, of course. It felt as though everything was so unclear and nebulous, again. But I could accept his unwavering belief in me. It was a tiny flame that flickered in my heart, and I found my hands going around it, trying to protect it from the winds of doubt.

“The Wolf Maidens?” Bryson asked, with a hunger he tried unsuccessfully to mask.

“The tales tell of rabid warrior maidens that fought in battles with a suicidal intent,” my grandfather said, with a frown. “Are you sure they are the best source of information?”

“Can any of you name another suitable one?” I asked that of every man in the room, but none spoke. “I didn’t think so. Your Grace...” I saw the man wince and tried again. “Grandfather, what you were taught about Strelae, from the words of priests, to the lessons from Eleanor, they aren’t accurate. What they are...” I paused. “What we are is something else entirely. The Wolf Maidens were the queen’s pack.” I glanced then at my other three mates. “Alongside her chosen partners. And I need to understand what the hell to do with all of this.” My thumb rubbed against the smooth crystal hilt of the sword. “So that I can do as you ask, and save everyone.”

And on that note, we settled down, drank cups of tea and talked quietly while waiting for the rest of our family.

“DARCY!”

Weyland returned before too long. The Maidens marched nonchalantly across the thick carpeted floor, looking around them in faint amusement, but Jan broke free of Selene’s grip, rushing towards me. I grabbed her as she launched herself at me, swinging her up into my arms.

“Were you a good girl for the Maidens?” I asked her.

“No,” Del replied darkly, then did something he rarely did, nowadays, sidling up and pressing himself into my side. I wrapped an arm around him and hugged him closer.

“She wasn’t too bad,” Selene said. “We took her up on the inn roof and had her howling at the moon when she got too boisterous. Ruffled the feathers of the good people of Middlebury, but she settled not long after that.” I smiled my thanks, but before I could reply, her eyes slid down, her attention caught.

The crystal at the hilt of the sword was glowing and as she saw it, she stopped still. Her brows creased and her lips parted. Ayla went to her lover’s side, entwining her fingers with Selene’s, and all three Maidens came closer.

“Is that—” Orla said.

“The Sword of Destiny...” Selene drew her eyes back to mine, then

searched my face. I wasn't sure what she was looking for, but she must have found it, because something in her expression brightened. "It was destroyed after the queen went across the border. The Granians..." She looked past me to my grandfather and the prince, her eyes narrowing. "They presented us with a molten lump of metal and a smashed crystal, to make clear their victory."

"All show, I believe," my grandfather said, getting to his feet. "Richard Fetterling," he said, holding out his hand. The Maiden inspected it for several heartbeats, as she summed him up, then Selene shook it firmly. "If this is the sword you speak of, it was displayed above the throne of the first Granian king, at least until it went missing. Joran the First explained away its absence with the molten metal and crushed crystal, telling the court of the time that it was a symbolic defeat we needed to press home, or so the history books say."

"But what if it was just symbolic," Dane said, moving closer. "For Granians and Strelans. Because the sword had been taken."

"Retrieved." I said that with total certainty, something in the pulse of the sword's glow confirming that. "Locked away for safekeeping. Kept beneath this estate." I looked over my shoulder at my grandfather and he smiled slowly.

"We are the descendants of Eleanor's first daughter. Middlebury was to be the gateway to the north and Joran knew he'd be forced to hold that land securely, or risk losing what was taken from the Strelans."

"Stolen," Axe said darkly.

"The first duke built this estate, established these lands, began the process of turning Middlebury from a tiny outpost into a thriving town," he continued.

"With the help of Nordred." That was a guess on my part, but my grandfather nodded.

"He helped broker the peace between Strelae and Grania, which earned him the mistrust of both sides, but... he was always a powerful, capable figure. So, as long as what he was working on aligned with the king's aims, he was left to his own devices."

I wrapped my hand around the crystal pommel then. A ball of the quartz had been set into the top of the hilt, no doubt taken from the raw rock of the cave below. If I squeezed it tight enough, I saw it. A younger Nordred—much more grandly dressed than the stable master I'd known—pulling the sword from underneath his cloak. He unsheathed it from the very plain



leather scabbard it was in, and the crystal in the hilt started glowing as soon as it was drawn out. The crystals on the walls glowed as he set the blade down on a rough-hewn stone dais, the light getting brighter and brighter as crystals grew up around the sword, before the glow finally faded. The sword was now encased, out of the reach of king and queen alike.

“So what does it do?” I asked, breaking the reverent mood in the room. “Apart from being a beautiful sword...”

Everyone gasped when I pulled it free. Blue fire played along the length of the blade, something it hadn’t done before. Selene reached out with a shaking hand, closing her fingers around mine before forcing it down.

“It signals who is the true ruler of all of Strelae, including the parts that were stolen from us by the Granians.” She glared at Bryson for a moment. “It is a means to connect with the power of this land. It is a means to rid it of the Reavers.”

“Really?” I held her gaze and didn’t let go. “Then show me.”

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## Chapter 25

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I felt a wrench when we left the children in the kitchen to have their breakfast. My grandfather's staff, some of whom had known my mother as a little girl, volunteered to keep an eye on them while we went into the cave. My men, all of the men, wanted to come down to the cellar, and while the Wolf Maidens and I allowed that, we did not admit them into the cave.

"These are the places of the goddess," Selene said, trailing her fingers along the crystals as we stepped into the cave. "The same as the one under Snowmere, and the one under the temple."

"There's a cave under the temple?" I asked.

"These places are all across Strelae," Orla said. "There is one near to the village I grew up in. Went down there all the time, my sisters and I. We used to tease each other, pretend to be ghosts..." She stared around the cave, taking in the dais where the sword had rested, wide-eyed. "Then on the goddess' feast days, the women would take us down to make offerings."

"Offerings of what?" I asked, strangely desperate. Perhaps there was a specific food or some item sacred to the goddess that we could provide. Maybe I could haggle with this invasive divine force, give it what it wanted and then—

"The first harvest fruits at the beginning of summer," Orla said. "I used to make corn dollies for that. A pelt from a new lamb in the spring. A skull of a raven in the winter. And... blood."

"Blood?" I saw my hand slapping down on the cave wall, then the gush of blood from my nose last night. My nose prickled as if to remind me.

"Blood is life," Selene said, raising an eyebrow. "Why else would the

goddess have us bleed each moon time, if not to remind us of this? It is the first gift she gives us and the last. Blood is sacred. Blood magic is powerful. Blood...”

I jerked my knife free and then pressed the point to my finger, watching the red well up there. I hated the sight of it now, because of what it represented.

Loss.

Loss of people, loss of my child, loss of Nordred. I’d seen far too much blood, it felt, and if it was precious to the goddess, why did she waste it so on the battlefield? But once I had the spot of blood on my fingertip, I clenched my fist. As I opened my hand again, the spot had spread. I pulled the sword free of its scabbard and then closed my bloody fingers around the crystal on the hilt. Flames flared along the blade, again, but this time they were far stronger, far brighter, than before.

“It feeds from me,” I said. I could feel every beat of my heart, the crystal now pulsing in time with it.

“As we feed from her, the land,” Selene added. “The fruits of the trees, the vegetables in the earth.” Her lips thinned. “The flesh of the prey we hunt. That’s what it means to be queen, Darcy. Everyone, including those men up there.” She pointed to the stairs. “They don’t know what that means. If one of them has a child, they can walk away from it. If one of them ascends the heights as Granian king, they can indulge in any whim they like.”

As the Strelan king had done when he was in power.

“But they will never feel this.”

Her hand covered mine, squeezing it around the crystal, so I felt her heart beating, then Ayla’s, then Orla’s. At first they all beat in different rhythms, but as we stood there together, they aligned. Burst after powerful burst from the muscles inside our chests, pushing the blood around our bodies, keeping us alive.

“What do you want to do?” Selene asked, her eyes drilling into mine so that I couldn’t lie, not even to myself. Those pale blue irises seemed to cut through everything.

“I want to...” My throat closed up on that. “I have to save them.” I saw the panicked masses at Snowmere and knew that the same chaos was being played out over and over across the land as Callum consolidated his claim. “I have to protect them.”

I saw a dark shadow fall over Jan and Del, but the children’s faces

could've been interchangeable with any number of Strelan children.

Or Granian ones.

Callum wasn't going to respect the border between the two countries and I knew I had to somehow make the Granian king see that. Callum wanted to reclaim what was his. To reverse history, right a terrible wrong. The hard thing was I wasn't entirely convinced his goal was wrong, just the way he wanted to go about it.

"I don't *want* to do that," I told Selene, confirming everything she had to say. "I *need* to."

"The Maidens have always sworn themselves to the queen's service," she replied. "Every single one of our number will fight to the death to ensure that we do save our people."

Death. I blanched at that, my grip on the sword loosening, but, together, the Maidens supported my grasp and it strengthened again.

"To the death," Ayla echoed.

"But let's not focus on defeat right now," Selene said. "Focus on what you must do. The power is yours. The sword answers to you. It's time to wield the power gifted to you."

"But I don't—" I started to protest.

"You do." Something softened in each woman's gaze. "You do. You just have to reach out and..."

I'd been pulled away from reality, in dreams or while awake, to see visions of things that were to come, and now the cave faded away to show me another.

"THIS WAY!" Pepin urged and I shook my head, the sight of her squeezing my heart somewhat. She had been by my side, helped me through so much, only to leave me behind the moment I got pregnant. But perhaps this was why. As I looked around, I saw she was hurrying people away from a burning village, the sound of howls in the distance letting us know who had perpetrated this crime. Dark shadowy figures lumbered through the remains of people's houses.

Reavers.

I hated the sight of them, aberrations that they were, my grip on the sword tightening to the point of pain.

"Down here," Pepin said, hurrying people down a straggling path

between dense undergrowth and overhanging branches. It ended in a massive rock formation, where one of the boulders was bisected by a thin crack.

People made sounds of consternation, looking around, starting to protest, until Pepin waved her hand and a stream of blue light hit the cracked rock. *Is that what my power can do?* I thought to myself, right as the sound of rock groaning filled the air. The ground shook, people started to shout and shriek, stare around, looking for some sort of safe haven, and then it was revealed to them. The rock split like a pair of doors, giving the onlookers access to a cave much like the one I stood in. People fell silent, staring, until Pepin chivvied them forward.

“Inside,” she ordered, brusquely, then with urgency. “Inside!”

At the head of the track, back where they’d come from, was a Reaver.

It felt like the whole world recoiled from the beast as it took a ponderous step forward, sniffing the air, then wrinkling its snout to reveal bloodied fangs. My grip tightened reflexively, every muscle tensing, ready to fight an evil that was miles away. Then the bloody thing threw back its head and howled, calling its pack over.

“Now!” Pepin snapped, and everyone there moved as one, rushing into the cave.

“We have to help them,” I said, as I watched, somehow aware that the Maidens had been gifted with the same vision. “We have to protect them! We’re here in Grania and they’re...”

My voice trailed away and for a moment, the only sound was the Maidens’ noisy breaths and mine.

The Reaver howled to its fellows, like a hunting dog that had caught scent of prey, and it was answered by more. It didn’t wait for them though. It leapt forward, thundering down the track as the last of the people scurried into the cave. A woman shrieked as she ran, her little toddler slipping from her arms. Unharmful, but just standing there, the child was transfixed by the sight of the surging Reaver.

The beast would tear its head off, I knew that. I cursed the child, the mother, her grip, in a low voice, as she rushed back to her little one.

“No,” I said, at the same time as Pepin spoke. “No!”

As my muscles flexed, to do what I didn’t know, Pepin ran forward, collecting the child and tossing it to the mother before dragging them into the cave, flicking her hand up to seal the cave behind her. A jolt went through the four of us standing together in the cave in Grania, because the rock closed up,

locking the villagers away as if they had never been there. The sound of the Reaver's howls were now muffled. Everyone shrank back in the now dark cave, the shocked silence becoming filled with muttering that became louder and louder as people voiced their uncertainty. Then, blue light flickered to life in the crystals and small sounds of wonder replaced those of fear.

"You are safe here," Pepin said and I caught the moment she forced herself to smile gently at them. "Within the goddess' embrace, no Reaver will touch you."

"But we can't stay in a bloody cave for the rest of our lives," a man snapped. "There's barely room to swing a cat as it is."

"No," Pepin replied with a nod. "This is just a waypoint." Then she twisted her hand as she pointed to one of the walls, and that's when something happened that I fought to understand. Where there had been crystals, now there was a swirling portal. Sounds of consternation filled the cave. "I have a safe house through this portal. There are others like you there. It's far from Snowmere, near the border between Strelae and Grania. You'll find food, shelter..."

My heart pounded so loud in my ears I couldn't hear what else she had to say. People were easily convinced by Pepin, because what choice did they have? Some still wept for lost loved ones, others helped the injured step through the portal, as outside the Reavers raged. Some threw themselves at the rock, others raked claws across its impervious surface, howling in frustration at being denied their prey, while Pepin made sure every person stepped through safely. Finally, she did so herself, sealing the portal and leaving an empty cave behind.

"THEY'RE a means to travel around the country," I whispered. "We could travel vast distances if we could work out how to use them."

For purposes quite different to Pepin's. I was glad she was doing the good work of saving people from the ravages of the Reavers, but that wasn't my destiny.

I heard my heartbeat and theirs throb in time, reminding me of the last time I'd had another's heart thudding so close to me.

Callum's.

Without him, the Reavers would lose their power. When he'd been injured on the battlefield at Ironhaven, the Reavers with him had dropped like

stones. We could work to save everyone in a scattered effort, or we could cut the snake off at the head. Selene seemed to think this power was at my beck and call, so I pushed it now.

“Show me him,” I said, staring blindly into the blue crystals of our cave. “Show me Callum.”

THE VISION of Pepin fragmented slowly, as if torn apart and what replaced it appeared in small flickers before a more complete vision appeared. Callum was lying on the king’s bed, the black sheets rumpled now, as two of his Reavers hauled forth his prize. The girl whimpered, fought against their grip, her whole body bucking and twisting when she saw who she’d been brought to.

“She’s the closest we can find, Majesty,” the Reaver growled, throwing the girl down onto the floor.

And that’s when I realised why this girl had been chosen.

Her light brown hair, her blue eyes, were not remarkable in any way, but neither was my own face. She scrambled to her feet, looking around her wildly, then grabbed a tiny knife from her belt, wielding it with shaky hands.

“Mm... she’ll do—for now,” Callum said, rising from the bed.

For a man who’d died hundreds of years ago, he was in remarkably good condition. The only thing that marred the tall, muscular body was the wounds I’d left on his body.

*Bleed*, I urged them. The priests had always gone on and on about Strelan dark magics, using blood to hurt or kill others. *Open and let him bleed out.*

I tried to see it in my mind, the stitches springing open, the lips of the wounds parting, blood trickling down his sides, then gushing. I imagined his hands slapping down on the injuries, trying to keep his life blood in, but they didn’t. Instead I heard the far-off snicker of the Morrigan as he stepped closer.

“Pretty girl.” He quickly disarmed her, tossing the knife away and then jerked her closer as she let out a little sound of distress.

“We need to save her,” I ground out, every muscle locked down tight. “If Pepin can step through a portal, we can too. We could storm the castle—”

“You’ll be mine, won’t you?” Callum’s voice was a feline purr as his hand went to her hair. “You’ll warm my bed and sit by my side as my queen?”

I marvelled at his ability to ask her such things, because every inch of the woman screamed resistance. Her lips were pulled back to reveal her teeth and her whole body trembled with revulsion, right as her eyes blazed blue.

“Never, you fucking bast—”

Whatever plan I had, it died a quick death, just like she did. The snap of her neck seemed far too small a thing to herald the end of someone’s life. I sucked a breath in as she fell to the floor, my eyes burning as I stared. He dropped her like a doll, just like that tiny scrap of fabric I’d found at Wildeford, then shoved her body with the toe of his boot.

“Remove this,” he ordered, “and find me another. One that’s more willing, this time.”

“Of course, Majesty, but...”

“What is it?” Callum’s eyes narrowed as he stared at his Reaver.

“The attack on Bayard is to take place tomorrow,” he replied, obviously reluctant to bother his lord. “We wanted to discuss strategy.”

“Strategy?” Callum snickered, then stepped over the dead girl to draw closer to the beast. “It’s the same as it always is, my dear Rorick. Swarm over the hills around it and sweep into the town, causing as much death and destruction as possible. We do this in the Morrigan’s name. Every scream is a prayer to her might; every drop of blood, her sacrament. There is no strategy other than to bring glory to her name.”

“Of course, Majesty,” the Reaver said, dropping his head forward in a bow. “I’ll return with a suitable girl...”

“HE’S GOING TO ATTACK BAYARD,” Selene said, her eyes wide and solemn as the cave came back to us. “That’s close to the border.”

But there was more to her concern than that. Bayard was the equivalent to Middlebury in Strelae, a major trading town where people brought Granian goods to sell or transported iron ore from there into Grania. I remembered the town. I remembered Balin, the older man who worked leather, creating my jerkins. I remembered Kelly and her delicious pies. Pepin and I had walked its busy streets, and seen hundreds of people going about their business. And now Callum was going to extinguish each and every one of them.

I pulled my hand off the sword pommel and then made for the door.

“What happened?” Weyland asked, scouring my face for clues, then coming closer.



“Are you hurt?” Gael appeared by my side and ran his hands down my back and sides. “Did anything hurt you?”

“Not me,” I managed to get out, despite seeing the girl and the moment her neck was snapped, over and over again. “But a girl... And Bayard.”

“Bayard?” My grandfather’s frown grew deeper. “That’s close to the border. This Callum has attacked it?”

“He will, tomorrow,” I said, “and we need to stop him.”

“We can’t get to Bayard in less than a day,” Dane said. “Darcy, it took us longer than that to ride here from your father’s keep.”

“I think I know a way,” I said.

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## Chapter 26

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“You said the sword is a means to get rid of the Reavers,” I said, pacing back and forth along the floor of my grandfather’s war room. I glared at the map of both Grania and Strelae as I went. The room was beautifully appointed and scrupulously clean, but it was more a museum piece than anything. I eyed a suit of the heavy armour that Granians of old had developed to defeat their wargen enemies in the past. “We have to stop this attack. We have to.”

“I can provide the knights stationed on my estate,” my grandfather said. “They’d welcome an opportunity to get their swords blooded, especially when cutting down creatures such as these Reavers you’ve described.”

In the much lighter armour that the Granians used now. I looked at him steadily, wondering if he knew how ineffective that would be. His men would die for certain, if we got them there in time, just like they had in the early days of the Granian invasion. But first we had to work out a way to get them to the battlefield.

“Is there a crystal cave near the town?” I asked, stopping and scanning the now outdated map, as if it would tell me.

“The tor.” Weyland’s tone had me looking up, meeting his eyes, that smile of his warming me more surely than the fire that crackled in the grate. He’d taken me up onto that rocky outcrop and we’d... I’d been hurting and he’d been wanting, and together we’d seemed to rub each other the wrong way until we could work out a way to come together, not force each other away. He flushed then, as if reading my thoughts. “There’s a cave under the tor. Dane, you remember.”

His brother stepped forward to consider the map, then traced the line of

the tor with his finger.

“We went rambling among the rocks when Father was locked in business negotiations.” Dane looked over at Weyland. “You got lost.”

“And you found me, having slipped down between two spurs of stone and into the fissure that led to the cave. I learned some new swear words that day,” Weyland replied with a smirk.

“So the only way out of this cave is through a fissure that a young boy could slide through?” Bryson said, frowning. “That will do our men no good.”

“No, that was just a crack in the roof.” Dane held the prince’s gaze effortlessly. “When I went in after him, we found it. The two of us caught hell from the local priestess, for blundering into a space kept sacred to women. Father sent us to the temple to scrub the steps for three days straight as punishment, while he finalised his business.”

Dane’s focus shifted back to me.

“There’s a way to get a large number of people to the town in little time. During the feast days of each aspect of the goddess, the townspeople would visit the chapels and pay their respects.”

“Is it the feast day of the Morrigan?” I asked, noting the way each one of my men winced. “Because we will worship her in the way she likes best, bringing war and destruction to the town if we are to protect it.”

“Not yet.” Gael’s tone was grim. “But soon. She grows in power as the summer wanes, the time of the mother gone again.”

“Then she’ll just have to accept our tribute early,” I vowed. “If I can do what Pepin did in the vision...”

“You can—if you believe it to be so,” Selene said, with that same kind of serene certainty that just seemed to amplify my own doubts.

“So we have the Maidens, and my grandfather’s knights,” I said, tapping a finger on my bottom lip.

“And those that worship the true god,” Higgins said, straightening up. “My visit with the local chapter was a fruitful one. There are many who have awaited your arrival for some time, milady.”

And how long would that last, once they saw the Reavers? I wondered. I held his gaze, seeing all the wild hope and fervent belief. For a while, the people of Snowmere had felt the same about me. They’d believed that I could save them from the Reavers too.

“We can send a bird to Stonewall Garrison,” Bryson said. “They can send

men to assist.”

“That might be hard to do, sire,” Higgins said. “The big knobs there, they don’t tend to do nothing unless they have orders with a royal seal on it.”

But his protests fell away as the prince retrieved two things. One, a small silver medal with a black sun and a crescent moon around it, much like Higgins’ larger one. The second was his seal. Not the same as his father’s but recognisable as belonging to the crown prince. My grandfather opened a roll-top desk and rustled around pulling out paper, ink and a fresh quill, then some sealing wax. Bryson wrote a short note, then wrapped the paper around the medallion and addressed it to the commander. Taking a taper, he walked over to the fireplace to light it, then used it to light the wax stick, carefully dripping it so that the message and the medal were well-sealed within. He gave the note to the manservant at the door, then turned back to the room.

“That medallion will bring help more quickly than the words I’ve written or my seal.”

“We’ll wait to get word back from the garrison,” my grandfather said, “but that won’t stop us from making our preparations. Now, Dane, where is the proper entrance to the cave?”

WE PUSHED around markers on the map, making bloodless decisions about how we would stage our counter attack, but that’s not how it would really be. Whether or not it was from me or Callum, the Morrigan would get her due. A shiver ran down my spine as I stopped looking at the map to gaze around the table.

At Dane who was taking a lead role in the strategising. His father had raised him to this in the same way Linnea tried to force me to improve my needlecraft. Next, my eyes flicked to Weyland who stood leaning over the table, adding his own thoughts, pointing out holes in his brother’s suggestions and then countering with amendments. Gael stood back, watching, waiting, blue fire appearing and disappearing at his fingertips without him realising. Axe was discussing what would happen on the ground with great gusto, buoying up the spirits of Higgins and his fellows. Of course he’d be the one to maintain morale.

*It’s customary to make an offering for battle.* I hadn’t heard the Morrigan’s voice in my head for some time, and the sound made me go cold and stiff. *Who will you give me to win the day?* My eyes slid over Selene and

her Maidens, then my grandfather, before settling on Bryson. *Not him, she insisted. He has no value to you, so he is not a fitting sacrifice for me.*

*So take me then,* I replied without hesitation. *You've already taken what's precious to me...* I sucked in a breath, feeling a phantom stab of the same pain in my womb that I'd felt that day in the caves under Snowmere. *Why settle for part of me when you can have all of me?*

*You assume I don't already possess you, body, mind and soul,* she replied with a low snicker. *But we'll see, little queen. We'll see. Even the goddess herself stops and waits to see the outcome of a battle. We roll the dice like men do in a tavern, waiting to see how they fall.*

To our advantage, that's what I prayed desperately, as I watched the plans unfold.

TO OUR ADVANTAGE, I swore the next morning, as all of our men massed in the foyer of my grandfather's mansion.

"You needn't come," I told him stiffly as I stood before him. I looked his armour over critically, looking for any weaknesses: leather that had rotted, spots of rust, something that might mean life or death on the battlefield. He watched my inspection with amusement, reaching out and patting my head with a mailed fist. I felt the heaviness of the steel and welcomed it, for it was one more element of his armour that could keep him safe.

"I should say the same of you." He reached over and straightened the seam of my leather armour slightly, then flicked off an imaginary mote of dust. "Most Granian men would see it a terrible loss of face to have their womenfolk fighting by their side."

"Leading the fight," I corrected. That had been argued about at length between my grandfather and Dane, but Dane had won. If I was to be queen, I would have to win people over, one battle at a time. This one was somewhat easier for me because the enemy was easy to spot. "We will prevail... Grandfather."

He smiled then, his whole face lighting up.

"We will, darling girl. We will."

APPARENTLY HE'D HAD to go down last night and talk long and hard with

his knights and I knew why, even though I had not attended the meeting. Making them see the impending threat. They would most likely subscribe to the theory that my enemy's enemy is my friend, but even the most staunch monarchist would have to grant this. The Reavers were the monsters of legend. This was their turn to pit themselves against that ancient foe and it was a strange knight who did not relish that challenge.

But they didn't know what they would be facing.

I felt their blindness, as I stood amongst the men, in the way knights jostled and joked, in the way Higgins and the local chapter of the wolf cult did the same. Axe was amongst them and their initial inherited suspicion of a blue-eyed Strelan quickly faded when he started passing a flask of rum around. I pursed my lips. While I appreciated his efforts, I needed everyone to focus.

"So how do I create a pack from two peoples who have historically hated each other for hundreds of years?" I muttered to Selene as the Maidens clustered around me.

"Find a common enemy," she replied. "Make them see that, under all the bullshit, they are the same. Men fight well to save themselves, but they fight the best when they've got something to fight for."

Right then.

I dragged up an antique-looking chair. Painted in white and what was undoubtedly real gold leaf, its spindly legs would collapse if any of the men here tried to sit on it. Climbing on top of it, I clapped my hands sharply for attention. When they turned, I saw in the knights' expressions what I would've if I'd tried the same with Kris, my girlhood crush, and my father's knights. Then I remembered what I was.

"Gentlemen, you must be wondering what we are fighting today," I said, my voice ringing out through the expansive foyer. "Or even why we fight. I can answer both questions. Reavers." I watched mutterings and murmurs run through the crowd but it was quickly stifled as I continued. "These beasts once ravaged Strelae but became creatures of myth and legend there. Believe me when I say to you that they have returned to Strelan lands. You might find that a cause for celebration. But we have reason to go on the offensive against the Reavers. For their leader is a man who remembers the past, before the Granians came here, and will stop at nothing to remove all signs of human life from these lands as well."

I looked around, trying to catch the eye of every man here.

“Reavers are beasts who’ll burn your cities and your towns, who’ll slaughter your animals and raze your crops to the ground, who’ll take your wives, daughters, mothers and sisters and rape them until their throats bleed from screaming and then, as they lie broken in the ashes, they’ll slit their throats before you. You’ll die, they’ll die and the bastard things will conduct a bloody orgy in the ashes left behind. Everything you’ve created, everything you love, will be reduced to rubble and dirt and there’ll be nothing you can do about it.”

I had their attention now. All smiles were gone, replaced by grim faces and hardened eyes. I hadn’t challenged their hatred of Strelans in my call to action. And the enemy I pointed them towards? Threatened to destroy everything they held dear—their families, their lands, their way of life—just as it was destroying the Strelans.

“Unless we stop them now. Bayard is on the border between the two countries. You’ll know of family or friends who live just a stone’s throw from the town. Now you know what will happen to them if the Reavers come over the border. And so do we.” I sucked in a breath, my whole body shuddering as I summoned forth the vision. “They are faster, harder, more vicious than any of the stories you’ve been told of the wargen, and they will not stop. Not for injury nor blood loss, for they are inhuman in that regard.” Some men frowned, looking at each other apprehensively, while others muttered curses. I raised my voice. “But we have this.”

I jerked my sword out of its scabbard and held it up high, blue fire flickering across the blade.

“The gods themselves have blessed me with a blade capable of cutting them down—the Sword of Destiny—and I will use it to lead the charge. We will stop these slaving beasts in their tracks and send the survivors yelping back to their master with a message. Grania will not fall to the Reavers.” Murmurs went around the crowd now, but not in dispute. Eyes shone and spines straightened as hands went to the hilts of swords. “They want to take everything we have, but we will give them nothing!”

The roar of hundreds of voices went through the house, rattling the windows and unsettling the servants, but I didn’t care. I pricked my palm with my knife, forcing the blood to flow as I wrapped it around the pommel of my sword. I had no idea if this would work and if it didn’t, I’d lose the faith of everyone here, something Weyland had talked to me about when he’d found me perched in the window seat late in the wee hours of the previous

night.

*“CAN’T SLEEP?” he’d asked, slotting his body in behind mine, then pulling me back against him.*

*“What if it doesn’t work?” I whispered, barely able to make my fears audible. “What if I’m not—”*

*“You are.”*

*“But if I can’t—”*

*“You will.”*

*“You’re not listening to me.” I twisted around to face him, frowning furiously. “Weyland, I—”*

*“...am Darcy, wolf queen of my heart, and the most beautiful, ferocious girl I’ve ever seen. You led the battle at Snowmere. You fought like the devil at Ironhaven. This is nothing, by comparison. Don’t let the fall of the city take from you what you know is true.” His eyes held mine, the blue glowing in the darkness. “You were always going to lead us to victory. This is just the first step towards that.”*

I FOUND it hard to believe in myself, so I clung to his belief, their belief as I strode into the cave. That song I’d heard when I claimed the sword, it got louder and louder in my ears, drowning out the soldiers’ chatter. The sound swelled as I stalked over to the closest cave wall, then grew unbearably loud as I slapped my hand down on the crystals. The points bit into the little cuts on my palm, forcing the blood to flow more freely, dripping down the wall onto the ground.

“Give me this,” I growled, more wolf than woman. “Give me this battle, dread queen. You want a fight, blood, death? Then get us to Bayard.”

The wall gave away suddenly, replaced instead by a swirling portal, just like Pepin had made.

“I did it...”

Selene smiled at my surprise.

“Good, now make it look like you knew it would happen all along. A good leader inspires confidence, rather than reminding the soldiers of the risks.”



I turned, eyes blazing, and strode past my mates and the Wolf Maidens in the cave, to where my grandfather and Crown Prince Bryson stood at the head of the assembled soldiers packed into the cellars, and on the stairs up to the kitchens.

“Through this door is a portal to the outskirts of Bayard. We’ll approach the northern road quietly, so that we have the element of surprise on our side. We anticipate that we’ll be there before they arrive. And when they do—”

“We’ll kill every one of those fuckers!” Higgins shouted, the rest of the men roaring in support.

This wasn’t the same as fighting at Aramoor. There, the steward and his men had all been united by the need to fight for their home. It wasn’t even like the battle at Ironhaven or at Snowmere, because those fighting had at least been united by the order of the king, the expectations of their families or just pure survival. Here, each group of men, even each man, had their own motivation, and somehow we needed to make them work together. I sucked in a deep breath and barked my orders. My voice echoed throughout the cavernous cellar and back into the crystal cave.

“Together,” I said to reinforce the original message. “The only way we’ll get through this is together. Look at the man next to you.” Part of me was surprised when they obeyed. “Strelan or Granian, it doesn’t matter. He’s the man you’ll have fighting by your side, protecting your back, ensuring we all get out of this alive. So memorise his face, see him for the ally he is, and then walk through the portal and towards the battlefield together.”

“*A leader doesn’t wait to see his orders are followed,*” Selene had told me. “*He assumes that they will and that ensures compliance.*”

So I did just that, grabbing my sword and walking through the cave and through the portal.

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## Chapter 27

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I knew that I was back in Strelae because I could smell the sweet scent of pine trees. The air felt softer on my skin somehow, like it was a caress. But any feelings of being glad to be home were shoved to one side as the Maidens all drew their swords. They flanked me as did my men as we all moved forward.

The tor was situated slightly north east of Bayard. From there, following the track towards the town it would take about ten minutes to reach the marketplace. But we weren't there to wander the markets or find the best price for pies. We'd reasoned that the Reavers would be coming via the main north road, down from Strelae, so that was where we were headed.

But what if Callum had mastered the art of using the crystal portals? I'd asked that question of the others around the map, before we'd approached the men. What if we positioned ourselves by the north road, ready to intercept the enemy, only to have them come surging up behind us?

"I'll take a contingent," Axe had volunteered. "I have a horn that I can use to send up an alarm. While I'm doing that, I can make sure all those Granian knights in their tin cans actually do head to the road to fulfil their duty, just in case there are any 'stragglers' who've rethought their commitment to facing the Reavers." Axe did that now, as I found a place in the undergrowth by the side of the road, accompanied by the Maidens, Dane, Weyland and Gael.

And Bryson.

He moved silently, sword drawn, perfectly alert, which surprised me. The prince didn't say a word, for his entire focus was trained on the road. When

we heard the sound of clopping hooves on the cobblestones, we all turned to look.

The stranger had an audience on either side of the road, unbeknownst to him. I saw our soldiers' eyes shine in the shadows, but he didn't. He wasn't seeing much of anything—his horse plodding placidly along home as the man swayed in the saddle.

“Drunk,” Gael muttered and I nodded sharply, right before we heard something else.

A far-off howl, loud enough to make the horse snort, then stop, its hooves pawing at the road. Its big haunches bunched, quivered, ready to launch itself forward, but it waited for direction from its rider. He just leaned further forward in the saddle, mumbling something in the slurring language of drunkards, the horse whinnying, then stamping its feet, trying to get a response. Another howl and another, louder. They were getting closer at a dizzying speed. My eyes flicked to the end of the road, then the horse, then the man, then back at the road, before I made a decision.

“Darcy!” Dane hissed as I moved out of cover and onto the road. The man might not be able to spur the horse to action, but I could. I ran over to the horse, making no attempt to settle it. Instead, I slapped my hand down on its rump to get it going.

The horse let out a loud cry, rearing up, nearly unseating the rider, but with some innate sense of self-preservation, he snapped back awake and gripped the reins, just in time for the horse to bolt. It went veering off through the trees, leaping over the heads of some knights before disappearing into the undergrowth.

I didn't go back to my hiding place.

“They're coming,” I said, feeling very small and very vulnerable, standing on that road by myself. But this was the plan. My heart beat too hard, too fast, drowning out anyone else's response but then I heard it, felt it.

It wasn't just my heartbeat I could hear but others, too. First my mates, then the Maidens, then Higgins and his fellow believers, then my grandfather and his knights. All of them beat way too fast, creating a sense of urgency.

All but his.

I dared to take my eyes off the road for a moment to find him. Bryson's gaze met mine with little effort, the gold of his irises starting to glow. I stared at them, wondering. Why? How? Then I heard the growl. My sword was out and in my hand without a thought, my focus back on the road, because the

first Reaver had appeared.

With more behind him. As the beasts' fangs flashed, they slowed their pace instinctively, their entire focus trained on me. The Reavers hadn't tried for subterfuge; to creep up on the people of Bayard. Callum wasn't at their head to direct their movements. They'd been unleashed like dogs, sent running from the capital all day and all night, to arrive here.

"Looking for me?" I asked, throwing my arms wide. "Have you the sense to work out who I am?" I smiled, feeling a wild moment of glee, one that was entirely at odds with the situation. "I bet you don't, stupid things, but I'm the girl your master has been looking for."

Their wolfish heads jerked up and their red eyes gleamed in the growing darkness.

"He sent an unfortunate messenger to declare his intentions," I said. "They told me he wants me to become his queen."

They were coming closer, but painfully slow now, like wolves slinking through the undergrowth, tracking prey.

"Of course, I just laughed in the face of his 'generous offer'," I said. "Nothing could force me to take up a position by his side. You're ruled by a corpse, one that hasn't the good sense to stay dead. He's the king of nothing, of no one but ravening beasts!"

My voice echoed through the trees, ensuring every one of them heard my words.

"Well? Are you just going to just stand there slavering like mindless idiots? Or are you going to come and get me?"

I needed this even if the men we'd brought with us didn't. I needed to feel like I could throw my fear of failure back in the teeth of these Reavers and let them choke on it. I turned tail and ran, legs pumping, arms slicing through the air, the flames of the sword fluttering with each swing. And if I'd had any doubts about the Reavers falling into the trap, I needn't have. I heard their collective howl and knew what it was.

Like wolves on the hunt, no longer caring about sneaking up on their prey when they had their quarry right in front of them, they launched themselves forward, right into our trap.

When the bulk of them were within the planned ambush area, my men rose up from the undergrowth, stepping out onto the road on either side, to smash the Reavers between them, and coming around at the back to make sure none escaped. That funnelled all of them towards me. But not before

swords were torn free and plunged into Reaver flesh.

I transitioned from running to whirl around, my feet lifting off the earth with the momentum, but I landed back down lightly and raised my sword just in time to meet the first Reaver's claws. He thought he had me as that clawed hand reached out; I could tell from the gleam of his red eyes, the snarl on his face. But his wolfish face went slack as I sliced at that hand off.

We both looked at it as it turned from wolfish to human, looking so small on the cobblestones. War raged around us, but we couldn't seem to look away. Then there was a high-pitched scream from my opponent.

Blood erupted from the stump, sluggish and black, spurting out draining away his life's blood, even when he slapped his other hand on top of it.

"Morrigan, dread queen," I said, with a smirk, my teeth feeling sharp and jagged. "Gift me strength of arm, so I might reap the souls of the unworthy in your honour." I stepped closer then and raised the fiery Sword of Destiny. "May my sword cut through my enemies like a scythe does the wheat."

And the sword did just that as I lopped off the Reaver's head, then turned to the next, because where there was one Reaver, there were always many.

"Make me your vessel, death dealer, slayer." I felt the truth in the words now for the very first time, because the other times I'd been motivated by a need to protect my country or to provide for it, but I felt none of that now. "Let me litter the battlefield with corpses as offering to your divine beak!"

I cut and I cut and I cut, slicing indiscriminately through Reaver after Reaver, the Granian men looking on in shock as a girl cleaved the massive beasts in two. I'd hear their bodies falling heavily to the ground, but I didn't look as I stepped forward and met my next foe. I began to feel it, that thrum of battle fever rising, rising. The fever was something I tried every day to keep pressed down. But once it was out? It felt right, true. This was my purpose, a dealer of death. I would cut down each and every one of my enemies until...

I paused then, seeing each one of my party fighting, slicing and stabbing, striking over and over again, often in small groups, in the case of the knights. At seeing my troops struggling here and there, I felt the fever abate a little. Flesh was cut open, men fell back with a scream, only for their companions to surge forward to protect them. And I realised that just because I was walking through this without injury, it didn't mean others weren't.

I saw armoured plate crumple and leather armour get sliced through. And then my focus zeroed in on a familiar set of dark brows and flashing blue

eyes in the midst of the mêlée. A set of claws drew back, ready to rake over Dane's face. His sword went up and blocked the blow, but another was coming and I knew I was too far away to get there in time. Regardless, I moved anyway. But just as I did, I felt a whoosh beside me, something moving like a blur to get between me and my mate, not to harm either of us, but to stop those blows.

Bryson.

His eyes glowed with an unearthly golden light as he appeared before my mate, sword raised up, right before the blows fell. Dane hacked into one Reaver while Bryson did the same with the next. But how had he managed to get there that fast? I didn't know or care, coming up behind the beasts and hacking them in two, seconds later, before turning to meet the next.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dane snapped at me, stepping forward to meet the next Reaver. "This isn't what we planned."

"And you getting your head torn off isn't part of the plan either," I shot back between gritted teeth, lopping off arms and stabbing into throats. The blade seemed to like it, drinking their blood, sinking into their bodies like a knife might through butter.

"Battle fever," Bryson ground out.

"What?"

"That's what you do, isn't it? Let your head go mad with battle fever and fight as a pack?"

I wanted to correct his assumptions about Strelans, but now was neither the time nor place. Dane shot me a wild, searching look, right before he dealt with another blow from his opponent. Could I do this? Would I do it? We'd tapped into that when we took the garrison, but there, the outcome had been almost guaranteed. Here, it was different. The garrison inmates could never have reached the sort of fixation on their purpose which the Reavers, powered by a fanatical energy, could achieve. Perhaps the Reavers needed to be matched by an equal and opposite force.

I took a breath in, no longer attacking, simply parrying away any swipes that came my way, so that I might take stock. And when I did it all came in. The sounds of sword against flesh, the growls of the Reavers, their terrible roars and howls, along with the shouts and snarls of the Maidens and those of my men. The humans weren't to be outdone, singing ragged prayers to Hrist of the Bow, praising her name in the same way I had done the Morrigan.

Which seemed to summon her forth.

*Are you ready, little queen?* she asked. *Are you going to stop playing at being a soldier and truly become one?*

*Get out of my head,* I snapped.

*You summoned me. You prayed to me. You promised me a delicious meal and I mean to collect, but my ravens aren't choosy about whose eyes they peck out. Your men's or my boy's beasts. Her darkly maternal tone in reference to Callum made my gorge rise. Each side prays to me in any given battle, thinking I'll intervene at the last minute in their favour. But what's in it for me?* she asked. *What will you give me, little queen, for your brave fellows to prevail?*

I took the chance to look around me, quick little darting glances. Axe had joined the battle and was in the half-wolf form, mowing down Reavers with his axe. Weyland was fighting side by side with Gael, each protecting the other's back. My grandfather was fighting with surprising speed and ferocity for a man his age—but for how long? Higgins and his band were singing raucous battle hymns, wading into the fight with little care. And Selene and the Maidens were moving in their part-shifted bodies, with all the acrobatic grace of a human and a wolf combined. I wasn't willing to let go of a single one of them, not even my grandfather's knights. They'd followed him into a battle which none of them would have joined without his urging, and they shouldn't be punished for that.

*Me,* I replied, a sob catching in my throat. *That's what you want, isn't it? Callum is not your natural vessel, but I am. Take me, if that's what it takes to win this fight. Take me.*

*Done.*

Her reply was swift and true and for a moment I thought nothing would happen. My mind went very still and quiet, as if she had left me behind and gone back on her word.

Then I felt it.

If the sword burned with a blue fire, it was nothing compared to what flared to life in me. My muzzle fell open, and it felt like every single strand of hair stood on end as pain raged through me. Agony pulsed red and hot like the blood in my veins and then this.

I thought I knew what battle fever was, but I had no idea. The state of feeling one with the blade was nothing compared to this. It pulsed inside me, all of the darkness I kept locked down, and then surged out. The Reavers were no threat, less than nothing. The need to obliterate every single one of

them surpassed all other thoughts, and the shouts going up around the battlefield told me everyone felt the same. Knights in armour shoved off their helms as that latent Strelan blood of theirs came to life, introducing them to the other side of their souls. We were wolves and we would hunt these fucking bastards until every single one of them was dead.

Cutting, slicing, stabbing, tearing limbs from sockets and then roaring with the joy of conquest. Reaver faces were slashed open, going from drooling beasts to bloody corpses. Guts spilling on the cobblestones and then being ground under foot. Arms lopped off and legs too, leaving flailing, hopeless Reavers on the ground, flapping like fish, until a sword was stabbed into their spines and they fell motionless against the stones. We fought and we fought until there was nothing left to fight, turning to each other then, instincts honed, blood up, ready to keep on fighting.

Until I grabbed on the reins and hauled everyone back.

“She is the one prophesied to come.” Higgins’ voice was little more than a guttural growl, because he had become two-souled as well. His half-wolf form was big with black fur running across his body. “She is the light in the darkness!” He grabbed my hand and held it up, forcing the flaming sword to point to the sky.

But I didn’t get a chance to see how the humans took this display, because more howls alerted us to the fact we hadn’t fought the entire attack force, just the vanguard.

“No,” Weyland said, stepping forward. “No, no.”

“We didn’t know what we would be facing,” Dane reasoned. “So there was always a degree of uncertainty.”

“We could fall back to the caves,” Gael said. “Try and evacuate the town through them.”

“No.”

I shot them all down with barely a whisper, pulling my hand free of Higgins’ grip. My feet started moving before I could even formulate a plan, the battle fever that raged inside me responding to the evidence of another foe, and I rushed towards it.

Trees whipped past and the breeze was cool on my face, combing soft fingers through the fur that still rippled up and down my arms. I moved, the wolf moved, as one, rushing towards whatever enemy lurked beyond, not away. Running away from Snowmere had been necessary, a large part of me knew that, but I couldn’t help but feel it had been some sort of admission of



defeat. I'd been whisked away from my father's keep half-dead from a beating. I'd been forced to slip out through the cave complex with what was left of Snowmere. I had run and kept on running away. Until now. I saw the first Reaver further down the road and it paused, sniffing the air when it saw me. But just like before, more came, many, many more. More than we'd be able to fight even if we were fresh to the battlefield. As that thought hit me hard, I heard the Morrigan's chuckle.

*A trap?* I asked in the world-weary way common to children who are used to being maltreated. They don't dare expect a lessening of the abuse, instead they merely wonder how often it will occur.

*A challenge,* she replied. *You wish to be heir to my power, little queen. Show me that you are worthy of it.*

By what? Allowing myself to die at the Reavers' hands? That seemed inevitable, but it wasn't going to stop me. A soldier couldn't allow themselves the luxury that was afforded to a civilian—to value their own life over all other things. And a civilian would never have done this.

“Darcy!”

I heard my mates call as I took off at a dead run, but I kept my head facing forward; facing my destiny. If this was my fate, I'd meet it head on. The world would go on without me. Other leaders would rise and take my place, fighting against the dread Reavers. However, I allowed myself one little sob, and it seemed to power me on, at least until I reached an open section of road.

The place where I would make my last stand.

The Reavers howled, the sound so deafening it felt like it shook the whole world. This had to be the sound the wolf of Granian legend made, right before he swallowed everything. It felt like the world grew darker somehow, dimming at the edges, or perhaps that was just the impact on my vision as I stopped right in the middle of the road.

“Come on...” I muttered under my breath. All I needed to do was hold them off for just long enough for the others to get back through the cave, to safety, I thought furiously. “Come on, you bastards. Come and get me!”

“What the hell do you think you're playing at?”

To say I was surprised to see the Crown Prince of Grania standing at my shoulder was an understatement. My astonishment increased as he grabbed my sword hand and the flames changed colour to become an intense green.

“You've got the power of the land. You wield the Sword of Destiny: so

bloody use it to its full advantage.”

Our hands stabbed the sword down and what came next was something I could never have expected.

Power erupted from the point of the sword, exploding out with a boom the whole world could hear, I was sure of it. And as the sound emanated out, the wolf form of every Reaver was stripped away, leaving just my men and the Maidens, my grandfather and his knights.

Bryson’s eyes burned into mine, willing me to see it, before his focus was drawn down the road.

All the Reavers had been transformed from beasts to men. Men who were weak, naked, dazed and confused, who shied away from those around them, or fell to the road in a dead faint. One Reaver seemed to fight what had happened, clawing at his body, trying to emulate the powerful pose of his beast form, but instead he remained a weak little man. But whatever I might have been about to say about that, the words stuck in my throat as the prince made a small sound.

“Gods...”

I felt his grip slip, watched his eyes roll backwards and was forced to pull my own hand free of the sword in an effort to try and break his fall. My arms went around him, holding him as we both slid down to the ground.

“Darcy! Darcy!”

My mates appeared by my side, taking in the whole situation before dropping down beside me.

“What the hell was that?” Dane asked.

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## Chapter 28

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I couldn't answer him, nor respond to my other mates as they clustered closer. All I could do was blink, staring blindly at the prince who now lay draped across my lap.

Well, not completely blindly.

I felt him, obviously. His massive frame was a heavy weight I'd chosen to bear and his armour was pressing hard into my knees. But beyond that. I felt both exquisitely aware and not at all, at the same time. I wondered why had I never noticed the small smattering of freckles across the tops of the prince's cheeks? That was a strange thing in itself, as wealthy southern Granians strove to keep their skin pale as milk, to differentiate themselves from the common man. His skin had a healthy bronzed glow and those freckles were a legacy of that. Then there was that thin scar that bisected one eyebrow. Had he gotten that in a training fight or some other youthful indiscretion? I stared and stared at him, keeping my mind preoccupied with noting all these little details rather than trying to work out what had just happened.

"One minute there were all those Reavers..." Gael said, in a hushed tone. "Then there was..."

"So men do live within those beastly things." My grandfather dropped down on one knee beside us. "I saw that it was true each time one was killed but—"

"He's a conduit."

Selene appeared with a frown on her face, hissing when one of the former Reavers tried to come closer. His action wasn't aggressive, but confused and that's when I remembered what I'd seen that time Rath had tried to use Del to

manipulate me. How my sight had taken flight to show me Callum with a group of men and boys he'd taken from the battle at Aramoor. He'd worked his magic on them, brutalising them until they became Reavers and I'd... I'd somehow stripped his power from them.

No, not me alone. Together, Bryson and I had done it.

"A conduit?" I asked, then looked at her intently. "What's a conduit, Selene?"

"A means to control and direct your power." Her focus shifted to my mates and her eyes softened. "What your mates do for you. It was never just the queen. Her mates were never just good dynastic matches. We Maidens were never just her honour guard. All of us were supposed to work together, becoming the queen's pack, helping support her rule—"

"And he helped unlock a power we weren't aware the sword possessed," Dane finished, quietly. He looked awfully pale, the blood on his face stark in contrast against his human features. "And lucky he did too." He glanced back at the mess of naked men that had only minutes ago been Reavers. "We would never have been able to take down all of them."

"But can they heal from this?" Gael asked, eyeing the men suspiciously. "Is this just a temporary thing?"

I got an answer from the Morrigan, but it was a dark and snickering response. I felt like she shifted within me, like a snake in her nest.

*I gave them two souls and you took one of them, she said. I accept your tribute. Not enough blood for my tastes however...* I turned my head to see ravens descending, picking over the bodies of the Reavers we'd slain and going to work to consume the tasty bits.

"I don't think so," I replied, then stared at my grandfather. "We don't call ourselves wargen, but two-souled. I freed the second soul of those of your men that possessed it."

"Yes." He shot me a tired smile. "That is going to make for some awkward conversations when we return to the estate. The illusion that Granians and Strelans are two entirely separate peoples, no, two separate *species*—is pushed hard at the highest levels. But the reality is that there were few Granian women in the early days of colonisation." His smile turned into a grimace. "Willingly or not, a lot of modern day Granians are the result of those unions. It will disturb many to find out just what that might mean."

"I can't worry about that now," I said, frowning as I stared at the prince. He had good colour in his face and his chest rose and fell with slow gentle

breaths. “Gael, can we heal him?”

“The prince will recover on his own,” he replied stiffly.

“Gael.” I turned my head to stare up at him.

He didn’t want this, I could see from the line forming between his brows and growing deeper with each second as I mutely pleaded with him. Perhaps Axe could carry the prince back, but if what we’d done had caused Bryson injury, I needed to rectify it.

“Fine. Undo his breastplate.”

The rest of my mates clustered closer, creating a strangely intimate space. It was only the caws of the ravens that reminded me of where we were. But it still felt too intimate as the prince was stripped of his defences. The breastplate was pulled off and the thick padded shirt underneath was unfastened enough so that when Gael grabbed my hand, we could slide our two hands under, placing them together on his bare chest.

“What do we do?” I asked, in a small voice.

“Same thing we always have,” Gael replied, giving my fingers a squeeze. “Will what’s wrong with him to heal. It’ll hurt and then—” He let out a sharp gasp and I could tell that he was feeling what I was—the power felt like it was being pulled from me, rather than me pushing it into Bryson. The sensation was so strong it took my breath away and Gael let out a wheezing gasp. Then the prince’s eyelids fluttered and blinked open.

For some moments, his attention was totally on me. As I looked down at him, I realised that Bryson’s eyes didn’t glow with quite the same unearthly gold light anymore. They were more a light brown or perhaps amber, a dull haze still hanging over them, even as he stared. He seemed to spend far too much time focussing on me, eyes flicking as he took in all the sharp angles of my face, just as I had done to his.

“Did it work?” His voice was croaky, and he started to cough. A waterskin was produced from somewhere and he took a grateful drink before peering between the legs of those standing around us to the road beyond. “It did, didn’t it?”

“What worked?” Dane was all business again, narrowing his eyes. “You obviously had some idea about what might happen. Ideas that should’ve been shared with us.”

“As you would share Darcy?” He shot my mate a dark look. “You snarl and posture the moment I get within ten feet of her.” Bryson rolled off me then, sitting up but not moving far away. I could see by the way his head

hung that he was still exhausted. “I’ve read some books, found some ancient scrolls in the treasury.”

“Secrets that belong to our people,” Weyland snapped, “not yours.”

“But Eleanor carried them across the border with her,” Bryson replied. “Nordred obviously anticipated a future where that knowledge would be needed by Eleanor’s descendants.”

“So why didn’t he tell Darcy about any of this?” Axe asked. “He was at her side training her for basically her whole life.”

“Because I might not have been the one,” I replied, and at my words, everyone fell silent. I could hear the wind in the trees beneath the sounds of ravens, and my own sigh joined it. “He could’ve been spilling all the secrets that belonged to the queen of Strelae to a girl who would go off to marry one of the local lords and spend her life pushing out babies.” I saw my mother then, wondering how the proud young woman I saw had survived my father’s treatment of her.

“Or potentially giving the secrets to Granians to use against us,” Gael said, shooting Bryson a dark look. “You lied to get us to Aramathia. You lied about who you were. And now the future king of the country that exists on land it stole from mine has just learned how to wield the Sword of Destiny?”

“The first Granian king used to wear it into every negotiation he made with the new Strelan one,” Dane said. “He used to flaunt it in the faces of my forebears.”

“I can’t wield it.” Bryson held out a hand, as though expecting me to just hand my sword over. I looked at him, then shrugged and picked it up and placed the hilt in his grip. When he tightened his fingers, nothing happened. The sword seemed a little shinier than normal perhaps, but no flames of any colour flickered across the blade. It was just a length of finely honed steel, like any other sword. “I’m just like you. I can only augment Darcy’s strength with mine.”

“You’re nothing like us.” Weyland pulled me up and onto my feet, then tried to push me behind him, frowning when I resisted. He turned to me with a look of urgency. “He’s nothing, Darcy. He let his father sell you off to us for iron ore. He was nowhere to be found when your father was beating you. Darcy...”

His voice trailed away as I put my hand to his cheek, stroking that severe plane, and his eyes grew heavily hooded as I touched him, reminding me that I needed to do so much more often. When I traced the shape of his lip,

rubbing off flakes of blood, he smiled, but his eyes still held a haunted look.

“He doesn’t know what it’s like to watch you walk through life, seeing you go from strength to strength, cheering you on at every step, even as your heart feels like it’s breaking, because you know what danger is coming. He doesn’t know *you*, Darcy. He just has some weird fucking idea in his head about what you are, but he doesn’t know.” He turned his head and pressed a kiss into my palm. “That you are mine, just like I am yours, forever. Until the stars fade and the sun falls into the sea and even then in the dark ruins of the world, I will continue to love you.”

I pressed my lips to his, realising as I did so that the gesture felt awkward and foreign; and that was not something I could accept. He was mine, that was correct. Each of my mates tugged at my soul, claiming a piece of me so thoroughly I could barely imagine letting anyone else in, but when I pulled apart from Weyland finally, I saw we had an audience.

Selene chuckled and then sent the other Maidens on their way, along with those soldiers standing nearby who’d come to help the wounded. My mates all met my gaze with the same burning intensity. My grandfather got to his feet and clapped his hand to my shoulder. But Bryson’s eyes were glowing bright, bright gold again, his skin suddenly going pale, as he watched everything with a kind of desperate longing I understood all too well. But he didn’t acknowledge it. He simply hauled himself to his feet and brushed himself off, walking away without a word.

“We need to quiz this prince about what happened,” Dane said.

“Fuck, brother,” Axe groaned, wrapping an arm around my waist. “Can’t we just go back to that fancy estate, have a long hot bath and then sit and drink with the men that fought beside us? Can’t we just live in the moment for once?”

“For now,” Dane conceded with a nod. “But tomorrow...”

Weyland replied by punching his brother’s shoulder as they passed. “Haven’t we got enough to deal with today?”

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## Chapter 29

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Evidently we did. We returned to the manor and, on Axe's urging, we went down to the guard house and Gael helped heal the wounded. While we waited, we got through quite a few tankards of ale, celebrating the victory. I'd seen this kind of thing before in my father's men. The relief of having made it through a fight crashing down upon you, loosening you up and you could either descend into a strange kind of apathy, completely wrung out, or you could recharge with wine, women and song. Unfortunately for the men, I was the only woman. But I noticed that during it all, the prince was a largely silent presence.

"To His Highness!" one of my grandfather's knights said, springing to his feet and holding up his tankard.

"To His Highness!" replied almost everyone else.

Everyone but me and my mates. I caught a few sidelong looks being thrown our way and realised we were being terribly rude. Granian customs dictated that once a toast was made, everyone echoed it and raised their cup, lest they slight the person being toasted. Bryson's lips twitched when he saw me join in, one elegant eyebrow rising. But it seemed to me that those golden eyes weren't starting to gleam because the men were toasting his health. Rather, they seemed to be taking me in with increasing interest, right up until Weyland reached for my hand.

"Come with me before this gets too out of control."

He escorted me from the guard house and back towards our suite. When we got back to the manor house, we paused first in the doorway of the children's bedroom, drinking in the peaceful sounds of their breathing—in



some ways that was more refreshing than the beer. Both of us were reluctant to move away until the quiet arrival of the others drew us out of our reverie, and we shot each other sheepish smiles as we followed them across the sitting area to our own room.

Drinking, carousing, singing dirty ditties were all an attempt to hold tight onto life, to reject death. And I felt that same strong urge to celebrate the fact that I was alive—that we all were alive—rise in me as I led Weyland into the room. The door was closed with a decisive click and then I was kissing him with a desperation born of that same impulse.

To feel alive.

“I’m filthy,” I said between kisses, as Weyland trailed his lips along my jaw, along my neck, before coming back to my mouth over and over. He only stopped kissing me to pull my shirt up over my head. “I need a bath.”

“And I need you,” he said, his voice hoarse as he looked deep into my eyes, cupping my cheek and stroking his thumb along the side of my face.

That bald admission was said with a curious mix of boldness and trepidation. He didn’t want to hurt me—something I knew almost instinctively—but I could tell there was more driving him. He didn’t want to miss out on this for a moment longer, not if I was ready to reconnect.

Was I?

I still felt fragile, as though with a good tap I’d shatter into a million pieces, but as I looked around at each of them, my too-busy mind finally understood what my gut already knew. They’d pick me up and put me back together if that was the case, each and every time.

“I know how you feel,” I replied, my eyes falling to the floor. It felt as though I couldn’t look at all the golden perfection of him, know he was mine and also confess the depths of my heart. “It hurts all the damn time.”

“Darcy—” Gael growled, rushing forward, ready to take away my physical pain, but I held up one hand to ward him off, while I lifted my other hand up and placed it over my heart.

“But now it hurts more to hold you at arm’s length.”

For a moment they all simply stood, taking my words in, digesting them, then Dane stepped forward.

“We don’t have to go very far tonight,” he said, notes of fear and hope warring in his voice. “Perhaps just with Weyland—”

“No.”

“Then with just your mates.”

I lifted my eyes up to his, frowning as I tried to make sense of his words. And it suddenly struck me. He didn't count himself one of them. I hadn't realised that. It made sense, in one way: I hadn't bitten him yet, but... He was mine, I knew that as surely as I knew my own name. Dane was completely and utterly mine.

"You are my mate," I forced out, through a throat tight with emotion, and he moved a step closer.

"Darcy—"

"You are mine, aren't you?" I started out strong, but his expression kept changing, so fast I couldn't get a read on him, and that made me falter. I drew my arms in and wrapped them around myself, suddenly feeling uncertain. "Dane—?"

He answered me with actions, not words, surging forward with a fierce growl to stand as close as he could and cradle my head in his hands.

"You are everything to me," he ground out, and my heart leapt. But before I could answer, his mouth slammed down on mine.

This was Dane at his most raw and unrestrained—not the controlled man nor the controlling one. The wolf seemed to have broken down those barriers just leaving a man who simply took my mouth. He kissed it open, not allowing for anything to stop him from plunging his tongue inside and claiming as much of me as he could.

But he needn't have worried, because I wanted him just as much as he wanted me. No, more. He was so infuriating and domineering and smart—and always thinking. To see him like this—just feeling—freed something inside my chest. It was as though there had been chains around my heart that I hadn't even known were there. But they had broken in response to Dane's passion.

In response to everything he did. His hands raking through my hair. His lips mumbling sweet words about how beautiful and brave and clever I was, right before going back to kissing me. And then he pulled away, sucking in breaths as his eyes burned bright blue.

"Get on the bed," he ordered, the control back again. But I shook my head.

"No. *You* get on the bed."

"Darcy—"

"The words 'I will do anything and everything you wish, my love' better be the next ones out of your mouth," I warned. "Or you can do exactly as you

suggested before. Scuttle back to the guard room on your own, and listen to Higgins singing a very off-key rendition of the Maid of Hillcrest, while we —”

“Do everything our queen commands.” Weyland said, as he finished undressing and flopped down naked on one side of the bed with a mocking smile. “You don’t see me arguing with her.” He patted the bed beside him. “Come here, lass. I’ll give you everything my brother is too stupid to surrender.”

“No.”

That growl, it seemed to come from the depths of Dane’s soul and he pulled one hand from my hair to drop his arm down and wrap it around me, tugging me closer. The kiss he placed on the crown of my hair was much softer, gentler. “No, lass... unless that’s what you want.”

“I want you.”

That admission broke me in ways I hadn’t really anticipated. I’d thought I was beyond this, having got to know them, fought beside them, then claimed them. I had assumed all of my defences had been lowered because of what we’d shared. But then I realised that I’d been carrying a different sort of fear. After Snowmere, I’d been hurting so deeply and completely it was hard to even take a breath, the pain like a nagging stitch in my side, making every breath agony. Because while they had introduced me to the joys of sex—turning the church’s lectures about it being for procreation and men’s pleasure only on its head—with it came something else. The possibility of conception. If we touched each other, things might escalate. I bit my lip as I remembered Weyland’s attempts to push his seed back into me.

*“You might be with child,”* Weyland had said. *“You could be carrying Gael’s child already, but if you’re not...”*

I stood there for a moment, feeling everything—joy and loss, need and desire—until they all became tangled into a messy ball rattling around my head. The sense of confusion in my mind only stilled when I took a deep breath in, looking up at Dane and seeing that exactly what I wanted... was him. As I slowly exhaled, confident now that I’d made my decision, I raised an eyebrow.

“I want you on that bed,” I said, pointing an imperious finger. “Now.”

My other mates might’ve scrambled to do as I asked, but Dane just moved slowly, lazily, to do my bidding, his eyes flashing with all the fire of a predator restraining itself from its true nature. His brothers smirked as they

cast amused glances at each other, then looked back to see what he was going to do. I wasn't totally sure if he was going to obey me, until he did. He sat on the edge of the bed, removing his boots, then his shirt. Then he threw himself back and sprawled out on the centre of the bed to work his trews open. I watched dry-mouthed as he pushed them down his legs and tossed them aside, perfectly naked for me.

Rather, perfect for me.

I blinked, then swallowed. and Stripping off the rest of my clothes with some haste, I crawled across the bed to him. For a moment, I sat back on my heels to take him in.

Focused on him, my mind wasn't flooded with images of blood, or of Reavers, or of the Morrigan. I didn't see what I'd lost, because—finally—in this moment, I could focus on what I'd gained. I lifted a hand toward him then stopped. My fingers flexed in the air, suddenly shy. Dane sucked in a breath, ready to start giving orders, but I smiled and shook my head, and moved my way up his body. It was only then that I had his full attention. His breaths were coming in slow and shallow, no doubt creating a burn in his chest, right before I leaned forward.

Staring into his eyes, just grazing his lips with mine, I teased him, and the bond between us, as much as I teased myself. I heard a growl of hunger start in his throat, but when he lunged for me, I pulled my head backwards with a little smirk on my lips.

"Someone needs to learn to do as he's told," Weyland said, with a smile, leaning on one elbow beside us. "Drive him mad, lass. Make him need you so much he can't string a thought together. Make that fucking brain of his stop."

"Already has," Dane grumbled.

"Not quite."

I leaned in again, hovering over him, waiting for more comments, for more thoughts to whir inside his head. But this time, the entirety of Dane's formidable attention was wholly focused on me. When I moved, his eyes followed and when I reached out to touch him, he leaned into the caress. We were perfectly attuned. I smiled then as I stroked my hand down the perfect slope of his cheek, then traced the gentle swell of his lips.

"You want to tell us all what to do, moving us around until you're happy that all possible risks are mitigated, but that's not what's going to happen now." I lifted his chin slightly so our eyes were level. "I need *you* here: the man, not the planner, nor the plotter. For at least one night, I don't want to

have to be the queen for you and I need you to not be the prince.”

I dropped lower as the need to touch him, kiss him, burned brighter.

“I need you, Dane.”

“You have me,” he replied. “You’ve always had me. Since the moment we saw you on the moors, I knew. You’re the other half of my heart, lass. You just have to reach out and take me.”

I smiled as I did just that, trailing my fingers down his neck and watching him shiver, then learning the form of him. His shoulders, his clavicle, the dip of his breastbone, the hard planes of his chest and, all through my inspection of him, I heard him take one shuddering breath then another.

“Lass...” he rasped out as my finger traced the small flat medallion of his nipple. “Darcy. I don’t need this. I feel like I’m only just hanging onto my control as it is. I—”

“But I do.” My admission took me a little by surprise. “When I watch you walk through the castle or astride a horse, you seem as distant as the sun. And just as untouchable.”

“Darcy—”

“No, listen.” I waited the length of a heartbeat or two, to make sure he was going to do as I asked, then forged on. “You were born to rule, raised to be a king and it’s evident in everything you do. You’re always thinking, planning, one step ahead of everyone else, so it seems, but...” I smoothed a hand across his chest, then twisted my wrist to graze his skin with my knuckles. “I can’t take a king as a mate, nor a prince, nor an advisor. Only you, Dane, the man behind those masks. I need you—”

“Grab those cords that hold back the curtains,” he said, ordering his brothers to move.

“Dane—”

“Tie me to the bed head,” he said, putting his wrists together and then placing them up against the plush velvet upholstery with an air of ceremony. “You and I both know I can break free of those cords.” The thick golden ropes of twisted silk thread landed on the bed beside me. “But... it’ll help.”

“Help what?” I asked, picking one up and frowning as I inspected it. Dane had always hinted at this other stuff, but we’d never gone far enough down that track for him to explain it. “Help you do what?”

“Surrender.” He tried to smile but failed, only achieving a wry twist of his lips instead. “I’m terrible at it, I know, and I can see why you need it.” He snorted then. “I feel that need, and this is how I can give it to you. My brain

is always working because I can't make it stop. But you can." He nodded to the rope in my hand. "You can make me."

An exchange of power, that's what he was proposing and I felt like I understood why. I had to force him to do the thing he never could.

And secretly wanted.

I wrapped the rope around one wrist, then paused for a moment, caught up in the way his muscles flexed and his skin contrasted so beautifully with the gold of the rope. I shook my head and continued, pushing the end through the fretwork on the border of the bedhead and tying him to it. When I did the same with his other wrist, he let out a shuddering breath and then his breathing seemed to slow as he fell into the sensation of being at my mercy.

We both knew it was symbolic, that he could get out of the ties if he needed, but that seemed to be enough. A strange haze came over Dane's eyes, turning them from keen and all-seeing to almost blind.

"Look at me," I ordered. His eyes widened and flared and immediately he was back with me again.

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## Chapter 30

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The need to strive for excellence had been instilled in Dane from an early age, so it made sense he would be perfect now. He waited with a strange kind of quietness that only broke when I touched him. Just a little sigh as my hand collared his throat and I felt his pulse jump under the skin, then another as I slid my hand down, growing bolder.

Even before I had decided to take him as my mate, Weyland had been full of easy smiles and rough embraces. Axe had washed me clean after my training sessions at the temple and remained a silent, hulking presence by my side. Even prickly Gael, so quick to see perceived slights, was less standoffish than Dane. So, having access to his body, to touch him as I wished, gave me a strange sense of reverence. But as my hands slid down his ribs, tracing the way they narrowed down to his hips, a different state of mind took me over. My eyes were drawn to how his cock twitched. How hard it was, and how the head was dark red, flushed with blood, made me think that it must be aching. I stroked my fingers across his abdomen and the muscles tightened and jumped, as his breathing became faster and more erratic, when I heard the sound.

For once, all my usually articulate mate could manage was a thin noise, through clenched teeth. It wasn't even a groan, and was barely louder than a whisper. A sound of need. My eyes flicked up, meeting his.

"You need me," I said and he sucked in a breath, then seemed to remember what was said, nodding sharply. "You've been needing me for some time." The knot at the base was swollen and an angry purplish red. I got my answer as I covered it with my hand and squeezed, bringing my other

hand to wrap around his shaft.

“Gods...” That’s all it took for him to break his word, the prayer escaping him in a gasp, but rather than intellectualise his experience in thought or words, all he could do was feel it.

The fight to stay in control—not to gush all over my hand as the little spurt of his seed seemed to warn was imminent—to follow the swivel of my hand up and down his shaft with every fibre of his being. The sound of the ropes creaking, the bed head groaning, mixed with the noises he was making that were intensifying in volume and intensity, as all of his considerable muscles locked down tight. He thrust into my hands instinctively, completely ruled by sensation not intellect and it was only then that I felt like I finally saw the real man.

Dane, desperate. Dane, needy. Dane’s teeth sinking into his full bottom lip until I feared it would bleed, his fangs dimpling the surface. But, most of all, Dane holding fast in this heady swirl of pleasure.

“Lass, you might need to go easy on the poor bastard,” Weyland said, his eyes flicking from me to his brother. “He’s fit to burst.”

“I remember what it’s like, to feel the first touch of your mate. It was lightning striking and the first rays of the morning,” Gael told me, holding my gaze until Axe moved forward.

“He’s stronger than me.” Axe nodded to his brother. “If you’d pushed me that far, I’d have had you on your hands and knees, taking my cock like a good girl in seconds.”

“Really?” I smiled at that, and the expression felt strange for the situation yet perfect all at the same time. “Perhaps you should anyway.”

“Really?” Axe echoed what I’d said, but with entirely different intent, and his expression mirrored his reaction. First of all wonder, then curiosity, followed by a dark look that made his blue eyes glow. “But lass, you should —”

“I should what?” I said, cocking an eyebrow. “Be a good girl?” I arched my back slowly, pushing my breasts out as I pulled back from Dane a little, letting his cock go and sliding down his body to run my tongue along his length. “I am your queen and I—”

“Will have whatever you want.” Axe moved behind me with flattering speed and his hand rubbed up and down my spine like one would stroke a cat. “Though don’t blame me if you can’t sit on a horse tomorrow.”

“I don’t much care about sitting on a horse at the moment,” I replied.



“Fuck...” His voice was rough and hoarse, as much his beast as the man, but my gasps became high and breathy as I felt his fingers slide between my legs.

It didn't hurt. At least, not in a bad way. Gael had healed me well, though he lay down on the bed beside Dane then slid down to make eye contact with me.

“If there's any pain, you say something,” he growled. “They can wait, no matter what they say.”

“But you'll make it all better, won't you?” I stared at Gael, with heavily lidded eyes.

“Always, lass. Always.”

“I meant it when I said it hurts more not to... uhh... be with you,” I said, my ability to speak becoming compromised and then my voice tapering away with a hiss as Axe started to touch me more intimately. I felt his thumb brush against my pearl as he pushed his fingers inside me. “I was holding onto the pain and...”

I wasn't ready for this, the deep, visceral pleasure that came from being with each one of them, a bliss that seemed to cut deep with each wave. Dane knew what I meant, arching his hips upwards to try and get more contact, the cords biting into his wrists as he fought their grip. I took pity on him, sobbing my pleasure all over the swollen head of his cock, then sucking it in.

I was full of them, Axe and Dane, and that went beyond the physical. One my protector, the other my advisor, both of them my lovers. And I felt that thing that I'd been fighting against, the sweet, sweet bubbling sensation of loving and being loved in return. Because it was like blood rushing to my extremities after being numb for so long. Now it was back, my whole body throbbed with life.

And in some ways that hurt.

As if the pleasure we were taking in each other was an attempt to shove the pain of loss to one side, unresolved. But that would never be. Whatever children I had, now or in the future, I would never forget any of them. Jan, Del, and my unborn one, they lived in my heart forever. And with that realisation—that sharing my love with my mates would never mean denying the love I had for my children—I was freed from focusing on that pain. Which let me come back to focusing fully on what was happening in our bedroom.

“Darcy, lass, I'm going to burst!” Dane gasped out so I pulled free,

listening to his pained moans as I let his cock snap back against his stomach. “Mercy, lass, please, for whatever I’ve done to anger you. Please, Darcy, please.”

“Seems like we are all fucking needy tonight,” Axe said, slapping one hand down on my hip and using the other to move the big, blunt head of his cock against my seam. It slipped in the slick there, something he gave a grunt of appreciation for, rubbing it up and down and making his shaft wet. “You give my stupid brother what he needs and I’ll see to you, lass.” As he rubbed against me, he found my opening and pushed the head of his cock in slightly, and my eyes widened as I immediately felt the stretch. “Fairly sure I should be trying this after someone else has softened you up, but you’re the queen.”

That I was. Queen of this little fiefdom, and my court of four was nothing if not attentive. Each one focused on me and my pleasure as Axe began to work himself into me. Then, as I was gasping at feeling so very full, I went back to sucking Dane, closing my eyes as I lost myself in the taste of him.

He tore free of his bindings, that had to be what happened, because gentle, shaking hands went to my head, caressing my hair restlessly as my head began to bob and I moaned.

“Gods, lass...”

They both groaned that out, one after the other, as I fought to take Axe, as I sought to push Dane over the edge.

“You feel so bloody good,” Dane growled. “Like heaven and hot wet silk, squeezing the seed out of me. I’ll never forget how this feels, never.”

His pleasure only served to enhance mine, and I increased my pace, my body shuttling back and forth between them.

“That’s it, lass,” Axe urged, his fingers digging into my hips. “Take me. Take everything I’ve got to give.”

That felt daunting, and not only because of his size. Because this was more than just physical pleasure. This was a connection snapping tight between us, locking us together. And it seemed as though that was something Gael feared.

“Don’t knot her,” he growled at Axe.

“By all the fucking gods—”

“I mean it, you filthy son of a whore. Not yet.” I pulled my lips off Dane and raised myself up to lean on my elbow, leaning forward so I could look at his brother, my hand taking over what my mouth had been doing. Gael tipped my head his way, kissing me. “You’ve done so well, lass. You’re so fucking

perfect, but I don't want you hurting, not tonight. Not when..." He kissed me again fervently, swallowing my moans of pleasure, just as they began to spike. My eyes rolled back in my head at the intensity of it all, then I pulled hard on the reins of control, breaking away from Gael to gaze down at Dane.

"Come with me," I commanded. His eyes held mine as his claws raked the sheets. "Come when I do and I'll mark you as mine."

I was always going to, anyway, but Dane had grown up so enmeshed with power games, I'm not sure he even knew how to exist without them. My words seemed to trigger something inside him, and his whole body went rigid. He rode my hand as I rode Axe's cock, those long, hard movements drawing out the point of bliss.

Blue flame had been an expression first of Gael's power, then mine, and now it seemed as if it was ignited by this ecstatic connection between Dane, Axe and me. The fire flickered all over the three of us, turning each one of us incandescent. But the flames didn't harm us. They couldn't, because they were an innate part of us that was now freed. And so I burned, in bliss as much as in actuality, with the remaining specks of the dried blood of our enemies sizzling before falling as ash from our skins.

I let out a wolf-like howl as my peak smashed into me and Dane erupted all over both of us, sending the heat of his seed everywhere. Axe bucked up hard, making me all too aware of how deep he was inside me, before his body stiffened and he gripped my hips hard while he pumped into me with scalding hot bursts. If the priests of my father's keep could see me now, they'd describe this as some pagan rite. And maybe it was. One that went beyond our connection with each other to link with the very earth itself. My awareness of what was happening spiralled up, up, up and out of my body, hovering by the ceiling to watch the three of us come apart as my other mates watched, transfixed, and then it was as if I came slamming back down.

Not onto the bed, but down the stairs, through the kitchen and into the cellar and on to the cave beyond. The crystal cave came to life, each shard of quartz becoming a blazing blue, one that got brighter and brighter before zigzagging through the earth and taking me with it. Beyond Middlebury to some forgotten cave, then when that was alight, to another and another. Deep within the earth, caves blazed to life across Grania and Strelae, all the way to Snowmere.

IT MADE SENSE, in a way, to be brought back here, to the great chapel built under Snowmere. The statue of Pepin lit up first, the idealistic shine of youth in her eyes, then the mute mother took on a golden glow, but the light faltered when it reached the final chapel, that of the Morrigan. The darkness within it was absolute, swallowing the beam of bright light that speared into it, the sound of birds flapping their wings growing louder and louder. The single note of pleasure seemed to go on and on, beating back the dark until I saw what stood within the chapel.

A skeleton of a woman, standing on a pedestal. Dark, night-blooming flowers drowsed from where they had wound their way through the bony rib cage. I blinked at the sight of it, but didn't stay there for long. My view abruptly shifted to see Callum and his body sprawled across the king's bed, a shivering girl curled up as far from him as possible. His eyes flicked open, as if sensing my presence, blazing bright blue. My lips peeled back from my fangs and I roared my disgust, right before my jaws snapped down and I was back in my mother's suite, my teeth sunk deep into Dane's neck.

I'd claimed each of my mates differently: in desperate love, in hot sweetness and in bittersweet melancholy. And I claimed Dane in righteous anger, snatching him from the teeth of the Morrigan and from Callum himself. My mate's arms went around me, holding me right where I was, prolonging the pain of the connection until I pulled my teeth from his flesh and looked down at him.

"Mine," I snarled.

"Always was." That wild smirk was back. "Was just waiting for you to realise that."

I shook my head, unable to stop myself from grinning back, even as Axe collected me up and held me close, but when he laid me down on the bed between all of them, it wasn't them or the Morrigan or even Callum who I saw. As my eyelids fluttered closed, I saw a long golden figure sprawled out on a bed just down the hall, his muscular body seeming out of place amongst all the floral bedding and striped wallpaper. Moreso because Bryson's hand was moving preternaturally fast, edging himself closer and closer, his eyes gleaming bright gold and staring into mine, right as he erupted all over his hand.

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## Chapter 31

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“So, yesterday’s mission was a successful one,” my grandfather said the next morning after we’d all sat down to breakfast. “But we need to think to the future. Reavers are real.” He blinked, as if still coming to terms with that. “And pose a threat to both of our countries. Bayard is so close to the border.”

I stifled a smile at that blatant self-interest. It was unfortunate that he viewed it that way, but it was a strong impulse I could manipulate in Granians to get them on our side. I nodded as Jan scrambled onto my lap and then started pointing to what she wanted to eat.

“You stopped the attack?” Del looked us all over with eyes that seemed far too old for his age. “You beat them and no one was hurt?”

“Not badly,” Gael told him, who was sitting at his side. “And I healed those that were.”

“I stayed up,” Del replied, a slightly accusing edge to his voice that had him flushing as he realised it. “I wanted to wait with the other men...”

But he’d been deemed a boy and sent to bed.

“That is our fault,” I told him. “We went to the guard house, as people often do after a fight, and we should’ve come straight to you and reassured you that we had won the day.” I looked directly into his eyes. “For this, we are sorry.”

He nodded sharply, then turned to the spread before us, but shot me a sidelong look when I reached across and squeezed his hand.

“You had quite the night it appears,” Bryson said, but his focus wasn’t on us. It was on Dane. His eyes seemed to trace the shape of the bite I’d left on my mate’s neck. “But—”

“My apologies, Your Highness, Your Grace, milady...” The butler broke into the room, looking somewhat flustered. Striding in behind him was a man dressed in fine livery. His uniform was the same as Rake’s, but with gold piping to declare his status. “A messenger has arrived from the capital,” the butler continued.

“Highness.” The messenger marched up to Bryson and then bowed low, holding a scroll out to him. The prince took it with a frown, then sent the man down to the kitchen for refreshments as he started to read the message.

“My father’s condition worsens,” Bryson reported. “If I’m to be considered in the succession, I have to present myself to the court before he dies.” The paper was screwed up in a ball and then thrown at the wall. “Gods be damned!”

My children went stiff and still as Bryson got to his feet, starting to pace.

“Your Grace, I’ll need your fastest horses.”

“You’ll have them,” my grandfather replied.

“And even then...” I saw Bryson twist his lips, but it was a poor attempt at a smile. He shook his head. “I’ll be too late. I thought I had time. I should’ve... We should’ve...”

“What does it matter?” Dane asked. “You are the eldest son.”

“But my father must endorse me before he dies,” Bryson replied, grimly. “I had hoped to have this business sorted in time to arrive back in Aramathia, but...” His sigh came out in a long shudder. “My brothers and their supporters will be circling. This is their chance to press their advantage.”

“The vultures are gathering around, waiting for your father to die,” my grandfather said.

“I must go at once,” Bryson declared.

“But you won’t get there in time.” Dane’s tone was pitiless as was his gaze. “Will you, Your Highness?” The acerbic way he used the prince’s title made clear that it might be a temporary one.

“You should hope that I do,” Bryson snapped back. “Reavers are real.” I saw it in his eyes, the struggle to accept what had become our reality. “But my brothers will do little about them until they have to. Let the beasts clear out the north—that will be their way of dealing with things. If Reavers turn Strelae, even northern Grania, into a wasteland, well...” My hands tightened around Jan’s middle. “That will give them the luxury of eradicating the dreaded warg and removing recalcitrant northern lords, allowing them to install new ones that are loyal only to them.”

I sat there for a second, wanting to clap my hands over the children's ears and prevent them from hearing a thing, but that urge came too late. Both of them watched what went on with solemn focus.

"If getting the princeling to the capital fast is so important..." Selene spoke up from the other end of the breakfast table. "Well, it's lucky we have a means to cross the country at a rapid rate."

"The caves..."

I could imagine it, each one of them lighting up, over and over, all across the country. And, if I let my eyes lose focus, I could see them, feel them again. Power, immense power, ready to be tapped, reservoirs of it dotted across the countryside. One was under the spring I had often ridden out to from my father's keep, no doubt imbuing the waters with some kind of magical power. Another was the one in the cellar below this building. But in Aramathia? Surely, there they would have rooted out each one, dug the crystals out and tossed them aside, or worse, carved them into trinkets and jewellery for the rich.

"I can feel them," I told Selene, "but abstractly. I don't know where they are precisely or if there's one underneath the capital."

"Because you've never been there," she said. "But Higgins has. I had quite the chat with him last night. That cult of his, it has a long reach. He says there's a major cabal within the city."

And as her focus shifted to Bryson, ours went with it.

"There is a crystal chapel beneath the castle," Bryson admitted. His eyes shone brighter for just a moment. "A large one. Aramathia was chosen not only for its proximity to the bay."

"It was of great strategic value to my people," Dane said, skewering the prince with his gaze. "And more than that."

"More than that," Bryson agreed. "The chapel under Snowmere is a place of worship for all three forms of the goddess, yes?" I nodded slowly. "Well, it appears there were other major sites around the country that were for just one aspect. And this one..." He shook his head. "It was originally dedicated to the Morrigan."

*Everything always comes back to you,* I said inside my head, to be met by the sound of her laughter.

*All of you fight me your entire lives, she replied. But in the end, I always win. You'll come to me, little queen, if you wish to sit your arse upon a throne.*

“The wolf cult repurposed it,” Bryson continued. “And I know exactly where it is.”

He pulled his shirt up to show us a black sun and a crescent tattooed on his ribs, marking him as a member of their order.

“Can we open a way to the capital from the caves below?” Dane asked me. “And do we want to do that? What the two of you did yesterday, that needs exploring further.”

“I need an army,” I said, still staring at Bryson, not at my newest mate. “If we can get you back to the capital in time to stop your brothers jostling for the throne, can you swear you’ll send the Granian army to take Callum down?”

“I’ve no desire to see a single Reaver set foot on Granian soil,” he said and I saw in his countenance what Bryson would look like as king. He shoved his shirt down and stood tall, all trace of Rake the messenger gone. Before us was a man with the kind of regal bearing I would never have, because he had been raised to rule, not had it thrust upon him. That imperious gaze held mine. “Get me to Aramathia and I’ll do everything in my power to bring this Callum and his feral pets down.”

“You sure you want to go trusting a Granian prince?” Axe growled, glowering at Bryson. “You might be delivering the next boot on our neck back to his seat of power.”

“Agreements can be drawn up,” my grandfather said. “And I will swear to anyone that needs to hear it that this deal was offered.” He turned to me. “We just need to know if it is accepted.”

I’d had one victory followed by one night of passion, of reconnection, but the business of saving our people was back there waiting for me, like the breakfast rolls on the table. Was this a mistake? Could Bryson be trusted? I realised that those questions were ones we couldn’t afford to ponder. Our numbers had been decimated and we had no other allies to turn to.

I got to my feet, putting Jan down on my chair, and then walked over to the prince, every eye upon mine. I offered him my hand then, the customary way of sealing a deal in Grania. But Bryson? His eyes twinkled with a devilish light, the corners of his mouth quirking, before he took my hand and turned it so that my knuckles were presented for him to kiss. My mates started to growl, but his lips were there and gone again, pressed against my skin, and I felt everything. How soft they were. The prickle of his stubble, not yet shaved. The heat of his hand in mine, something that seemed to linger



long after he had let me go, making me rub my palm against my treads.

“Then we must go now,” he said. “If my father dies before an heir is declared, then the eldest son present becomes king, but if he endorses one of my brothers...”

“I’ll get that lazybones, Higgins, out of bed,” Selene said with a sharp nod. “We’ll meet you down in the cave.”

AND SO WE all came to be standing right back where we’d been yesterday, though with quite different intent. My mates and I were swathed in hooded cloaks, as were the Maidens and the children, to try and hide what we were. I felt a prickle at the back of my skull, as if a headache was brewing, but rather than pain, it was a sense of having already seen us like this before. In that vision of us walking into court, with the man I now knew to be my grandfather standing before us.

I recalled how in the vision my voice had rung out imperiously as I had ordered everyone to kneel, and how they had all obeyed. I tried to channel that confidence again as I pricked my palm with my knife and pressed it against the crystals.

“Ready, my queen?” Bryson said, as he took position beside me.

My mates all rumbled their discontent as he used my knife to nick his skin as well. I felt the hot pulse of Bryson’s blood as he covered the back of my hand with his. For a moment, I stood there, staring into those odd golden eyes and wondered at what lay behind them. I had only one way to find out.

“Show me,” I urged. “Show me Aramathia.”

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## Chapter 32

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I didn't want to be in this place, I knew that as soon as I stepped through the portal and into the cavern. This wasn't a tight little cave like the one under my grandfather's estate, but one with soaring walls like a cathedral.

"We need light," Gael growled, taking position at my shoulder.

"It won't help," Bryson said, with complete confidence, staring out into the hazy light. The crystals still glowed blue in response to our presence, but here it was a dark, sulky colour, creating a hazy miasma of gloom within the chapel.

"This is the throat of the wolf," Higgins said, his eyes gleaming as he looked around avidly.

I'd seen wolf cult statuettes before. When men were sent north to serve at the garrisons, my father had been particularly officious, insisting that the men, whether highborn or low, be stripped and searched, making sure they were humiliated in the process. This often resulted in the confiscation of small votive figures carved from the deepest ebony. Wolves, all of them, the hard, dense wood carved in abstract shapes with sharp edges, though many of them had been well-worn and polished through the daily touch of the devoted, over years. And here, in this chapel, a massive jet black stone wolf was set behind a rough altar, also made of stone. Something, however, whether it was that they seemed to be made from a different type of stone, or had a different style of construction, made me think that they'd been installed at different times, and I wondered why. While we stood looking, Higgins fished his medallion out, as did the other worshippers he had collected in Middlebury. They bowed low to the statue for some minutes, then Bryson

walked over and interrupted their devotions.

“I must ask you to curtail your worship or else leave you to it,” he explained. “Time is of the essence for me to make my way to the throne room.”

“And we will join you there,” my grandfather replied mildly. “Go on ahead, Highness. We will be there presently.”

“And us with you.” Selene came to stand by my shoulder. “Hoods pulled down, of course.”

“That goes for the rest of us,” I said, turning around, “But the children...”

“Darcy, I should come,” Del said, gripping his sword hilt. “I can help. I can—”

“You can set her heart at ease, knowing you’re safe,” Gael said, crouching down before the boy. “She can’t do anything that she must if she knows your safety is at risk. Down here, you’re not likely to be in any danger.”

At that statement, we all looked around the gloomy cave. I wasn’t entirely sure that was true.

“Then we should stay, too,” Selene told Del. “We’ll lay in wait, young prince, and if we get a sign from Darcy—”

“How will we get a sign?” Del demanded. “How?”

“Your mother is goddess-touched,” she replied evenly. “We’ll know if she needs us.”

“As for us, we’ll go out into the city,” Higgins said, speaking for the wolf cultists that he’d brought with us. “All of us have families to reunite with, but we’ll make contact with the chapters we know of, let them know that she has come.”

Bryson looked back at me speculatively for a second, then nodded and strode off.

“You’ll keep the children safe?” I asked Selene, knowing she would but needing to hear it anyway.

“With my life,” she replied.

“And ours,” Orla and Ayla added.

“Goddess hope that’s not required,” I said, then flinched when I heard the sound of birds fluttering. “Perhaps—”

“We must go now, Darcy. The crown prince is going to attempt to have his father declare him king and Bryson will need all the support he can get in the throne room,” my grandfather said.

I knew he was right, but what unnerved me was hearing the low chuckle of the Morrigan inside my head as we left the children and the Maidens behind and walked some way through the cave. Here and there, we passed the evidence of new worship, of altars and symbols that had been installed in this sacred place. But they looked nothing like that skeletal statue I had glimpsed in the Crone's chapel beneath Snowmere. The trappings of worship that we came across looked more like toys left by children, rather than religious artefacts. What lurked within this place was far older and far darker.

*More than you know*, the Morrigan said.

After a time, my attention was caught by the crystal walls as we passed, our reflections moving and distorted by each spine of quartz. But as I looked, they changed.

OTHER WOMEN WREATHED in cloaks stalked forward, their arms burdened down with the fruits of their labour. Wheat from the harvest and corn, fruit from orchards, animals from the field. A lamb bleating piteously, struggling in their grip, but the women marched forward. The reflections changed, showing me the stone altar from before as they laid their sacrifices down. The fruit rotted and the wheat withered the moment it touched the stone, drawing cries from the women that seemed to echo around the chapel. But when I glanced at my mates, I knew they didn't hear the sounds. My princes strode forward, taking the four points around me, forming my honour guard. I looked back and the women had laid the lamb down. It gave one shrill, sharp cry that was there and gone again, as it too was eaten by decay.

*Is that what I need to do?* I asked her as we walked. *Bring you a lamb?*

*You brought me two very pretty ones*, she replied and that was when I saw an image of Selene and the Maidens sitting down with the children, Orla pulling a set of dice from her tunic and explaining the game. Jan shook the dice first and I watched them tumble onto the floor, then bounce free, rolling towards the altar. She was up and after them, running towards the hunk of stone, hands outstretched, the dice bouncing forward.

*No!* I shouted inside the confines of my mind. *No!*

*No? You want to be queen, don't you? You want to wield all the power of the land. One girl for so many... You'll need everything I have to give if you're to survive walking into this wolf den. They're strong with the power of gods that don't belong here.*

*I said if you needed a sacrifice, you'd take it from me.*

Weyland's head turned in my direction when I pulled out my knife, a protest on his lips unvoiced as I sliced my palm. You always know a bad knife cut by the sensation that follows. Immediate pain and the cut probably isn't that deep, but one that took some time to feel was never a good one.

"Darcy!" Weyland snapped, slowing his pace, but I moved sideways. I walked along the wall, smearing the pristine crystals with my blood as I went. It dripped between my fingers, onto the stone and everywhere I went, the stones grew brighter and brighter.

*Mm... There was an almost feline satisfaction in the Morrigan's tone. Blood, all blood, feeds me, but I do like the taste of yours. Strong, it is.*

My sight showed me that Selene had swept in, catching Jan before she touched the altar, and she had directed her back to the game, bending low to pluck each dice from the stone floor.

*And you can have all of it, I promised rashly, if you just do this. Keep them safe.* I hadn't specified who because I didn't need to. It was my mates and my children, the Maidens and my grandfather. It was Flora in the keep and Annis and all the other refugees. Even Higgins and his unruly band of cultists. *All of them, I urged.*

"What are you doing?" Gael asked, snatching my hand away, then using his healing powers to close the cut.

"The Morrigan wants blood," I replied simply. "We gave her some yesterday, but that's not enough."

"Nothing's enough for her," he returned, in a dark voice. "You start bleeding for her and you'll never stop."

If I didn't, someone else would, I wanted to shout at him, but I just shook my head.

"Let's get out of these caves."

The exit was an old trapdoor built behind a storage shed that seemed not to be used often, and we were able to emerge unseen.

"This way," my grandfather said, directing us forward.

We wove between merchants and serving girls and off duty soldiers without attracting comment, though my eyes still kept careful watch from beneath my cowl. The architecture this far south was far different to that in the north, full of grand domes and thick carved columns made of a white stone they must've had to import. It shone in the sun as we approached the palace and ascended the broad steps. Two guards were stationed at the grand

entrance at the top, but they blocked our way, the spears in their hands lowering when we approached.

“What business have you in the palace, sir?” a mailed knight asked.

“I am the Duke of Fetterling,” my grandfather replied, holding out his ducal seat imperiously for the knights to inspect. “I arrived with the crown prince’s retinue and he expects me to join him in the throne room.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” the knights said, pulling back, although one frowned as we passed through. The guard’s keen eyes tried to pierce the shadows of our cowls, but we followed hot on my grandfather’s heels, as his boot steps echoed through the halls of the palace.

IT WAS BEAUTIFUL. Of course it was. All of the stolen wealth of my people had gone into building an edifice that tried to validate the Granian presence in the capital. The builders had created it in the style of the great Farradorian cities of the empire, trying to borrow a history Granians didn’t possess. The people I was born into were newcomers in comparison, even after the time that had passed. The Granian presence in these lands was but a blip in Strelan history, albeit a significant one. But we had other fish to fry, so I forced my eyes away from the paintings in their gilt frames, and the suits of armour standing on marble floors, to focus instead on the long corridor that led to the throne room.

“Make way for the king!” a voice announced almost as soon as we’d made our way inside and joined the throng that filled the throne room. We moved with everyone else as the courtiers parted to leave a central pathway between the door and the throne itself at the other end of the room. Bryson was up on the dais next to the throne, three other young men with similar features standing beside him, one with a sulky cast to his full lips, but all of them came to attention as their father was announced. Knights marched in wearing golden armour, entirely impractical for battle, and I heard Axe make a noise of disdain. The throne room sported a massive glass-domed roof, allowing the sun to bathe the king and his escort in light as they entered. The sun shining off the knights’ gleaming helmets and breastplates suffused the already light-filled room with added radiance.

The king himself looked like he’d need every ray of light to assist him. He crept forward, bent double with age, relying on a cane to take each shuffling step. Murmurs went through the crowd at the sight of him, making

me think his current state was a surprise to at least some of the courtiers. But the ripple of hushed sound faded away and they watched in silence, as we did, following each painful step until the king came to a halt at the red carpeted stairs leading up to the throne.

Did it look insurmountable? I imagine it did. The man's whole body heaved as he sucked in one breath then another. It must've seemed as unassailable as the side of a mountain, but the king stepped forward. Clunk. His cane stumped down into the carpet and he hauled himself upright. His honour guard hovered nervously, breaking formation, obviously wanting to help their liege lord to ascend, but I knew why they could not.

"Why don't they help him?" Axe hissed.

"Because if they do, he is no longer king," I whispered back.

The Granian kings were put in place as facsimiles of the emperors. And each emperor had needed to prove every day that he was fit to be at the head of an empire that spread across multiple continents. Those that were deemed unfit in the old days, at least according to Linnea, were sacrificed on an altar to the gods. A king ruled by example, so when his strength failed, it showed that it was a sign that the gods' favour had deserted him. And so, we all watched motionless, as the king painstakingly hauled himself up the stairs. One step, then another and another. I think the whole room held their breath, all the way until the king made it to his throne and collapsed down onto it, gasping for air.

So this was the man that ruled all of Grania? He looked so thin and weak, stark lines drawn on his face, his hollow chest heaving. His sons looked on as if stunned into immobility, all but Bryson. He clicked his fingers, and a golden goblet of wine was produced by a cupbearer. Bryson took the goblet without thanks and then sank down by his father's side.

"Father."

Did the king look at the crown prince with love or contempt? I couldn't tell from where we stood. His fingers shook as his son held the cup to his lips and he took a noisy sip before waving it away querulously. The king shifted into a more upright position on his throne, his head craned forward like a bird's. He regarded every person in the room, it felt, those eyes still keen even as the rest of his body failed him.

*As is often the case, the Morrigan said. People beg me for a long life, to spare them, but if they get it, they are forced to endure living like this. Your body failing, even your mind, while your spirit remains as strong as it ever*

*was. A quick death is sometimes the most merciful.*

Could she give it to the king? I wondered. Quickly, before he could opt to choose another of his sons, not Bryson, but I was about to get my answer.

“I bring you all before me to announce my heir.” That seemed to electrify the room. No one moved or said much other than low, muttered asides, because the king had the rapt attention of every single person there. “My time is coming. And so, to ensure the safety and stability of the land, I must ensure an orderly transfer of power.” He looked like an old buzzard as he regarded each of his sons, the one with the sulky expression straightening up.

*Why don't you take him?* I asked the Morrigan.

*Not a fit sacrifice. I am not your knife to be directed at your enemies. You are mine.*

My jaw locked tight at that, and I returned to watching the proceedings and trying to anticipate the king's next move.

“Now that Crown Prince Bryson has deigned to join us, we can proceed,” the king said.

He was tired, I could see that in the frequent pauses and sucking breaths the king made. Clinging to life, he used what energy was left to him and directed it at his sons.

“Each one of you has grown tall and strong. Each one of you is a proud descendant of the people who claimed this land from the dreaded wargen and turned it into a bastion of culture and civility. As a result, each one of you is worthy of being considered for the role of king.”

My eyes darted around as people started to murmur, and it seemed that they hadn't been expecting to hear that there was more than one contender for the role of monarch. However, surely it was a good sign that the king had addressed Bryson as Crown Prince, indicating his eldest son had his favour.

“The man I choose must be strong enough to bear the duty of ensuring our glorious line continues, as our forefathers would have wanted.”

“But not his foremothers...” Dane mumbled.

“He will need to lead his people through the times of scarcity as well as that of plenty, to uphold our commitment to maintaining prosperity, while never taking his eyes off the threat we face from the north.”

*Bryson then, I decided in my head, because he knows that threat better than anyone here.*

“Strelae is a vassal state.”

I felt my mates stiffen at the same time I did.



“It exists at our pleasure.”

Bile flooded my mouth.

“We allow the beast men to grub in the dirt to provide us with iron ore, and now that their puppet king has fallen, opportunities exist.”

*Not while I still have breath in my body*, I thought furiously.

“To not parlay with animals, dirtying our hands each time we hand them money for them to use against us. With a new king must come a new era.”

I searched Bryson’s face, wanting, needing to see some sort of evidence that this was not what he believed, that the man who had fought beside me had dealt with me truly, but those golden eyes stared into mine, giving me no such assurances.

“And that new king...”

I wasn’t going to allow this old bastard to stand in our way. I’d seen one king dead, I could do the same to another. I was sick to death of politics and blatant self interest, rampant greed ruling everything and everyone, so I jerked my sword from its sheath and started forward. They called it the Sword of Destiny. We would see if it could live up to its name.

“My lord king!”

My grandfather caught sight of me and knew what I was about, but rather than step out of my way, he stood in front of me, hiding me from the court.

“And who do you bring before us, Lord Fetterling?”

I watched the king’s eyes narrow as he took in my grandfather, then me behind him, my mates moving swiftly to take position by my side. The king watched my free hand go to my hood. But Bryson’s eyes widened, then he shook his head, barely perceptible to anyone but me. Those full lips pursed as his eyes widened, then parted, his tongue flicking out to—

“Well? Answer me!”

The king’s order dragged my attention back to the matter at hand. He thought he was going to deprive Bryson of the throne, deprive the whole country of the help it needed to survive Callum’s attacks and that couldn’t stand. My hand tightened around the hilt of my sword.

*If I am your knife, then bid me to strike against this false king in your name*, I said, making bargains I shouldn’t make, but feeling that desperation.

*This one?* she answered. *Oh, I will not suffer him to live any longer, but I have other tools at my disposal.*

And that’s when I saw it. My vision of the throne room faded, showing me another seat of power hundreds of miles away.

Callum stood covered in gore, bodies strewn around him. Blood pooled around the door that led down into the chapel beneath the old palace, leaking under the door. The light that always glowed around it dimmed and I heard the low chuckle of the Morrigan in my ears as it faded. Callum roared and his Reavers roared with him, as the door opened.

They surged forward, a brutal masculine force in a place for women, striding through the cave, shoving aside the statue of the Maiden, then the Mother, until they came here.

My bloodied handprint had faded to brown, but it was still there at the Morrigan's chapel, but Callum's much bigger one slapped down over top of it, his bloodied mark obliterating mine. Then he stepped into the Morrigan's chapel and slapped his hand down on the crystal wall, just as I had.

They were coming, the Reavers. They'd surge up in the chapel below and obliterate everything in sight.

Starting with my children.

"No," I whispered. "No!"

*You wish to be queen?* the Morrigan said. *Then prove it. Fortune favours the bold.*

My head jerked up as I realised I might not make it through this. My shoulder blades itched, already feeling the strike of a thousand arrows as I threw my cloak aside.

"I am Darcy, wolf queen of Strelae and Grania." I said the words I'd heard in my vision and, just like then, I heard the courtiers snigger. How long would their laughter continue once the Reavers appeared? Bryson's gaze flicked around the room desperately, seeming to sense what was to come, right before I delivered my order. "And you will kneel!"

I stabbed my sword into the neatly tessellated marble tile floor and a great boom of power silenced everyone. The beautiful sound of their collective knees hitting the floor felt like it echoed around me, right as my power snaked out.

The king slid off his throne, much to his chagrin. Protests, orders, complaints rose in his throat, but I silenced every single one of them. I silenced him. I twitched my head to one side, cracking my neck, and watched as his followed suit. But rather than simply relieving a persistent ache, the result was a slightly sickening sound as the king's neck broke.

"The king is dead," I spoke into the silence, then set my eye on Bryson. "Long live the king."

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## Chapter 33

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Much later, my mates would question why I confirmed Bryson as king, but right at that moment, I wasn't thinking, just reacting. And then, suddenly, so was everyone else. Whatever spell I'd cast, it was broken by the death of the king. People surged up the dais, a healer pushing courtiers to one side to confirm my diagnosis.

"He's dead," the man said, his face paling as he stared about him wildly. "His Majesty's...he's—"

"Remove my father's body," Bryson said, in crisp tones. "It must be prepared properly so that his soul might ascend to the heavens."

"Of course, Your High— Your Majesty."

"Highness," a big bluff-looking man said, stepping forward. He wore the rich robes of a southern noble. "The king did not name a successor."

"Which means the eldest son inherits," my grandfather said, "as per the decision made at the sudden death of Arnald II. It was passed into law by the senate—"

"Yes, yes," another man said, waving my grandfather away, "but we can't allow that without ruling out foul play. This woman..."

He looked like he was about ready to set the dogs on me, but the way I firmed my grip on my sword seemed to stop him.

"This 'woman'," Bryson said, stepping down from the dais and coming to stand beside me, "is my wife-to-be."

I swallowed hard. I'd handed him this opportunity, declaring myself queen and him king in the same breath. I'd been worrying more about the danger facing us and that was still in the forefront of my mind. I fought

against the urge to take a step away from Bryson, because we needed this alliance, any alliance right now.

“Worry about these matters later,” I snapped. “Reavers are coming.”

“Your Highness,” said the man who’d dismissed my grandfather’s knowledge of legal imperatives, looking down his nose at me. “You can’t be serious. This is some delusional wargen brat.”

“I’m Lady Darcy of Elverston,” I shot back.

“Gods, worse then.” The man’s mouth twisted into a sour smile. “One of our own gone feral. Not queen material. Not fit for anything but working on her back in—”

Anything else he might’ve had to say was cut off by a sword pressed to the man’s throat. Bryson’s sword.

“Don’t say another word about my bride-to-be or, on my life, I’ll make you regret it.” I blinked at the vehemence in his voice. Bryson turned back to me, his manner softening. “Darcy, what do you know?”

“Callum’s worked out how to get into the chapel beneath Snowmere, how to wield the power of the crystals. He’s coming here with his Reavers. Now,” I forced out, my throat tightening with fear.

“But he can only go places he’s been before, can’t he?” Bryson asked, frowning.

“He has been here.” Dane was pale, his eyes blazing bright blue as he flipped back his hood. “He came here with Eleanor when she first crossed the border.”

“Reavers? Sounds like some kind of elite soldier. And what, you’re saying this man came here with Eleanor? You’re talking three hundred years ago, man. What nonsense is this? High—” another lord said, stopping to correct himself. “Majesty, there is a greater threat here. These wargen have infiltrated the capital under false pretences.” His eyes narrowed as he stared at my grandfather. “Brought here by Fetterling.”

“Brought here by me,” Bryson corrected. “On my order, because I have seen them, the Reavers. I have seen their bestial shapes. I have heard their howls and I have cut them down with my sword. If the Lady Darcy says they are here, then they are here.”

And as if in support of his statement, a far-off howl had all of our heads whipping around.

“No,” I whispered, before turning back to Bryson. “Sort this out,” I ordered, stabbing a finger at the cluster of lords.

I COULD'VE BROUGHT them to their knees again, but the moment they got back to their feet, they'd be spouting this rubbish once more. Instead of wasting time on their petty issues, I focussed on what was important: my family. I took off at a dead sprint, knights spinning around to watch me go, but not knowing how to respond in all the chaos.

Why had I leave those most precious to me, most defenceless, in the chapel of the fucking Morrigan? Why did I leave them behind at all? If I'd kept them with me, I could be protecting them. I—

“How are we going to do this?” Weyland hissed as we went careening down the hallway towards the front door. The knights stationed there saw us and sought to stand in our way, but Axe pushed forward. With a roar he took the half-wolf form, then sent the two men flying as other Granians started to shout and shriek. We paid that little mind as we tore through the yard, men bellowing behind us as we went, before skidding around the shed and then down the hatch to the caves.

“JAN?” I shouted, my voice echoing as if to mock me. “Del? Selene!”

We moved much more slowly now, every one of us with our swords drawn. I jumped as I saw shadows shift in the crystals, my grip tightening as I heard a low hiss, and then we found them.

Each of the Maidens stood there, swords at the ready, she-wolves about to protect their cubs, but they weren't what had my attention. Jan had plastered herself against the crystal wall, making a low keening sound I never wanted to hear again, but Del was stepping forward. He tore his sword free of its scabbard and went to stand next to the Maidens.

“Noooooo...”

The word stretched out so far it made no sense, the sound echoing and ringing in my ears as I threw myself forward toward the enemy. For, there, in the sullen darkness of the cave I could see the advance contingent of Callum's Reavers.

It was as though time stood still for a moment and I could see everything clearly, despite the gloom. The string of drool hanging from the first Reaver's jaws, the way his fangs seemed to gleam in what little light we had. Those piggish red eyes, unseeing and unthinking but for this. Death, pain,

destruction, that's all it and its fellows wanted: exactly the mindless beasts those Granian idiots had been twittering about. Those nobles looked down their perfectly formed noses at such things, but they would've pissed their very expensive breeches if they were facing this monster.

Facing imminent death.

As one shouldered forward, so did another and another, their number too many to count, The Reavers roared and my sword flared to life, burning bright incandescent blue as I rushed towards them.

THERE WAS a bitter kind of satisfaction in cleaving a Reaver in two. The sword cut through the first one like a hot knife through butter, the body landing heavily on the ground, black blood seeping into the stones.

*I bring you offerings, dread lady,* I told the Morrigan as I charged forward, cutting through one Reaver, then another. *I bring you death.*

*And I bring you a lesson, little queen.*

Her voice was like nails dragged down a school room chalkboard, making my whole spine stiffen, and one of the Reavers took advantage of my distraction to swing a blade at me. Muscle memory from the drills I'd done over and over with Nordred, with the Maidens, came to my aid and I lunged to the side to avoid a heart strike. Its weapon caught the side of my bicep before I twisted and thrust my own blade straight up to end its life, spinning to avoid its body landing on me. I was forced to slice, parry, cut, stab and my mates were right there beside me.

Axe was at my left shoulder, roaring his disdain as the other Reavers tried to attack, then eviscerating several with a great sweep of his blade, leaving their pink guts to spill on the floor.

"You fucking bastards!" Weyland shouted on my right, rushing forward in an attempt to meet the Reavers before they could even get to me.

Gael stepped in, slapping a hand over a slice on my bicep, the skin knitting back together with a sharp sting, right before he parried the next blow coming for me, as Dane barked out the order.

"Stick together! We are stronger when clustered close."

"We've no shields for a shield wall," Selene barked.

"Wouldn't matter if we did." Gael gutted his opponent. "They'd cut through the fucking thing."

But Del's cry was what had me breaking formation. It came from his very

soul, rising up from a place of loss and pain I had no way of understanding. The death of his parents, the destruction of his home, of the only life he'd known, it all came out in that ragged sound, right before he rushed forward to attack the beasts who'd been the cause of it all.

“No, Del!”

I injected all of the maternal command I had into my voice, but it failed to make a difference. He charged forward into the fray and I was forced to join him. The Reaver that he attacked curled its lips away from its muzzle in a snarl, knocking away Del's sword before grabbing my son by the throat and that's when I saw red.

PEPIN HAD SAID I didn't belong to her any more once I was pregnant, but I hadn't even been aware that I was, hadn't had a chance to feel my child grow and kick within me, to adjust to the idea that I was growing a life inside me. I hadn't given birth to Del, nor seen him raised, from tiny baby to the boy he was now, but that didn't matter.

He was mine.

I'd found him in the rubble of Wildeford. I'd made sure he was safe. I'd even given him to a family that would've kept him from this danger, except I hadn't been able to leave him there. He'd clung to me, wanted me to be his caregiver and it was only now I really understood the fierce burning love of the Mother. I would place my own throat in the Reaver's grip any day of the week rather than see a single beast breathe in the direction of Del or Jan, and that was what I screamed out with all of my strength.

A woman's voice has power, otherwise why would men work so hard to keep us silent? But I was willing to bet mine drowned out all other sounds in that moment. My words reverberated throughout the whole cavern and the crystals all lit up at once. I was only vaguely aware of it, for my focus was entirely on the arm of the Reaver as he held a kicking, squirming Del off the floor by his neck, my boy's fingers raking across the beast's claws in an attempt to free himself.

So I did it for him.

My blade sliced through the animal's arm. Del fell backwards to the ground, the Reaver's clawed hand still tightly clenched around his neck. His mouth worked as he tried to suck in air and his eyes widened desperately. I cast my sword aside as I dropped down to him, cursing the monster that was

still a threat to my boy, even in death.

“Del...” My voice shook and my vision blurred as I crouched at his side, my own hands turning to claws as I frantically tried to prise away the talons of the dead limb from his neck. It took for the Reaver’s arm to revert back to human for me to get it off him. Del drew in a great wheezing breath in response. “Del.” I had him up and in my arms, holding him tight, wanting to shelter him from every enemy, even as I knew they must be approaching. “Del, you can’t—”

“Darcy...!”

He gasped out a warning and I spun around to see more Reavers lumbering closer, as my pack rushed toward us from the rear, having dealt with the previous wave. My sword was still lying on the ground, its blue fire growing brighter and I knew I wouldn’t be quick enough to grab it. The Reavers snarled, then howled in anticipation of victory, but I was determined to snatch it from their jaws.

“NO!”

The word reverberated out, smacking into each one of the creatures and stopping them. A fiery blue light followed it, blazing high as though a line of pitch had been lit, creating a flaming barrier between us and the enemy. The blue flames incinerated any Reaver that got too close, effectively stopping the rest.

“What the fuck is that?” Dane growled, dropping down beside us. “Are you alright, lad? Are you alright?”

Del just coughed when he tried to respond so Gael went down on one knee, putting his hands on the purple welts around our boy’s neck.

“It’s alright, lad.” His voice was a curious combination of ragged emotion and soothing calm. “This will sting.”

“Sting my arse.” Weyland tried for humour but failed. “It’ll hurt like hell, but you hold onto my hand, Del. That’s it, grip it tight.”

Del sucked in a breath as the healing magic licked across his throat. His sound of pain was choked off, then when he let the breath out, more came. A sharp scream, one that had its answer in Jan’s, not because she was under attack, but in sympathy. But Del coughed and coughed, then took a shuddering breath in and out, each one easier than the next.



“WHAT IN ALL THE GODS...?”

At the tone of awe mixed with disbelief, I knew exactly who it had to be, and I turned my head to see the crown prince—no, the new king of Grania—stepping into the cavern, an expression of wonder on his face as he stared at the fiery barrier. Behind him was a phalanx of lords and knights of the Granian court, but the looks on their faces ranged from horrified to appalled as they looked around at the carnage of the battle, then beyond the blue flames to see that Reavers did indeed exist. As I followed their gaze to the other side of the barrier, there was a stir amongst the Reavers there and it became clear that Bryson wasn't the only member of royalty in the cave. Reavers moved aside as their prince stepped forward and he raised an eyebrow as he approached the flames.

“And what do we have here?”

We all watched in horror as Callum reached up to touch the barrier I'd somehow erected. My mates and I leapt to our feet, swords at the ready. We needn't have worried though. Sparks forced him to jerk his hand back. He stepped back a pace, licking his fingers to ease the sting, before he smiled at me.

“The little queen has found her power?” he sneered.

“I found it before, when I stabbed my sword into your side.” With insulting slowness, I moved my eyes down to the site of the wound, smiling when I saw dark blood still oozing sluggishly from it. “What a pity that this sword wasn't the one I struck you with.”

Whatever poise Callum possessed, he lost, the moment I raised the Sword of Destiny.

“How did you get your hands on that?” he said, lunging forward. “Little mongrel bitch!”

“Mongrel I might be,” I said, with a nod. “But I've got blood pure enough to do what you couldn't. You were forced to surrender the blade to my forebears.”

“And they said they melted it for scrap!” he shouted, red eyes shining brighter and brighter. “I saw it myself!”

“I guess they tricked you,” I replied, spinning the blade in my hand in a way Nordred would've rolled his eyes at; a move that was showy but useless on the field. Then something occurred to me. “Doesn't matter anyway. You could've found its resting place all on your own and you still wouldn't have

been able to wield it. You couldn't do it on the battlefield when my ancestors invaded this country. You've never been worthy."

I was treated then to the delicious sight of a man hundreds of years old wincing as if stung.

"You know that. You've always known that. No matter how many Reavers you raise or people you kill, as long as one person lives to draw breath, they'll always say the same thing." My lips curled. "You are nothing. You will always be nothing. And sooner or later I'll make sure you burn down to nothing."

The flames on my sword were what inspired me to try what I did next. My power took the form of blue flames along the blade, which was what had enabled me to cut down Reavers with little effort. So I wondered if the power I wielded now could do the same.

*Burn*, I thought, pushing that into the thrumming barrier. *Burn every single Reaver in this cave. Burn them all.*

Howls then screams let me know I'd achieved my goal and I watched the blue flames lick over the Reavers' flesh, appearing to eat away their half-wolf form to reveal the men beneath before burning them, too. The remaining men bolted for the portal, returning to Snowmere, I was sure. All but Callum. He stepped closer to the flaming barrier and slapped his hands against it as he stared at me, even though the fire slid across his flesh to leave blackened rot in its place.

"This isn't over, little queen. Before this ends, you'll be begging for a place by my side. Anything to save your precious country." His focus shifted to where Del still sat between my mates' legs. "I'll take every thing and every person you love, just like your fucking ancestors did to me: that I vow."

"WHAT IN THE GODS' names was all of that?" the rather effete noble from the throne room asked Bryson, just before he stared at me. The portal had closed and every Reaver was gone, the crystals in the cavern dulling now.

"Witchcraft is what it is," the bluff man rumbled. "The crown prince has been ensorcelled! Guards, take this woman—"

"Are you really that stupid?" Bryson's voice was like a snake, coiled and ready to strike. "Are you so incapable of correctly determining what is going on? That was Prince Callum, the one of history."

"No." The nobles were so definite, so confident in their chorus of denial.

“The man would have to be... No, that’s preposterous.”

“And those are Reavers,” Bryson said. “We intercepted an attack on the border and stopped them going any further, but they’ll attack again. They’ll attack anywhere, everywhere, not stopping until they’ve enslaved or destroyed everyone. There is no Grania, no Strelae, not in their minds. They see the entirety of these lands as one country, and they intend to conquer every part of it. Callum has returned to right what he sees as a wrong and he has the means to ensure that what he wants to happen will come to pass, unless we mount a defence against it.”

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## Chapter 34

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We had survived. My children were whole, my mates and friends uninjured. I should have been celebrating, but I couldn't seem to drag my eyes from Del's neck and those red marks the Reaver had left. They were still there, despite the fact Gael had healed our son. I wanted to settle the children, make sure they had something to eat and help them process what had just happened. But as my grandfather ushered us into his suite at the palace, we found that the new king had yet more bad news for us.

"We have to front the Royal Council," he told me.

"You think to give her orders?" Stepping in between the two of us, Gael looked like he was only just holding on to his control as he glared at Bryson. "You think she's yours, for you to bid her to do as you tell her?"

"No." I pulled Del close, holding him before me, my hands gripping his shoulders. "No, I—"

"You announced yourself queen of all of Strelae and Grania." I could hear the incredulity, betrayal, even, in Bryson's voice. "Then, in the bowels of Aramathia, you countered an attack from a supposedly long-dead prince."

He moved forward, side-stepping Gael, to speak more directly to me.

"People are going to have questions, Darcy, and if you aren't there to answer them, others will propose interpretations of the events that will not paint you in a very flattering light. My father..."

"Fuck your father!" Weyland growled. "Mine always said yours was never to be trusted. Invading and taking over the rest of Strelae..."

But I didn't hear the rest of my mate's rant. Bryson was searching my face, and I could see him turning a question around in his mind; one he

wanted to ask, but couldn't quite bring himself to. Yet.

Did I kill the king?

The truth was that I couldn't honestly answer that question. I didn't understand what had happened—it wasn't something I'd experienced before. But Bryson's unquestioning acceptance that I should submit to pressure from external forces; the way he was pushing the point that I do what was 'right' rather than what I wanted? That was behaviour I knew too well, that I had been subjected to from a young age. I pressed my lips into a thin line as I met the king's gaze and considered my response.

"And what do you propose I say to this council?" I asked, finally.

We didn't get time to clean up. There was only just enough time to check that the Maidens would be happy to keep the children safe, before we went marching up the hall en masse. As dukes, both my father and my grandfather had recognised places at the table of the Royal Council of Grania. But I didn't represent either of them, and I wondered how much outrage and downright ridicule my presence in the council chambers was going to cause. As it was, I could hear the shouting from halfway down the corridor. But when we swept in, they all sat up and took notice, none moreso than the new crown prince.

Bryson's brother looked so much like him. He had the same sharp facial structure, the same tousel of curly brown hair. But his eyes were a flat brown, rather than Bryson's gold, and the expression in them became flatter, harder, as he stood staring at me.

"Aramathia was attacked by wargen scum?"

He had jumped to his feet the minute we entered the room, a number of others following his lead, making it clear there was a faction at play. I noted similar looks of disgust on the faces of the prince's friends as they ran their eyes over me and my men.

"This is what our father talked about, brother," the prince said, turning his attention from me to Bryson. "This is why we must attack. To drive out those filthy beasts."

My group made our own alliances clear, with my grandfather and my men coming to stand at Bryson's back.

"Those 'filthy beasts' just saved your city from Reaver attack," Dane drawled, widening his stance and drawing his arms across his chest.

"Wargen haven't walked the halls of the palace for centuries," the prince spat. "And now five of you appear. My father dies and this feral girl declares

herself our queen? You would be hard pressed to convince us that any of this was a coincidence.”

“So I won’t try.” Bryson took the chair at the head of the table, gesturing as he did for everyone else to sit. My grandfather took his designated chair, though my men and I remained as we were. There were no chairs for us here. “We returned with great haste once word reached us of Father’s state. He was on his deathbed, that’s what we were told...” He pulled in a breath, then another, going quite pale for a moment before visibly steeling himself. “So his death is hardly a surprise. I wish it wasn’t.”

Real emotion vibrated in his voice and I watched his hands grip the arms of his chair before he forced himself to release them.

“But he is gone, no doubt feasting with the gods themselves right now.” A small murmur of appreciation went around the table, though it died off quickly. Bryson performed a little gesture, one I’d seen people make every Sunday at church, and I had to clench my fists to stop the muscle memory kicking in, so that my own hand wouldn’t do the same. “Our father, the king, was a great man.” The persona of the man speaking now wasn’t ‘Rake’, or even Bryson, but the new Granian king. “One whose vision and foresight saw Grania through a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity. As king, I pledge to continue that legacy.”

But there was no mention of the new vision, the one the king had dumped on the court, just before his death.

“To keep the peace, to build a stronger, better Grania.”

“One that absorbs the territory to the north, as our forebears always planned?” The prince smiled slowly, his perpetually sulky look turning into something insufferably smug.

“You want that?” I stepped closer, and there were mutterings from around the table from these Granian noblemen who seemed to struggle to know where to look. At the blood on my skin? The armour I wore, the sword at my hip, as their eyes covetously caressed the softly glowing crystal on the pommel? Or at me, to outline the womanly shape of my body in the way men do when they think they have the right. “And what do you think you’ll be taking, milords? A land rich with iron ore?” I saw some eyes flash brighter at that. “Some poorly educated, misguided Strelans to serve their superior Granian masters?”

“Darcy...” Bryson growled, but I was not his bitch. I was born Granian, so I knew how their minds worked. Obvious and overt displays of power—

because that's what this castle was, from the paintings on the wall, the thick carpets and the excessive amount of gilt surfaces—always went over best with them. So I whipped out my sword, plunging the tip into the carpet before anyone could respond, letting the crystal come to life and glow bright, right before I summoned my wolf.

She was accustomed to playing second fiddle to me, my human side far too dominant to allow her forth, and so all she got to do was take a look at these idiots. My hair turned to fur, my eyes burned bright blue as my nose became a muzzle and my lips peeled back to reveal fangs.

Some of these men would be cultists. My father had been wont to complain loud and long about the fascination some of his peers had with the religion, so my actions here were calculated.

“You've the choice between two wolves,” I told them, my voice now coarse and guttural, speaking to those hidden cultists more than anyone. “The one that seeks to defend its pack, that wants a world where we all get to return to our homes and our families at the end of this.” They all fell silent, staring, wide-eyed, unable to look away. They knew, academically, about wargen, but I was willing to bet none of them had ever seen one before. “Or the one where you become the thing you despise.”

I swallowed hard, then returned to my human form.

“Prince Callum—es, that Prince Callum—has returned and he brings with him his Reavers. I don't know how, but he managed to turn Strelans, Granians, and people from beyond the mountains into creatures like the wargs you despise, but far worse.”

I leant forward to rest a hand on the gleaming tabletop beside Bryce, then flexed my fingers, and watched as his brother swallowed when he saw that I was digging claws, not fingernails, into the polished wooden surface.

“Reavers are not enemies to be met on the battlefield. Reavers aren't an indigenous people to be displaced to suit your ambitions. Reavers are exactly the kind of mindless creatures Granians have always despised. They are creatures that don't care for rank, for nationality, for age or gender. They just kill and destroy. That's all they do. And Callum has set himself up as king of the north to ensure they drive out all others—Strelan and Granian—on his behalf.”

The image of the woman that had approached me at the camp on the border, just before we crossed over, flashed into my mind again. That bundle in her arms, her dead child staring blindly at the sky was burned into my

memory. I wondered how many more mothers would suffer the same fate as I looked around the table, willing the rich and powerful here to just fucking listen for once.

“He won’t stop when he reaches the borders between our two countries. He won’t stop for mail-clad knights or Granian kings. He won’t stop until he’s made to, until he’s driven back and back again, right back to his grave where he belongs.”

I smiled slightly, seeing the men around the table stiffen, their pride pricked.

“You think Strelans are animals and that, whatever this new force is, you can use him and his Reavers to rout us out, like a terrier might rats. But you don’t understand. Yes, he wants Strelae back under his control, but...”

“He wants to kill every single one of the descendants of the people that stole his country,” Dane added, coming to stand beside me.

For a moment there was only silence, the men there obviously fighting to understand, to process what was said. Then, just when I thought we’d built a platform where we might be able to work out a way forward, together, Prince Tristan piped up.

“If this Darcy beat back these... Reavers,” he said, his lip curling. “And declared herself queen before all of the court, then there’s only one thing for it.” His eyes met mine and they fairly crackled with challenge. “You must meet this Callum head on and save your people. Cut the head off the snake, so to speak.” Tristan’s focus shifted to his brother. “As your first act as king, you must endorse this plan of action, surely?”

The stone on the pommel of my sword glowed brighter then, as I gripped it tight.

“Is this what it takes?”

“Darcy—” Dane started to say, but I couldn’t turn away from this, no matter what he had to say.

“If I lead a contingent to try and attack Callum directly—”

“Darcy, no,” Weyland interjected. “Darcy—!”

“If I do, will some of your number come with me?” I stared each man in the eye one by one, settling in the end on Tristan. “Will you come and see for yourself the challenge we all face? The might of the Granian army was enough to defeat Callum before.” I clung to that hope like a child would, knowing it was a flimsy thing, but unable to stop myself. “Perhaps it can again.”



“I will fight beside you, Darcy,” Bryson said, his voice softening. “You know I will.”

“A brave choice, brother,” Tristan said smoothly. “But one I support. You \_\_\_”

“As will any man who wishes to ensure the safety of the country we love.” Tristan’s face fell as Bryson cut him off. “Do we cower here in the palace like mice in their hole, knowing that the cats swarm outside, or do we fight like men?”

That started the council chattering again, the noise a combination of masculine excitement and fear. But Tristan? He was studiously silent, his gaze skirting around the whole room, then focusing on his brother with a steady scowl.

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## Chapter 35

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“We shouldn’t have shared that information with the blasted Granians,” Weyland said as he donned his armour.

It was too late to worry about that. After the council had decided to back our plan, we’d spent the rest of the day and most of the night talking strategy, debating how best to plan our attack. Now, it was late the next evening and we were about to put it into action.

“The Granians need to know about the crystal caves,” I said, tightening the neck guard on my armour then looking at him. “If I fall—”

“That will never happen,” Axe swore, shoving his weapon into his belt and striding toward me. His hands were heavy on my shoulders, grounding me. “Not while I draw breath.”

“And I’ll be there by your side the whole time. I’ll heal your wounds; keep you whole,” Gael promised.

Despite the lack of sleep, all of us were filled with a restless energy, something that would only be expelled once we reached our destination.

Snowmere.

I didn’t want to go back to the site of my defeat, to that fucking castle that Ulfric and Aurora had ruled like a pair of spoiled children, to the same place where Callum seemed determined to replay the sins of the past over and over. But Tristan had neatly manoeuvred us into this plan of attack.

But Bryson had made sure to do the same to his brother and rival.

Which is why the king was walking into my grandfather’s suite.

“No tin suit, Your Majesty?” Weyland asked, looking him up and down as he entered, then wandering over to investigate him more closely, his

professional curiosity piqued. “What is that?”

Bryson bared his teeth and brushed my mate’s intrusive hand away.

“It’s brigandine,” he replied, coming to stand before me. “It’s become fashionable among knights in the empire. It weighs less and affords you greater range of movement than plate mail.” Bryson’s eyes met mine. “I assumed that’s what we’ll need on this mission.”

This was to be a sneak attack, not a battle, and when that had become clear, I’d wanted to exclude all of the Granians I’d incited to join us. Too long between wars, that’s what my father used to say. The longer men went between real battles, the more they overestimated their abilities and underestimated the cost of such fights, making them eager for war.

But they’d all insisted that they had to come.

For the moment, my Strelan contingent and I were tolerated, viewed in an environment of suspended judgement. Enough nobles had seen us in action in the crystal cave against Callum to provide corroborating stories to give credence to my words, but... Pragmatically, the death of the old king had been both a boon and a curse. The leadership of Grania was in flux and, while Bryson may have won the crown by law, who knew who would end up with it on his head once the dust settled? So it wasn’t simply a matter of slinking into Snowmere, past the bands of roaming Reavers, into the palace and lopping off Callum’s stupid head. In order to gain the firm backing of the council, we needed to carry out our foray with half of Grania’s nobility in tow.

Linnea had impressed upon me that the only way through a distasteful meal was one spoonful at a time. I felt like I was being faced with an endless bowl of tripe to consume right now.

“It is,” I replied to Bryson, “but do your lords understand that?”

The pained grimace he shot me told me all I needed to know.

WE MET on the palace steps, and never before had I seen such an array of magnificently crafted and ornamented armour. Every single southern nobleman shone bright in the last rays of the dying sun, in shades of brilliant silver and gleaming gold. The northern lords were easy to pick out. They all wore brigandine, an armour that was a compromise between Strelan leather and the southern preoccupation with steel plates sewn within layers of leather, reinforcing key areas of the armour.

“You cannot be serious...” I hissed, turning to Bryson. “This is a stealth mission. We need to get into Snowmere undetected.”

The only answer I got was a slow sigh, then he approached the posse of overstuffed knights.

“My lords, I appreciate that each and every one of you has volunteered to join us on this mission to extinguish the grave threat facing us...” Tristan walked up to join those assembled, looking anything but honoured. However, it was telling to see that he and his fellows all wore brigandine armour as well. Bryson acknowledged his brother’s late arrival with a nod. “But we all must be aware that this is a covert mission rather than one where we tackle the threat head on. As a result, we must dress in a way that will help us achieve our objective.”

“To infiltrate the Strelan capital and get the lay of the land for our upcoming invasion?” Tristan asked.

“To be clear on what threat we face,” Bryson corrected. “Only then can we ascertain how we will respond to it.” He clicked his fingers and several knights appeared off to the side, laden with brigandine armour. “My lords, your choice is clear. You can either don the leather armour that has been kindly offered by Lord (name of northern lord)...” The knights stepped forward, presenting the armour in question to those assembled. As the southern lords started to splutter in protest, Bryson spoke decisively. “Or you can remain behind and keep your plate mail for the war to come.”

Would Strelans rush in so needlessly where angels feared to tread? I wasn’t sure. What I did know was that, while we waited for these popinjays to change, we lost what sun we’d had. Their enthusiasm seemed to indicate that they felt like they were being given a chance to revisit history, to measure themselves against the warriors of old. The way they joked and jostled made them look more like a bunch of school boys acting as warriors in a play than actual soldiers preparing for a skirmish. Gael shook his head at them.

“This is never going to work,” he muttered to me.

“I’m with you there, brother,” Weyland said. “So, what’s our plan?”

Ostensibly, we had one. The council had finally hammered out an agreement that we would emerge out into the caves beneath the citadel and hope like hell they weren’t full of Reavers. If they were, we were to fall back, assuming that was possible. But if they weren’t? We’d carry out our reconnaissance; see if we could safely make our way to Callum’s lair where

I'd...

Light him on fire; the blue flames of my sword licking over his flesh like a lover? Cut him in two like I'd done to so many of his Reavers? Something—anything—that was what beat hot and hard and true in my heart. We were rushing into things, I knew that, but caution seemed an impossible choice. Sleeping was a fitful thing, because who was to know when and where Callum might emerge again? Under the palace here? Near my father's keep? To tear through what remained of the population of Snowmere, only to... I shook my head, trying to keep those negative scenarios out of my thoughts. And then my every muscle tensed when Bryson finally announced the Granian force was ready.

"And you?" He moved closer, putting his hand on my shoulder like he might do with any of his soldiers, but it felt wrong—I didn't belong to him. Bryson wasn't mine just like I wasn't his, no matter what he might think and I fought the urge to shake his hand off. "What of you, Darcy? Are you ready?"

Ready to kill the Reaver king? Ready to eradicate the threat across our lands and live in peace? I nodded sharply, then pulled away, wasting no time in making for the caves. As before, the gloom of the cavernous space was oppressive, made worse by the constant whispering from the gathered lords. I couldn't tell which sounds were their excited mutterings, and which came from the crystals. When we drew up in front of the altar, however, all conversation stopped.

I watched the northern lords, and several of the southern ones, too, step closer to the massive wolf statue. Cultists, I thought. They gazed upon the huge carving with fervent eyes, fingers twitching with the desire to reach out and touch it. Before any of them could, I stepped forward to redirect their attention.

"I will create a portal between this cave and the one beneath Snowmere," I said, praying that was the way it would happen. "My men and I will go first."

"To announce our presence?" Tristan asked, his eyes flashing his mistrust before he shifted his focus to the king. "This could be a trap, brother."

"You fear that you will be outwitted by wargen scum?"

There was no heat in Bryson's voice, but his words, and their implications, stung anyway. They implied that we were either inferior—and therefore no threat at all—or we were capable of deceit, the likes of which

was only usually seen at court in Aramathia—and therefore equals. There was no other conclusion to come to.

“Not at all,” Tristan said, casting a sideways look at his men. His grip tightened around the hilt of his sword as he began to pull it from its scabbard, and he raised his voice to give a rallying cry. “We will breach the capital of Strelae today, something even our forebears were unable to achieve. For Grania!”

When he lifted his sword aloft, so did his followers, echoing his call. I rolled my eyes at their dramatics and used the distraction to turn away to surreptitiously reopen the cuts on my palm.

“Don’t let them know your blood is what activates the power,” Dane had told me, after we’d returned from the council room to the relative security of my grandfather’s suite. “You’ll find yourself pinned to a table and bled dry if they work that out.”

“And why does it work?” I’d asked him.

He’d shrugged, then shaken his head before taking my hand and leading me out to the balcony so that we could take in some much-needed fresh air, a necessity after being stuck in the close quarters of the Royal Council room for so long.

“Kings and queens—they’re always terribly concerned about bloodlines and their purity. Even commoner fathers refuse to care for children not of their own blood. Blood has significance to humans, beyond our need for survival. It’s become a symbol.” He’d stared out over the city. “Of life, of bonds, of family. So, perhaps that’s why.” Dane had turned to look deep into my eyes. “A monarch has the power to bring people together. Perhaps that’s why your blood is different, to facilitate that.”

Well, now we’d see. Opening my hand wide dragged at the edges of the cuts. The barely-formed scabs cracked and blood began to well in my palm. When it started to drip, I set my hand against the crystal wall. Each time I tried it, I didn’t believe that it would actually melt away and be replaced by a portal. But, each time, it did. I looked into the swirling surface and wondered what our fate would be, this time.

Would we survive this? I didn’t care a fig for the lords of the council or even for their king. I wasn’t a Granian anymore, to be required to bow and scrape before the powerful men of their land. But I wasn’t able to be a Strelan either, not while Callum ruled. My bloodied hand gripped my sword and I felt it flare to life. The crystal glowed, and when I pulled the blade free, blue

flames licked along it, ready to burn; to destroy.

“Ready to discover whether or not my words are real?” I asked, looking back over my shoulder. “You want to invade Strelae? Then come and find out just what that means.”

And before any of them could say a word in response, I stepped through.

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## Chapter 36

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Chaos. That was my first thought as I entered the triple chapel. Not due to the presence of Reavers, for the chapels were all conspicuously empty. Moreso due to the evidence of their passing in the blood that was throughout, dried to dark brown stains, footprints tracking it through the chapel of the Morrigan and that of the Mother. I saw Callum's handprint, then put my own hand up as if to compare the size, but yanked it back as the others stumbled through.

"This...?" Tristan looked around wildly. "This is Snowmere?"

"This is the chapel beneath the city," I reminded. "The reason why the city was built here in the first place."

"So, a site of pagan worship," he said, wrinkling his nose. His attitude offended me, and I wasn't about to let his comment stand. As more people spilled through the portal, men filling a space dedicated to women, I marched up to the prince.

"When I was younger, I spent a lot of time sitting in a pew in my local parish church, listening to different priests expound about their gods—the ones that the empire amalgamated together—and not once did I sense or feel a divine presence." I looked around at the dark silky shadows of the Morrigan's chapel. The black shapes shifted in the air, as if alive themselves, setting off the lords with nervous murmurings and furtive glances. "Not so the goddess in her triple forms. I have very personal evidence that she exists, so keep a civil tongue in your head."

"You're not here to convert the locals to the faith, brother," Bryson said, in a dismissive tone. "Keep your mouth shut and observe. You can regale me with your pithy remarks when we return home. If we return." He turned to



me. “Darcy...”

Whatever he had to say, I paid it no heed, for I’d heard a sound. I flexed my arm, the sword blade coming to life, blue flames creating light where there’d been none. That alone was enough to excite the council members, but I paid them little mind as I walked out of the Morrigan’s chapel, following the slight sounds through to the Mother’s shrine.

“Pepin?”

It felt like it’d been years since I’d seen her and I blinked, then squinted, unsure if I could believe my own eyes.

“Darcy...”

She lifted her head and smiled at me from where she was crouched down beside the fallen statue of the Mother. I could see that she was trying to lift it up, from the way her muscles strained, but the statue didn’t move. I sheathed my sword and walked to her side without thought, slipping my hand under the shoulder blades of the effigy. When we moved together, this time the statue moved easily. The two of us got the statue upright and then back onto the plinth where it’d been situated when I’d first seen it.

“Figures,” Pepin said, eyeing me then the statue. “I have no sway with the Mother, but you...” Her eyes narrowed. “You’ve got some of her power.”

And that’s when I felt my frustration rise, as I considered how ineffectual I had been in the face of everything that had been thrown at me. Power? That was a joke. I felt powerless in the face of so many things—and who had more power than her? Wasn’t she a goddess? Why was she allowing any of this to happen?

“How can I be of the Mother?” I shot her a tight smile and watched her face fall as she saw my anger, my pain, at how inadequate my attempts to change things had been. I glanced over my shoulder at the chapel behind us, seeing the darkness, the bloodied hand marks. “I lost my child, Pepin, so there’s no need to shun me anymore. I’m not a mother anymore; perhaps never will be...”

She put her hand out and clasped mine, and, at her touch, my words trailed away.

“You lost one child, Darcy,” she said, “but not the others. You know what you are now. No longer a maiden, concerned only with her own life, her own needs, her own development. You’ve become like her.”

And, oddly, when we both turned to stare into the statue’s face, this time I saw something different. An impression, as if the details of a face had been

rubbed away over time, leaving only the barest of bone structure behind. My mother's face, mine, were both superimposed over the statue's.

"Whatever I am doesn't matter," I said, finally, hearing the men's voices getting louder. "So, are you the one who is responsible for clearing the Reavers out of the chapels?"

"No," she smiled, "You are."

"What?"

"Callum might have the blood," she said, gazing up at me. "But he doesn't have the connection. All he has is his own rage to feed him. He burned through everything he touches, until you. You're the land we backburn to stop the bushfire from spreading, you're depriving him of fuel."

"Can I be the knife at his throat?" I asked, my voice far sharper than I had intended it to be. "Can I be the end of him? He won't stop until he's dead—"

"Darcy, maybe not even then." Her smile was wistful. "That's why you're here, isn't it? But you'll need to evolve again, if you want to stop him for once and for all." She regarded the statue steadily. "Remember, the Mother is life, not death."

"Mother...?" She was talking about moving from mother to crone but it wasn't just the age discrepancy that had me baulking at that. Mother, that's what Pepin had just told me I was now, and I wanted to cling to that identity. Then I shook my head, remembering the way it'd felt when Callum's Reavers had tried to take my children. "I'll become whatever it takes to keep the children safe."

"That's just what she'd say." Pepin was watching me closely, though I couldn't imagine why. Then she slowly nodded, before asking me something unexpected. "Tell me now, how's that little girl of yours?"

"Jan?" It felt like a cold finger slid down my spine. "Why do you ask?"

"She's mine, now," Pepin said. "I watch over her from time to time." She shrugged. "I made sure you found her, didn't I?"

"What...?" I had questions, so many questions and it wasn't their importance or urgency that stopped me from uttering them. It was my experience with trying to communicate with the goddesses. The Morrigan, Pepin, they made vague pronouncements, hinting or alluding but never telling me anything really useful. I frowned as I stared at her, because I suddenly felt like I was moving away from her, in more ways than one. "It doesn't matter. What does matter is why we're here. If you are one-third of an all-powerful goddess, then perhaps you can help me and my party find our way across

Snowmere in one piece?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” That familiar impish grin was back and as Pepin dusted off her hands, all of a sudden it felt like sound came back into the cavern. The members of the council were pushing forward, asking questions of each other (for why would a Granian nobleman expect a woman to have knowledge when he didn’t?). But of all of them, Dane’s was the only voice I listened to.

“Darcy?”

As he stepped closer, he eyed the two of us carefully, particularly Pepin. Now that he knew what she was, he was expressing a kind of wary respect I’d never really seen in him before.

“Gather your boys and hold them close,” Pepin told me. “Because Snowmere isn’t the place it once was. It belongs to him now. And Callum could never hold something precious without breaking it. And, Darcy, make sure those soldier boys hold their tongues. I can help you find a safe path to the castle, but not if they’re yammering the whole time.”

I conveyed that to Bryson, without bothering to explain exactly what Pepin was. I was in no mood to be holding theological discussions with a Granian right now. But as we passed through the chapel of the Maiden, they paid little attention to her statue, their attention captured by the massive footprints on the ground, the brownish stains that spoke of how Callum had found his way into the chapel. They fell silent of their own accord once the door was opened. Because there, tossed on the steps like dolls, were the bodies of those the Reavers had decimated in order to break the seal on the door: their only funeral rites was a constant drone of flies that set my teeth on edge. I wanted to stop and pay my respects, but this was not the time, so I covered my nose and climbed after her, up the stairs and into the old castle.

“THIS IS THE PALACE?” Bryson whispered.

“No,” Dane replied, looking around at the destruction. Every piece of furniture was broken or burnt, every piece of fabric shredded. Paper had been thrown about, torn and scattered. People’s belongings had been ransacked and dumped in hallways, forcing us to carefully pick our way through. But once we got to the gates, that’s when we saw how complete the sacking of the city had been. Snowmere burned before us, smoke rising in lazy curls, turning the sky grey with ash.

“Looks like an attack is not needed, brother,” Tristan whispered when he reached our sides. “They’ve destroyed it themselves.”

And Callum had. Not one building was whole and standing. The place was ghostly quiet, empty of life.

“Come on,” Pepin said, then glanced back at the northern lords and their weapons. “You’ve got swords? Good, you’ll be needing them. But for now, stay quiet and look alive. I know one of the less used routes but, be warned...” Her lips pursed. “You’re about to enter the wolves’ den and you don’t want to go alerting them to our presence.”

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## Chapter 37

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This had seemed like a much better idea back in the safety of Aramathia. Once I was back in Snowmere, I remembered anew what it was to be living on a knife's edge. I jumped when I heard the far-off howl of a Reaver, started at the sound of rubble tumbling across the cobblestones, kicked by an errant boot as we made our way through the ruins of the city. Tristan smirked at me, obviously amused by this, but he didn't know the horrors that existed here. We'd come at night to try to decrease our chance of detection. But, in some ways, that just increased my sense of dread. Was that dark shape just an irregular shadow or was it a lurking Reaver? Were those red points his eyes or just burning embers? The place stank of blood, rotting flesh, ash and smoke and every breath was a fight to take for more reasons than one.

As I picked my way through the destruction, I relived the day that Callum attacked. I'd been flush with a sense of victory at Ironhaven, only to belatedly realise how arrogant I'd been. He'd tricked us, using the battle as a feint to draw us away from the defence of Snowmere, and then he'd thrown the mass of his army against the city walls as we struggled to rally. I saw again Reavers plunging their claws into the mortar in between the bricks of the city walls to help them clamber up. The way they'd tossed dead bodies of their own kind at the base of the wall, and then used them as a ramp to climb higher. We'd done everything we could to defend the city and yet...

"Darcy."

Pepin barely whispered my name, but it was enough to draw my attention back to the here and now. When she flattened herself against a wall, I did the same, gesturing fiercely for the others to follow. They did so, more or less,

but without the required level of finesse used by me and mine. I heard the shuffle of feet, the muffled curses and I winced. Because if I could hear it, so could the ones we were trying to avoid.

And there they were: a Reaver patrol.

The first one was a massive bastard with thick, shaggy, black fur, his shoulder span so wide it looked like, if he was close enough to you, it would blot out the moon that hung high in the sky. But that broad muzzle, it jerked up, then snuffled loudly at our sounds, his fellows doing the same. He carried a weapon, making me wonder what that was a holdover from. I didn't recognise the style of sword, it had a curving blade rather than a straight one. But he clasped the hilt tight, scenting the air, using what he caught on the wind to draw him forward.

Close to us.

I shot my men a look, each one of them drawing their weapons slowly and silently, but their actions caught the eyes of the Granians. Bryson stared at the creatures with an intense kind of focus. He knew they were a threat and was focussed on how to deal with it. But the others? Their eyes went wide and their mouths worked in stunned silence. Their shocked response worked in our favour, until the northern lords shook their heads and stepped out onto what was left of the street, swords in hand. Their movements, coupled with the sounds of whispered asides and swords scraping in scabbards, caught at the sensitive ears of the Reaver and the beast spun around with a snarl.

“Fuck...” I hissed.

The flames along my blade fluttered to life, providing a point of light to draw the Reavers' attention, as I took the vanguard position.

“For the sake of the gods’, Darcy!” Axe snapped, coming to stand beside me, hefting his weapon. “C’mon, you furry fucking bastard.” The Reaver’s ears pricked up, then it let out a roar, one that was echoed by its fellows. “Come to me!” Axe urged and that sent a charge of fear through me. The way he talked unnerved me, like he thought he was somehow replaceable, interchangeable.

“Not about to deprive me of a fight, are you, my mate?” I asked him.

“Deprive you of death, more like,” he said between gritted teeth, but there were no more words to be had. The Reavers had seen us and launched themselves in our direction, leaping through the air like guard dogs on an intruder. But we were there to meet them. I kept my eye on the slaving muzzle of the big black one, tracked its trajectory and then moved forward to

meet it.

I didn't know what Bryson and his pet lords were up to, nor did I care. In the moment there was only my sword in my hand, my body moving precisely the way I wanted it to. Raking the sword through the Reaver's guts, its roar turning to a scream, then a truncated yelp as it landed on the ground like a side of beef and I lopped off its head to silence it. Axe let out his own roar of challenge, shaking his head and taking on the half-wolf form, feinting right, to catch his opponent's eye, then throwing his axe into his left hand and hacking into the Reaver's throat. Blood fountained across Axe's body, making my heart stutter for a second, but it was quickly apparent that it was all from the Reaver and none of it his. The beast fell to the ground, reverting into the grimy figure of a young man seconds later.

"They're..." Tristan's hand wavered as he pointed to the air, all his insouciant arrogance gone. "They're—"

"Attacking, brother, so look alive."

Bryson, I had to admit, looked the very image of a king as he strode up to meet the incoming Reaver. He parried its strike before slashing at its arms. His sword kept catching on the big beast's forearms, hitting the bony part, so that he appeared to fall back. His strategy worked to lure the Reaver closer, then, when it swung wildly for him, he was up and under its guard, thrusting his blade through the animal's chest.

The next moment, a man hung on the king's sword, blood dribbling from his mouth. He glared at Bryson, tried to say something, then went limp. Bryson was forced to shove the body backwards, dislodging it from his sword with his boot. Looking around, I noted with a grim sense of satisfaction that we'd dispatched all of the patrol. But Pepin turned to me with a worried look.

"We need to move," she said with some urgency. "They've sent up the alarm. More will converge here. That will be to our advantage, if we're fast. They'll mass here like sharks in a feeding frenzy, but we'll have moved on —"

"Using it as a distraction while we enter the palace." Dane nodded decisively. "We can get in, without being seen, via the servant's corridors."

Apparently Aurora hadn't liked her serving maids walking up and down the rich red carpets of the inner sanctum in the castle that she and her husband had claimed as theirs, so she'd had secret corridors built into the walls to allow them to come and go, sight unseen. It was a relatively recent addition, so I hoped it meant Callum was unaware of them.

“Then we must move, and now.” Bryson’s head jerked up as he heard far-off roars, getting louder and louder each second. “Come,” he commanded. Most of the lords moved without hesitation, but a few just stood there. Tristan seemed to be stuck in a loop, glancing at each dead body, then the ruined buildings, then off into the distance, going back to the starting point once he was done, only to start again. “Move, now!” Bryson’s bark seemed to help break the spell his brother was under, and Tristan, along with others of his faction who’d been overcome by seeing Reavers face to face, moved swiftly to join us.

I GOT the feeling Pepin was enjoying this. She took us on a circuitous route, down winding streets and through the ruins of people’s gardens, evidence of death and decay everywhere. Some of the lords coughed and spluttered when confronted with some of the more violent manifestations of destruction—a gutted dog, a headless goat left to rot—but the sounds of the Reavers’ bellows helped to silence them, perhaps making them wonder if they’d be next. But when we came to the great square where I’d fought Aurora, where I’d called the people of Snowmere together to fight the incoming Reavers, we realised our mistake. We’d safely wound our way through enemy territory, only to reach an insurmountable obstacle.

Snowmere was destroyed, but nowhere was in ruins as much as the once-imposing square before us. The stones had been torn up in places, while the buildings around it were still burning slowly, and the stink of decay, of ash, was so much thicker here. I remembered all of those grand buildings with their imposing windows that had stood around the edges of the square watching me fight an unworthy queen. There was none of that left now. Callum had worked so hard to retake the city of his birth, but now that he had it? He seemed determined to smash it to pieces along with everything else. But there was no point in trying to fathom his reasons for doing anything, because at the moment, we couldn’t get to the castle. The greatest impediment to our plan was the fact that there, among the ruins of the square, were hundreds, maybe thousands, of Reavers.

They were like dogs lying at their master’s hearth. Some were chewing on meat or guzzling down ale, but mostly they just lurked about, waiting to be deployed. When we had met them in battle, they didn’t seem capable of independent thought, appearing to operate as beasts lost to battle fever. But



when there was no enemy to fight? They launched themselves at each other, some roaring and cheering as others ripped into each other for the sheer joy of it.

“The entrance to the servant’s corridors is over there,” Dane whispered, pointing to a spot on the left hand wall of the palace. It was the only building that seemed intact.

“To get there we need to... what...?” Bryson asked. “Get through them?”

“Not possible,” I said.

“Could be, if a diversion was provided.”

I glanced at Weyland, saw the way the light danced in his eyes and then shook my head. “No. No, Weyland, no.”

“What is this warg proposing?” Tristan asked, other lords clustering closer. “To lead the pack away? Sounds like a good plan to me. Let him make himself useful.”

“And what will you do to assist in this mission, milord?” I bit each word off, refusing to pay him the respect of using his correct title but keeping up the pretence at civility when I obviously felt none. “What experience do you have in fighting Reavers? What superior strength, speed, skills do *you* have to offer?” I stood taller, moving closer, watching the man fight to hold his ground, although he managed to. “Perhaps you would be the best one to lead the diversion.”

“If you’ve finished bickering...” I turned to see Pepin regarding us with a frown. “You’ve got the means for the best diversion right here.” I frowned, not seeing her point, so she reached out and wrapped her hand around the pommel of my sword. The crystal flared to life and, with it, I saw a vision of what could be.

The whole square ringed with blue fire, blood dripping from my nose as my mates and I urged it on, entreating it to consume everything. Dane’s hand on my shoulder as I conjured the fire, along with Weyland’s, Axe’s and Gael’s.

But also Bryson’s.

And our eyes glowing an unnatural green as the fire raged.

“How do I do that?” I snapped. “How? You have all twittered on about the power I’m supposed to possess, but no one ever shows me how to wield it.”

“Because there is no trick to it.” A dimple popped in Pepin’s cheek, but her smile was a sad one. “The power is yours, Darcy. Visualise what you

want to happen, believe it is possible—” Ah, there was the catch, the thing I found the hardest to do. “And then, will it to be so.”

I looked out at the square, remembering what I’d been able to achieve the last time I’d marched out onto that broad expanse with a sword in my hand. I straightened my shoulders, took one step closer and then another.

“You have your mates, your connection to your people and the land,” Pepin said, keeping pace with me, as they all did, now. While the Granians might not see me as queen, they did think of me as their way out of this mess. Because we knew things that they didn’t—about the land, about the fight that was to come, about the Reavers—and suddenly knowledge was the most valuable thing here. “Use that, use them.”

I didn’t need to tell my mates to come forward. They did so without even thinking about it. Dane, ever watchful, checking me for strain or injury, before his hand settled on my shoulder. Axe, hefting his weapon and staring out at the Reavers, as if daring them to attack. Weyland, shooting me a wicked smile, promising me a million pleasures if we just got through this, and then there was Gael. He stepped up to me and grabbed the back of my neck, tugging me forward so our brows were pressed together, and he spoke quickly and quietly.

“You’ve always been able to do what needs to be done, so don’t doubt yourself now, lass. Whatever power you need from me, you take it, you hear? Burn those bastards to the ground. Rout this blight on our land. You can do it. I know you can.”

Then, as they all settled around me, another stepped forward.

Tristan made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat, then swallowed it as he heard another Reaver’s roar, eyes flicking around wildly. All of his fellow countrymen looked outclassed, outmanned, except for Bryson.

He continued forward, ignoring my mates’ growls, coming to stand before me, then thrusting his hand out in offer.

“I’ve worked as your conduit before. I can do so again.”

I hesitated. What had happened before had been accidental, something that had transpired in the heat of the moment whereas this was something different again. I stared down at his hand, broad and square, and knew that, if I took it, I was laying the groundwork for other offers and I wasn’t sure I wanted that. But when I looked beyond him to the square I knew that I needed to use everything at my disposal.

Did I actually think we were going to kill Callum today? No, but I had to

try to see what I could do. I only had to look at the destruction around me to know why. While the beautiful city of Snowmere had been decimated, all those hand-crafted buildings that had stood for hundreds of years, much more than that had been destroyed. The people who'd lived here were what brought it alive. They'd lost more than their home. They'd lost their king, the war and, lastly, their identity as Strelans. I looked behind me at where Tristan and the other Granian lords stood. I wouldn't have to convince them of the problem going forward, but... When they were back in Aramathia, and they were safe and secure, they'd see this as an opportunity. To strike while we were weak and finish the job Callum started.

That, most of all, was why I took Bryson's hand. I gripped it tight, making it clear he wasn't to pull away, but those golden eyes hadn't indicated for one moment that he would. Something bloomed, hot and pulsing, inside me and I sucked in a breath, taking his hand and mine together to stab the Sword of Destiny into the cobblestones at our feet.

A boom radiated out.

Every Reaver in the entire city would've looked up at that moment. The ones in the square certainly did. They searched for us, as if they were wolves on the hunt, but they didn't realise that they weren't the predators in this case. We were. I felt the prickle in my nose, then that heavy feeling as blood dripped free to splatter across our hands.

The Reavers were a blight. It put me in mind of what used to happen when disease attacked a crop on my father's land, back when I'd lived at the keep. When we knew that a field had been struck by blight and the grain was deformed by disease, then everyone would be involved. I'd watch my father set a burning brand to the diseased stalks. The dried grass would catch alight willingly, one stalk, then many, all of them burning as the fire spread. Everyone in the keep would ring themselves around the blighted field, toting wet sacks and rakes, anything to beat the fire back once it got to the end of the blighted field, not allowing it to spread to the healthy.

That's what I had to do now.

Burn them out. Because there was no other way to cleanse Snowmere of the Reavers' presence.

*Burn*, I thought, seeing the building on the left, smouldering slowly. The flames had died down to coals, but I brought them to life again, coaxing them awake, then blowing gently between my lips, an answering breeze picking up to fan the flames. That happened there, there, and there, all around the square.

Dead fires or banked ones flared higher. At first, the Reavers didn't respond. Burning, destruction, it was as normal to them as a field of flowers might be to me, so they paid no mind as more and more spots began to burn in earnest.

Then the smoky haze began to shift, wafting closer.

Their animal natures were stifled by Callum's will. If they'd had a sense of self-preservation they would not have leapt into any of the battles we'd fought against them. Animals fought for territory, for dominance, for mating privileges, but what motivated Callum was something entirely alien to those innate tendencies. So it took some time for those instincts to kick in. But when they did? I watched from the outskirts, my eyes flickering with reflected fire, catching the moment when noses were thrust up, when ears flicked forward.

*Burn*, I said, over and over, feeling the power of each man pulsing through me, along with that of the land. The Reavers didn't belong here, weren't supposed to exist. They were a corruption that had been allowed to fester, but nature always corrects itself. It starves out plagues, allows predators to flourish when prey animals grow too many, then their number too is forced to thin as the pickings grow slim. The time of the Reavers was over, I decided, pushing my will out further.

Flames flared higher and higher, forming a wall around the square now and the Reaver roars turned to screams. Fire broke free of the edges, no longer needing me to feed it when there was so much fuel for it to consume. It ate up wreckage, going from wood to ash. And when it ran out of that to burn? Living beings can be just as combustible. I smiled as I felt the flames jump to the first Reaver, then when it went floundering into the crowds, screaming and slapping at its singed fur, those flames jumped again and again. *Burn, burn, burn*, I crooned, singing a strange kind of lullaby to the fire.

*You think yourself the avatar of the Mother*, the Morrigan chuckled inside my head. *But you belong to me. You always have, despite your denials. Take pleasure in their deaths. Feel the moment each one of their hearts stops. Know that you were the one to do this.*

But I wasn't alone in that realisation. My vision skimmed up, over the square and then rose into the air on the wings of a raven, our raucous cry piercing the air. And there, on the balcony that was outside the king's suite, was Callum. As he watched the destruction that took place before him, I saw the bright red shiny scars on his arms.

Marks I'd left upon him.

*Burn*, I urged again, hoping to set him alight, to turn the air hot and combustible, to create a spark of lightning that would turn him to flame. But he only jerked himself away from the railings and then strode inside.

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## Chapter 38

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"We need to turn back," Tristan stammered, knowing he no longer needed to be quiet to survive. A massacre was taking place before us, and his little voice was lost amongst it. "This is witchcraft, brother!"

"This is the reality."

When Bryson shouldered forward, staring into his brother's eyes, the northern lords clustered closer and that's when I saw the lay of the land. Two Granian factions were in play right now, and my mates and I were just along for the ride. The king stared steadily and Tristan and his cohort of courtiers shrank back as a result.

"I know what you want, brother," Bryson said. "What you planned when I was absent from the capital. You were a busy little bee, currying favour with the southern lords, planning your eventual domination of both countries, imagining yourself emperor of all. But I was about my own business."

One of the northern lords, a fellow with close cropped hair and a thick beard, pulled out his sword and the rest of the northerners followed suit.

"This is all a great shock for you. All of you from the south, that is." Bryson looked at them all. "But not for us. I've seen towns on the border decimated. Children slain, women torn asunder, houses burned and places laid waste by animals just like them. So, if you want to claw your way onto the lion throne, you'll need to know just what threat you're facing."

"We need to go back," Tristan pleaded, grabbing at his brother's hand. "I have no designs on the throne. I just wish to ensure our family's legacy is preserved." He looked beyond him to me. "You've fallen under the spell of a witch. I see that now. We—"

Bryson smirked then, some aspects of his time as Rake returning to his demeanour.

“Is that how you’ll sell it to those fools parading around Aramathia in their untarnished, unused gilt armour?” he asked Tristan, in a low voice. “That I’ve been ensorcelled and that you’ll simply be doing a public service by deposing me? Well, tell me this, brother, because if your answer is good enough, I’ll step down right now.” He threw an arm wide, pointing the conflagration burning beyond. “How will you deal with this, Tristan? Imagine you are king and Father’s crown is on your head. What will you do?”

Tristan took an involuntary step backwards and that in itself was answer enough: that when his back was against the wall, he’d try to keep retreating. The northern lords scoffed and then gave Tristan and his party their backs, before turning towards me.

“So you’re her,” the lord with the big beard said. “Lord Kendrick.” He offered me his hand and I shook it. “I thought for a moment you were my Missy. The girl is a hellcat, and a devil with a sword and a bow.”

There was much assumed knowledge in his words. I wanted to puzzle it out when I could have the chance. But now was not the time, for my heart was beating too hard, too fast in my chest, making me feel dizzy and wired all at the same time. Blood was still seeping from my nose, something I had to wipe away periodically. And I wanted to ensure I made the most of having the attention of all the men here now.

“Lord Kendrick?” I said. “My father spoke of you.”

The man chuckled. “Not good things, I assume?”

“No, which means I’m automatically going to think better of you,” I replied. “And Missy? I’d like to meet her before all of this ends.” His eyes narrowed slightly, assessing me, but he nodded sharply. “But now we must proceed, while the iron is hot, so to speak.”

All of the men stared out into the fire, into the chaos we had created and then nodded, but when I turned back to ask Pepin which path to take, she was gone again.

Of course she was.

These goddesses flitted in and out of my life, causing chaos or letting it fester, and we were left to clean up the mess. I gritted my teeth, then squared my jaw. We’d take the palace through our own reconnaissance, then.

WE SKIRTED THE SQUARE, our way lit by the terrible light of the flames, and found the door to the servants' passage that Dane had spoken of. We had to shift aside rubble and fallen timbers to open it, but once we did, we slipped inside the castle with no opposition. I was reminded of the morning when I went to find Aurora.

I'd gone to the castle to call her out, to offer her a challenge she understood, to stand up to her petty tyrannies. And I felt that same sense of purpose, of righting a wrong, as I entered the castle again. The difference was that Aurora's actions felt so small, so trivial, now, compared to Callum's, and I was a lot less sure of my ability to end him compared to the confidence I'd had in meeting her. In truth, he'd been the real threat all along. I'd allowed myself to become caught up in the distractions of court politics, but there would be no more of that. No matter what the gods or goddesses, kings or queens wanted, I *needed* one thing above all else.

To kill Callum.

That was why I'd agreed to the mission. I knew Tristan had been trying to manipulate us all along, but there was merit to his suggestion. Kill the prince of the Reavers and it'd reduce every single one of those monsters down to the naked, weak men who appeared each time they were released from his control, whether by death or by the intervention of my power. In my mind's eye, I saw the vision splendid of Snowmere—of all Strelae—freed of the Reavers, and the image burned just as bright as the fire in the square.

TRAVELLING via the corridors now would not give us the element of surprise. I'd ruined that when I set the square on fire. Instead it was just a means to avoid any unwanted encounters. We could hear the roar of Reavers, felt their steps thundering past us on the other side of the walls as we walked deeper into the palace.

"Here," Dane whispered finally, pointing to a tiny peephole set in the door. I walked up to it, pressing my eye against the cool wood, and there he was.

He didn't look like the Reavers' prince right now. Callum sat on the edge of the bed that he'd had covered in black satin sheets, elbows on his knees, head hanging. I was gratified to see blood still seeping sluggishly from the wound on his side. My fingers twitched. Could I yank that open, force every drop of blood out of him, then...? My train of thought was cut off as his head



jerked up, like a hound that's caught scent of its prey. His eyes, glowing hellishly red, found mine. As he smiled slowly, a strange glint came into them.

"You came," he told the wall, and I wondered at how he could tell I was there. "I knew you would. We were joined from the very beginning, unable to be kept apart, even in inception." He got to his feet, revealing a bare, scarred chest. Clad only in a pair of leather trousers, he stalked forward. The marks on his bare torso looked like at some point he'd been bitten by his own Reavers, with white points of scar tissue raking his shoulder. "Sister, lover—" My lips twisted in revulsion as I mouthed that word, and my brows drew down in a deep frown. "Queen." He held out a hand imperiously, his bearing declaring him every inch the prince, even as his maimed body seemed to belie that status. "My queen."

"Darcy, this isn't—" Dane whispered, urgently.

I cut him off, twisting the handle and stepping into the room. I watched Callum smile, his eyes glittering as I approached. There was no other way through this than to go forward. Pepin had said I needed to believe in my abilities, to draw on the power of the land if I was to extinguish Callum, so I was going to follow her advice.

*"Don't allow anyone to draw you into conversation in a fight," Nordred had told me when I was a woman, grown. "It's a delaying tactic, gives them more time to rally and you don't want that."*

I didn't. I raised my sword, the flames along its blade pulsing in time with my heartbeat as I approached him. My mates ringed around me, defining the field of combat upon which we would fight, and I lifted my sword into the guard position. I held the blade at an angle across my body, ready to strike out in my defence. Callum's unnervingly proprietary smile turned to a smirk, and he dropped his outstretched hand.

"Couldn't stay away from me?" he asked.

"Couldn't wait another second to kill you," I retorted, approaching slowly.

Watch for the line of attack, that's what Nordred had told me, read their body, their facial expressions. Look for signs of which way they'll attack and side step it, then strike.

"And yet you stand here, bantering with me," Callum replied, moving in turn. "It's almost as if you can't bring yourself to strike me down."

Looking for hints, more likely, but I didn't reply. I wouldn't let myself be

distracted by this monster. I had to analyse him, dissect his moves before slicing him in two. And there it was. A slight dip of his shoulder. He was going to strike right, so I shifted to the left.

I'd seen many of my men and women take the half-wolf form, so the transformation of Callum's body shouldn't have been a surprise, but it was what he shifted into that gave me pause. Rather than fur and claws, I saw black smoke trickle from his fingers.

"Darcy!" Dane shouted in warning, but his warning wasn't needed. I knew instinctively that I shouldn't let it touch me.

But where he was striking out with his hands, I had a sword, so I parried his swipe and then quickly sliced back and into his arm. The bright blue flames burned brighter, fluttering with the movement. I'd slice off his hand, just like I had the Reavers and then I'd go about cutting the rest of him to pieces.

So it came as an awful shock when my blade hit bone, and instead of slicing straight through, it was as if I'd slammed my sword into a brick wall. Worse, the blue flames along the steel began to falter, then darken. They turned to black, small deadly looking things that threatened to creep up the blade and... I pulled it away from him, and he laughed.

"Tell you what." He threw his arms wide, providing the perfect target, so of course I hesitated, suspecting him of some trap. "I'll let you strike first, my queen. Then when I've subdued you, you can spend some time patching me up—after we've made love, of course. I think you'll look quite fetching, covered in my blood."

"I'd rather see you covered in your own," I shot back, right before I struck.

Callum was favouring his right side, where I'd plunged the sword the last time we'd met, so I feinted towards it, watching for the split second it took for him to move. As soon as he did, I was moving to the left before he could even swipe at me, stabbing into his unprotected side.

The sword didn't slice him in two like it did the other Reavers. Instead the blade scraped against his ribs, exposing the white bone, but not much more. The tip didn't find the gaps between them, didn't stab through and so I was forced to jump sideways and out of his reach. And Callum just laughed.

"The Sword of Destiny..." He spat out the title like it personally offended him. "It doesn't work on me like it does my Reavers, does it, my queen?"

"Don't call me that," I growled, watching in confusion and horror as the

cut across his ribs knitted back together.

I lunged forward again, forcing him to raise his arms to block my strike, and the blade hit the hard bones of his forearms. For a moment I watched his flesh burn, bleed, then—just as before—a blackness seeped from the wounds to prevent them from bleeding before oozing onto the blade.

“What do you want me to call you?” he asked, grinning as he began to circle, forcing me to do the same. “*Lover? Sister? Eleanor?*”

“You think I’m her?” I asked, my shock causing me to foolishly stop in my tracks at the idea of it. My reaction only made his smile widen as he shook his head at me.

“More than her. A version of Eleanor tempered by trauma: made hard by circumstances, rather than weakened by them,” he said. “A woman worthy of me, unlike my pathetic sister.” My sword twitched in my hand, the blue flames flickering wildly. “We are joined—”

“The hell we are,” I said. I knew I was being pulled into responding to his strategy the very way I’d told myself not to. But I couldn’t seem to stop it. *Focus*, I told myself, *focus!* Clenching my jaw, I struck out again, no longer trying to aim for those black smoky hands and whatever magic they wielded. I sliced my sword through the air, aiming for his head, in the hopes of wiping the annoying smirk off his face, glad when he was forced to jump backwards once, then again. But he didn’t bother trying to strike back, not when he could employ a more effective weapon.

“No? Then how do you explain this?” There was something sinuous about his voice, like it was a snake trying to hypnotise me. Determined not to be his prey, I struck again and again, trying to catch him off guard, to lop his head from his shoulders, but Callum evaded each blow with a smirk. “Your aim is very good. Nordred taught you well...” His hands went up, catching my blade between them and his grip was unbreakable. My muscles strained with everything I had to try and break his hold. “But he had no way of knowing what I would become. If you’d had the chance to oppose me on the battlefield in my former life, I’d be dead now, but...” His mouth quirked up on one side, as though he was privy to a joke that only he knew. I had a sickening feeling that he was about to share it, and that none of us would find it amusing. “Where do you think I have been for three hundred years, Darcy?”

A tense silence filled the room. I frowned as I stared at him, considering his words and trying to fathom what his meaning might be. Suddenly,

muffled howls from beyond the heavy oak door alerted us to the fact that our time was running short.

On the edge of my field of vision, I saw Weyland whip his head around to assess the extent of the threat. As I flicked a glance in his direction, I saw his eyes widen, and he called out, “To the door!” Even as I directed my attention back to Callum, I was aware of my mates running to the door to push the solid iron drawbar home into its slot on the far side of the door frame.

“Darcy!” Dane shouted my name in an attempt to stop me from stepping into the snare that Callum was setting. As my men threw their backs against the door, the thuds coming from the other side made it clear that they’d barred it just in time, for Reavers were now attempting to break it down. When I threw another glance their way, Gael was watching me. His tone turned desperate. “Darcy!”

But whatever my mates had to say, it was drowned out by the sound of my heart beating loudly in my chest as I tried to fathom Callum’s intent.

I answered his question, of course I did. I had to know what he was talking about.

“You’ve been raising Reavers—”

“Not for three hundred years, beautiful girl,” he interrupted, before raising a hand as if to stroke my face. When I shied back from it, he continued. “Nowhere near that long. It’s only the last nineteen years that I’ve been walking that particular path.”

And that was when the vision struck: a series of events playing out before me.

The first moment made me blanch, for I saw Linnea. But this younger version of her was smiling softly, kindly, murmuring words of encouragement and support. I saw that she was bent over, tenderly wiping the brow of a panting, red-faced woman drenched in sweat. The next moment she was reaching between the woman’s bloodied thighs to draw out a quivering, screaming baby. Although I wanted to stay there to see my mother’s face as she reached for me, the vision whirled me away. With a dawning sense of horror, I began to understand that it wasn’t only me that was born that day. The next moment, I was looking at the interior of a crystal cave, at a figure I barely recognised as Callum. Eyes closed, motionless, he was covered in enough grime to look like the abandoned idol of some long since forgotten dark god. Then, somehow, the sounds of my first cries emanated from within the crystals. As the reverberations washed over him, his eyes flicked open,

hellish red and glowing in the darkness.

For a few moments, the vision flickered back and forth. When I reached my newborn hands into the air, he did the same, black smoke playing across his skin. Those eyes stared at his claws as if seeing them for the first time. And when I fed at my mother's breast, temporarily soothed from the trauma of birth, Callum set forth, seeking sustenance too. First a deer that happened to cross his path, then a bear just risen from hibernation. But their meat, their blood, didn't slake the hunger and thirst that burned inside him.

He stumbled into a small village, lurching like a shambler, bird shit, dirt and mud caking his body. People looked up as he passed and made the customary sign to ward off evil, looking scared when it didn't work. They frowned and shied away, then laughed nervously as he approached. The age-old approach of the uneducated to the unfamiliar was evident in the way they poked him with the long forks they'd been using to toss hay, then circled him, before pushing him around as he stumbled. Then he shifted, taking the form of a Reaver. And the laughter turned into screams.

As I stood with my hand at my mouth and my guts roiling, he continued his trail of destruction. Blood, flesh, sobs that were hacking and broken as he rutted on top of something soft, then the only sound was the crackling of fire, the stink of smoke in his nose, before he moved on. Over the Eaglefell Mountains and beyond, to the dark lands. When he recruited more and more Reavers, his powers grew and so did his memories of what had happened. He turned a band of murderous monsters into an army, turning them back towards the border of his homeland when he felt her presence.

Me. My arrival in Strelae brought him home. Everyone he killed, everything he destroyed, was because of me. If my mates hadn't whisked me across the border, if I'd mouldered away in my father's keep... Nordred could've taken me to Strelae at any point before I met them, whisking me away under my father's nose and the two of us, we could've lived the life we always wanted, father and daughter selling our swords to the highest buyer.

But he hadn't.

He'd left me in Grania, in a country that would never welcome my strengths and skills, because somehow he'd decided that was a better option.

Because of this.

The world was going to burn because of Callum and his Reavers. If I burned some today, yet more would be made from what was left of the population of Strelae. And it was all my fault. He'd never have returned to

the place of his birth, never decimated Wildeford and countless other towns, Snowmere being the largest, if I hadn't crossed the border. I staggered back, his words hitting me far harder than anything physical he could've done to me then.

It was all my fault.

"I was joined to Eleanor in birth," he told me, "and now I'm tied to you just the same as her successor. Your strength feeds mine." His hand closed around the sword and the black flames ate the blue, extinguishing all the light I brought to the blade. "My destiny is yours, Darcy, Wolf Queen."

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## Chapter 39

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“Darcy!” Bryson’s voice broke the spell I was under. “You can do this.”

The word of a king I wouldn’t kneel to, a man whose father proposed to subjugation of mine, but somehow it was what I needed. Callum’s words were just that, words and they were only distracting me.

I had to try. If I managed to strike Callum, the bastard, through the heart, then none of this mattered. He’d die and the Reavers would die with him. Everyone I loved would be safe, all of them, so I flexed my fingers around the hilt of the sword and felt myself drop down into the state that Nordred had worked so hard to instil in me.

Where ego, thought, self was dissolved and blown away, leaving only this. An arrangement of limbs best suited to make the strike, sword raised, arms bent, so that when I straightened them the momentum of that would carry the sword forward to its target. I saw it then, the point piercing his chest, burying itself hilt deep and me sobbing, blood running down my face, down his chest, as his heart was sliced in two. *That*, it was the only thought I allowed myself. *I want that*.

I moved like clockwork, my body, my sword moving on automatic, the sounds of the room falling away, leaving only Callum and I locked in a terrible kind of intimacy. He moved forward, raising those smoking black hands, as if we were caught in a terrible dance.

One I led.

I needed to aim for the soft parts, the neck, the gut, where few bones would impede my blade, so I aimed for one, then whipped my sword sideways, going for the next. The tip of my blade scored his neck and blood

burst free, right as he laughed. He straightened up, giving me a front row seat to watching his skin knit back together. No matter, I would try again.

*Find your form, maintain your balance, see the target and strike.* I heard Nordred's voice in my head, directing my arm as I attacked again. This time Callum met my strike with his own, the heel of his palm smacking into my forearm and that's when I saw something completely unexpected. Leather shrivelled and curled then fell away where he had touched me and my skin? It went cold, bitterly cold, a bruise forming, or so it seemed, but the spot was too dark, too deep. The cold went right the way down to the bone it felt, filling me with something I instinctively shied away from until the flames of my sword flared brighter. Just as before, they roared to life all over my skin, driving out the cold, healing the bruise, right before I rallied.

"Get your arses over here!" Dane growled. The northern lords and Bryson were already there, trying to hold the door shut as it groaned on its hinges, but Tristan and his contingent were clustered in the corner of the room, watching everything like traumatised children.

"Now!" Bryson roared and no one could have refused his order.

But I couldn't focus on that, because right now was the moment that all of my training failed me.

A skilled swordsman against an unarmed man was not an equal fight, and yet here Callum was, blocking my every blow with his own, because the rules had changed. Nothing I could do would hurt him. Every cut was erased as if I never made it, every injury healed. I was forced to do the same, feeling that bitter, bitter cold all the way down to the marrow of my bones, right before I shook it off. But he laughed every time, at my pain, at my confusion.

"You see how we're perfect for each other," he told me. "So well matched."

"I long to see your eyes open and staring at the sky," I said back, feeling a growing sense of trepidation, tears beginning to burn in my sockets. "For the Morrigan and her birds to peck them out, for maggots to form in the wounds I leave in your body."

"And I have much more prosaic intentions for your body." He ran his eyes down my form and my teeth locked together. "You lost one child, but I'll give you another. Many in fact. A daughter to rule after and a brace of sons to defend her. Don't cry for the loss of your babe, because you'll be barely out of the birthing bed before you'll be back under me again."

Not that. Not fucking that. A strangled growl formed in my throat, pain



fighting its way up, up, up from where I'd stuffed it down and it came with fangs and claws. I shifted then into the half-wolf form, the other half of my soul dragged up with my pain.

"My child..." It wasn't just the loss of my baby, I knew that academically. So many had lost theirs in this war not of our making, each woman feeling so damn helpless to protect the other half of their heart. It was the loss of each one of those children that had me snarling, the expression so much more natural in this form. "My child. Their children. All of their children."

"I'd kill every single one of them ten times over," Callum replied with a look of pure elation, "if that's what it took to get me what I need. You."

If what Nordred taught me was no use here, it didn't matter. I had other weapons at my beck and call. I stabbed the sword into the rich carpet of the room, watching the bastard's face fall. If I fought him, he could strike back, but this?

"Burn," I said, my wolfish lips curling back, revealing my fangs as I said the word, the flames of my blade exploding up the length of the sword and over me, then outward.

The first time I saw the flames lick over his flesh, the relief was tangible. Then seeing that skin turn reddish, the raw, that was even better. Black sluggish blood? It was like manna from heaven, exactly what my soul needed. I sucked the sight of it, of him jerking stiffly, bracing himself for the pain, then his teeth locking together to stop the sounds in his throat.

"No," I said. "Scream. Scream for all of the people you made do exactly that. Scream for me with all of the pain you inflicted. Scream until you have no throat to make a sound."

And for a moment I thought that was possible. My flames licked his flesh like a lover might, caressing his entire frame, but right as he was engulfed, his skin turning bright red, then black with blood as it peeled away, something happened.

He laughed.

Callum shook himself like one might a dog, flicking my fire from him and leaving it to set the curtains alight, the carpets and the bed. But it was replaced quickly. Black smoky flames formed instead and that's when I realised exactly what they were.

His grin was like a skull's as he reached out, a single finger touching a single red rose that had been left in a cut-glass vase by his bedside. Left over

from Aurora's days perhaps? I didn't know. Whatever it was, it died in that instance, the rich red petals turning black, the air filled with the sweet scent of its perfume, right before it turned sour and rank.

"You can burn my Reavers, steal their souls, reduce them down to weak little bastards," Callum said. "But you won't stop me. Eleanor and I were an aberration, according to my grandmother, the power my sister was supposed to wield split between us. She took the light and I..." He held his hand up so I could see the black flames flickering there. "I took what was left."

Callum moved closer then, the sounds of the room now bleeding in. People were shouting, Reavers were roaring and wood was cracking under the weight of something.

"I was always the one who could do the things she couldn't. Put her horse down when the poor bastard broke its leg. Beat the snot nosed brat who disrespected her in the classroom so he thought better of doing that again. Killing our grandmother when she decided that I was not a positive influence on her. Nothing ever stopped me from doing what I must, not even death."

I'd seen it before, Callum's death scene. Him crushed under the weight of Strelan and Granian dead both, crying out for the Morrigan as the ravens circled overhead. But this time I saw her, a familiar figure, appearing by his side and pulling him free, then placing her hand on his forehead.

*Aeve?* I asked, seeing the priestess from the temple right then.

Her head jerked sideways, those kohl rimmed eyes, the fine network of lines on her face creasing as she gave me a tiny smile, right before a red light filled Callum's prone body.

No, I thought, over and over, as I saw him move, wait, then grow strong again, when I was born. No, I thought as he learned his craft. He hadn't managed to create Reavers successfully at first, but he learned. Gods, how he learned. And he was a master of it now, able to create monsters with little effort.

He gave me the answer I needed.

Our powers were the opposite to each other's, perfectly in balance, but that was because each one of us kept a certain amount back for our own survival.

But what if I didn't?

I thought of my children, my mates and everyone I'd bonded with since I left my father's keep. Even the people I grew up with there. None of them mattered right now, not in the face of this threat. Pepin said I needed to

visualise what was needed and then draw upon the power of the land to make it happen, so I did it now.

I didn't try to burn him, but us.

The flames didn't lick over my skin so benignly now. I felt their heat first, then their bite, my skin beginning to sizzle. It hurt, but so did everything since that day and that's what fed my flames.

I got up every day and tried to reach for it, for love, for connection, for need and closeness. I remembered Jan pressing a kiss to my cheek, the feeling there and gone again and somehow that painful moment of sweetness coloured this. Her small moment of spontaneous affection had made my heart ache, just like I did now.

*Burn*, I urged the flames. *Burn all of it, even me.*

That's when I saw Callum's smile falter, the fight we were engaged in finally going my way, I felt the sweetest of pain. I'd brought this bloody bastard back into this world and I'd take him out of it.

"DARCY!"

They were the ones that broke my focus. They would every time. Because their pain? I saw Dane stumble back from the door, the Reavers beyond pushing hard to take the ground ceded. I watched him face fall, his strength leave him. Then Weyland, Gael shifting as he saw red lesions appear on my mate's skin, trying to heal them with the blue fire in his hands, but his own body was burning up as well, his hands no longer able to contain that fire without harm. Axe roared, his skin beginning to peel, but he threw himself at the door, willing to hold the line until the very end. That's what broke me. Because I could throw myself on the funeral pyre. I'd been dreaming of that since the moment we lit the logs under Nordred, somehow knowing that's where I belonged.

But not if it took them too.

I couldn't.

Because this was my weakness, one that Callum didn't possess. He was connected to nothing and no one, so there was nothing he needed to protect or hold back. The bastard could throw his whole soul into his attacks on me, beating me back, turning me cold, so bloody cold until...

"Not like this." Bryson's voice sounded so soft, so calm and when he touched me that terrible cold, the burn faded away. "Not like this, little

queen.”

I collapsed into his arms not from a desire too, but because I could do nothing else. The flames that burned inside me, it flickered, spat, sputtered and then—

“Not like this,” Bryson insisted and that was when the fire went out.

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## Chapter 40

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I was a bird, flying through the darkness. The air felt silky as it passed through my feathers, but I couldn't focus on that. I had somewhere to be, something to do and so my wings beat hard, driving me onwards.

My bird self felt a pang of disquiet as we circled around the steeply pitched roofs of the Strelan royal palace. We didn't want to come back here at all, but down we spiralled, in long lazy loops, the ravens perched along the pediments all croaking out their greeting as we arrived. We flapped, flapped, dropping altitude quicker to then land on the balustrade of the balcony.

"We ride for Grania," Callum said, pacing back and forth. We noted the blood that trickled from his side and felt a strange kind of hunger. We knew what that black blood would taste like, thick and sweet like syrup. "She wants to run from the inevitable? She'll see what happens to those she loves when she does." He spoke to a room full of Reavers and they just nodded along. Some had singed fur or red raw flesh on display, but still they remained still and observant. "I only need some of them alive to persuade her to do what I need."

"She is your power source, sire?" one of the Reavers asked.

"Darcy is your queen," he insisted, skirting around the question. We fluffed our feathers at that, somehow unsettled by it. "And she will come to accept her place by my side." He smiled slowly. "She won't have any choice." He glanced down at the map spread out on the table. "But first we need to send a message. We'll decimate this keep on the border. It's her father's and no doubt there will be plenty of people she cares about. Once they're dead, the girl will be a lot more compliant and finally learn her

place.”

That was enough to have me setting flight again. To pass on a message and to try and escape it. My wings beat hard, every muscle working to lift my feather-light body into the air, then I caught a spiral of warm air. I followed it up and away from this place that stank of death and destruction. My beak ached for a taste of it, but still I beat my wings, flying out into the darkness.

Here the shadows didn't seem quite so hostile. The endless darkness, I was one with it, my own black wings barely perceptible from the gloom. But the murk had its own currents and I followed them now, shifting up and down in a space that remained completely undefined.

Until two golden eyes appeared.

I knew them, somehow that was apparent, though in this form I couldn't have said how. All the bird knew was that we were flying closer.

No, sucked closer.

Those currents? They were his breath, because out of the darkness he came. We flapped our wings, tried to stop our progress or at least hover in place, but there was no stopping this. We were just a tiny raven, but he... The shadows resolved themselves, all the gloom around him somehow lightening in his presence, because nothing was darker than this massive wolf.

Bigger than a horse, bigger than my father's keep, bigger than a mountain, my brain fought to make sense of its size, but more than that. He was like a black hole, sucking in all available light but giving nothing back. His jaws opened as he panted lightly, fangs flashing, but it wasn't those sabre-like teeth that caught my attention, it was his throat. A great vortex swirled there, one that drew me in.

My wings flapped harder, faster, fighting his pull like a bird would a storm, not wanting to be drawn into the maelstrom and spat out again.

But this beast wouldn't be spitting anything out.

Because this was the wolf that ate the world.

He didn't have such grand plans today, drawing his breath in and out in noisy rasps, each intake pulling me closer. My pinion muscles burned, feathers rattled in my wings and then were yanked free. I felt each one of them plucked from my skin, tiny starbursts of pain that came faster and faster until finally I could fly no more, spreading what was left of my wings wide. He didn't eat the world, just me. I braced myself for the feel of his fangs, the crunch of his jaws but there was just a dizzying, sickening swirl and then this.

I jolted awake, blinking, blinking, able to see a similar pair of golden eyes

staring into mine, though much smaller. They creased, then his hand went to my cheek.

“Darcy...? Darcy, you’re awake!”

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## Chapter 41

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“Bryson?” I asked, not sure what the answer would be, but I hadn’t expected this. He scooped me up, held me close, wrapped his arms around me and gripped me tight, so tight I could barely breathe.

No one had hugged me like this. No one other than my mates. So it felt strange to smell the spicy scent of amber incense and sandalwood of his expensive cologne, feel the strength of his body and—

“Get out of the way.” This was the Gael I met when he first came to my father’s keep, his hair falling over his ruined eye, but the other glared at the king just fine. “We’ll see to our mate.”

“Just as you got yourself out of the Reaver king’s chambers?” Bryson snapped back, those golden eyes hardening. “Out of Snowmere.”

“Enough of that.” Weyland climbed on the bed and stared down at me, touching me with a too gentle hand that shook as he tried to stroke my cheek. I gripped it with mine, feeling that pulsing warmth I always felt when we touched, but so much weaker now. Like the thready pulse of a dying man, I held his hand tighter, questions in my eyes, but he collapsed down beside me, burying his face into the side of my neck and just breathing me in. “Don’t do that again.”

That’s when his voice, my heart broke. Tears filled my eyes, at what I’d tried to do, at what I’d obviously done to him, them. The skin around Dane’s eyes was purplish and bruised, Axe looked deflated, as if someone had sucked the marrow from his bones and Gael? I studied his face, seeing that angry cat expression. He was fluffed up, trying to make himself look ten times as big to ward off a predator, but underneath it he was...



Scared?

“Please don’t ever do that again, Darcy. Promise me.”

Weyland sounded like a boy pleading with the monsters under his bed, not a grown man, a warrior, but I’d stripped that from him, hadn’t I? That burning need to incinerate Callum had resulted in me stealing their strength to fuel that hatred. My mates crawled onto the bed beside me, Bryson staying at the foot of it, exiled in his own chambers, but I saw something in those golden eyes. They knew something the others didn’t.

I’d do it all again.

Not taking their strength, I couldn’t allow for that. Every time I blinked I saw the lesions forming on their skin, heard their grunts of pain. Never that. But that intense need to protect them? With it came something else. A need to hide what Callum had told me.

This was all my fault.

That woman who’d thrown her dead baby at me the way someone might rotten food at a person locked up in the stocks for the day, it made sense now. Somehow she’d known. There would be no Reavers if I wasn’t born and Callum wouldn’t have brought them to Strelae if I hadn’t crossed the border. Every death, every rape, every act of destruction, it lay so heavily on my soul, staining it black, blacker than the fur of the wolf I’d seen in my dreams.

Which begged this question.

“How did we get out of Snowmere?” I asked, but while my mates went to answer, I focussed on Bryson. Something glittered in his gaze, and it took a little for me to recognise what it was. Satisfaction. That small smirk of a smile, it said everything.

“My men and I got the lot of you out,” he answered.

“No, that’s not the whole story,” I said. “You wouldn’t have been able to carry four men and one woman through the entirety of Snowmere without being torn apart by Reavers. It would’ve been hard enough to do if we were all functioning, so I ask again, how did we get out of Snowmere?”

My mates shifted as one, clustering closer and staring at the king, as if that would force an answer from him, but Strelans didn’t have much luck getting Granian kings to do anything they wanted. Bryson merely stiffened, those golden eyes glowing brighter.

“Rest now,” he insisted. “I’ve been holed up in this room for too long. The council is awaiting word from me and the longer I spend not answering their questions, the more time my brother has a chance to recast himself as

hero of the story. This is my chamber. No one will disturb any of you while you stay here. But..." I hung on that word. He knew I would. "When you are ready to find out how the Granians really won the war against the Strelans, then come and find me."

I was crawling towards the end of the bed as soon as he said the words, but Bryson paid me no mind, sweeping from the rooms, every inch the king. I didn't get far anyway, my mates grabbing me and pulling me back, but for the first time I had to stop myself from fighting free.

"What happened?" I asked in a hoarse whisper. "What happened?"

"We don't know, Darcy." Dane pulled me to him, setting me across his lap and holding me close, my eyes falling closed on automatic. He stroked his hand up and down my body. "We don't know."

This should've been reassuring, feeling him against me, hearing his heart beating slow and true, but as soon as I closed my eyes the darkness was summoned and there he was. A massive wolf the size few had ever seen. Big enough to stride across plains in seconds, large enough to swallow the world.

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## Chapter 42

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“Darcy!”

Some time later, my head jerked up off the pillow with a start, and as I did, I saw a small person appear. Jan launched herself at us, then clambered over each one of my mates, groans marking each place she shoved her knees or her elbows, right before she nestled down in a space she created beside me.

“I know you need your rest,” Selene said, appearing at the end of the bed, “but the little princess was insistent.”

“You didn’t make me breakfast,” Jan said, listing my sins. “Nor my lunch, and you didn’t make me have yet another bath.”

“Terrible lapses of judgement, each and every one of them,” I said, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Can you ever forgive me?”

“If you tuck me into bed and tell me another story of the princess with the swords,” she said, because she knew her worth. Jan had no issue with asking for what she wanted and I smiled against her hair at that. I barely asked my parents for anything, knowing the answer would always be no.

“So what should happen today?” I asked her as I rolled out of bed. My mates moved too, though I caught the moment each one of them winced or required extra effort to do so.

“She should become queen,” Jan said decisively.

“But if she’s queen, she can’t have any more adventures,” I said with a smile.

“I will have adventures when I become queen.”

Jan stared at me then, her eyes sparkling with mischief, so why did I see

more than that? Something else, something—

“You’re not still going on about that?” Del appeared at Orla’s side, looking freshly washed and combed and ready for bed. He shot me a long-suffering look, something I’d seen a lot of on his face. “She used to drive us all mad, prancing around the village with her mother’s best tablecloth as a cloak. Ordering everyone around, being a proper little madam, she was.”

“Did you, young wolf?” Axe asked Jan and she giggled when he tapped her nose.

“You knew you were a queen before we even met you, huh?” I asked her, wiggling my fingers, ready to tickle her.

“Yes, I saw it in my dreams.”

I blinked, the little girl’s voice losing all trace of girlish fun and when I stared at her, Jan seemed... regal somehow. Her hair tumbled down around her shoulders, needing a good comb out and she was still in her dress, not the nightgown my grandfather had found for her, but somehow that seemed fitting. I joked about getting her a palace all the time, but now was the first time I could see her taking on the role of princess in reality.

Or queen.

I sucked in a breath then, wondering what kind of world she’d inherit if she did manage to fight her way onto the Strelan throne. Queen of nothing, that’s what she’d be right now, but I couldn’t tell her that.

“And what did you dream of back at home?” I asked her.

“Of you.” Her beautiful face split into a grin. “I didn’t know it then, because I couldn’t see you clearly. I thought it was my mummy, because you felt familiar. But it was you, Darcy. You picked me up and put me on a throne and made me queen.”

“You need to stop telling her stories, Darcy. You’ll just encourage her,” Del grumbled, an old man in a child’s body right now.

“Of course we’ll encourage her,” Weyland said with a wink. “She’ll be our queen one day and I will kneel at her feet and swear my allegiance.”

I moved to my knees right now, the movements slow and painful. As I went down I looked around for my sword and found it lying on a spindly chair. I pulled it free of its scabbard and set it before me, hilt up. The flames along the blade flickered lazily, detecting no real threat.

“I swear to spend my life fighting to make you Queen Jan, first of her name,” I said, not knowing if there had been one before her.

“Janila.” Del watched the two of us somewhat wistfully. “If she’s to be

queen, she'll be Queen Janila and I'll be Prince Delvin."

"Queen Janila and Prince Delvin," I said, inclining my head to each one of them slowly, like a grand lady would do, the two of them bursting out laughing, killing the mood. "But even a queen and her prince must get some sleep. Who knows what the morning will bring? We'll meet those challenges best when well rested. Let's get you two in bed and you can tell me how Queen Janila's coronation will go."

LYING down on the children's bed with them was just as fortifying as it was with my mates, but for different reasons. As we workshopped the ideas for the night's story, everything else fell away. My worries, my exhaustion, everything but this. I couldn't focus on Callum, not when Jan's face lit up as she discussed the preparations for her fake coronation. Even Del's frown he wore near constantly made me laugh, Jan's smile growing wider. I told the story of her ascension to the throne, just as she wanted it, but eventually their eyelids grew heavy and their breaths came in slower and slower so I was forced to stop.

Did other mothers watch their children like this, sucking in every detail of their faces with a kind of rapt fascination, tracing the soft curves of Jan's cheeks and the leaner ones of Del's. Where did the scar come from that bisected his eyebrow? Did Jan's real mother have a tiny beauty spot on her cheek, just like her daughter did? I'd never know because of the Reavers. I sighed. I'd enjoyed an hour or two of not thinking about them, but it was the threat they posed that had me moving now.

"When you are ready to find out how the Granians really won the war against the Strelans, then come and find me," Bryson had said. Well, if there was some secret to it that hadn't made it to the history books, I needed to know it. I turned down the lamps and crept out of the room and then walked down the hall.

THE PALACE WAS a rabbit's warren of corridors and richly appointed rooms, which was perhaps why I ended up stumbling into here. I heard deep male voices, ones that spoke authoritatively, and when I came to the doorway, I recognised what this was. The room where the Royal Council

met, though it was not a full sitting right now. My grandfather rose when he saw me at the door, as did Bryson and some of the northern lords. But beside them was Higgins and some of the wolf cultists.

“Darcy!” My grandfather said, rushing forward to take my hands in his. “You’re up and about.”

“Yes.” I gave his hands a squeeze before pulling away and consulting the table. A map of all of Strelae and Grania was set out across it. “And what’s this?”

“We’re trying to ascertain where Callum will strike first,” Bryson said, taking his seat again. “We were thinking he’d take possession of this bridge here—”

“No.” As I blinked, I saw it, heard Callum’s words, a part of the dream, no, nightmare I’d forgotten. I hadn’t remembered it until now. “Here.” I pressed my finger to the point on the map where my father’s keep was situated.

“But if he takes the bridge, he controls the movement of large numbers of troops across the border,” Lord Kendrick said.

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking logically,” I said, shaking my head. “Anything you learned about military strategy will be no use to you.”

“If this Reaver king is Prince Callum of yore, then he would’ve received training in strategy and the logistics of waging a war,” one of the other northern lords said. “He damn near won the war the first time.”

“But he’s not fighting a war.” As soon as I said the words, I knew them to be true. “It’s not about holding back the Empire this time, or protecting territory. It’s about...” It felt hopelessly egotistical to say this, but I had to. “It’s about me.”

One of the lords snorted at this, but Bryson silenced him with a sharp look.

“Because you are the one prophesied to come,” Higgins said, rising to his feet as he stared at me. It was always unnerving, because he didn’t seem to look at me like I was a person, seeing something else instead.

“Thank you, Higgins.” Bryson’s words were as polite a rebuke as they could be, though the cultist sat down in response. “Darcy.”

He turned to me, asked me to explain and didn’t try to interject anything of his own, making clear he was reserving his judgement until I was done. I nodded, clasping my hand around my other wrist and then telling them what I knew.

“I’m the reason why he’s here in the first place.” A small amount of muttering rose at that, but Bryson silenced them with a look. “That became clear when I confronted Callum.”

“You were talking to him, I saw that,” Bryson said, “but few of us were able to eavesdrop.”

“Those bloody Reavers...” Lord Kendrick muttered.

“I couldn’t kill him.” I took my hand off the Sword of Destiny and everyone noted the way the crystal pulsed with a blue light. “Not even with this. I tried but... We’re linked somehow. He went into some kind of stasis after the Strelans lost to the Granian forces, but he was awoken by me.” I saw it again, the vision that had been shared with me, of my birth and his rebirth. “When I was born, he came back to life.” I shook my head. “Or whatever it is that animates him.”

“Hatred, I imagine,” my grandfather said.

“And while I was cared for by my mother, he slipped across the border to the dark lands beyond the mountains. As I grew, he raised a Reaver army, but they just wreaked havoc in the lands beyond, until...” I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly completely dry. “Until I stepped foot in Strelae. I’m what brought him home, because I’m...”

I wasn’t one to beg, but right now I mutely pleaded with Bryson, staring into those cool golden eyes, wanting him to make the right decision. Because it would be oh so tempting not to.

“He thinks I’m his power source.”

“If you allow him access to your power,” Bryson said, cutting off the others before they could say anything. “That’s what all this has been about. He can’t take the sword, your power, anything from you, not until it’s freely given.”

“He’ll hold the keep and all of the people there hostage until I do,” I said, my voice getting faster and faster, my tongue tripping over the words. “He’ll kill some of them...” My mouth stopped, seeing it. Cook torn to pieces, some of the maids on the ground, screaming. “Enough to draw me out and—”

“So we keep you here, safe.” Bryson’s voice was authoritative, definite.

“No.” I dragged one breath in, then another. “I’m his power source but I’m also his weakness. You’ll need to...” I didn’t want to say this, but the realisation had come to me the moment I had found out the truth. I hadn’t wanted to accept it then and still feeling the warmth of my children’s body on my skin, I didn’t want to now. “You told me that you knew how the Granians

ended the war with the Strelans.” I scanned the face of every man around the table. “I assume it wasn’t through superior armour and the might of the Farradorian empire?”

Bryson went very pale right then, his golden eyes standing out plainly on his face, but Higgins grinned.

“It’s time for the lady to meet the dread lord, isn’t it, Your Majesty?”



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## Chapter 43

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“The chapel is a grand place,” Higgins enthused, readying himself to get to his feet. “You’ll finally see His Majesty—”

“I will take Darcy to the chapel,” Bryson said, rising, “alone.”

“Are you sure, Majesty?” One of the lords eyed me suspiciously. “Seems like the easiest thing to do is dispose of the girl. No power source, no Reaver king.”

“You think you can execute the wolf’s mate without consequence?” Bryson’s voice sounded deadly, taut. I didn’t know what that meant, but my hand wrapped around the hilt of my sword as my eyes flicked around the room, trying to ascertain which threat was the biggest one. “His mate is the only thing that anchors him in this world.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” My grandfather bowed his head in respect and so did each man around the table, some with gravity, some with fear.

“Wolf?” I asked, my voice thin. “What wolf?”

“If you want to know, you need to come with me,” Bryson said, holding out a hand for me to take, but I just stared at it. I didn’t want to relinquish my hold on my sword, not for anything. “It’s your choice. What you need, what the country needs, I can provide, but...”

*But...* That’s what I thought about as I prised my fingers away from the hilt, then slapped them down into his hand. It felt too warm, too big, too strong and he used it to tug me closer and didn’t that feel familiar? It was too easy to think of other men who’d done just that, my mates, so why the hell was I allowing this now?

Because I needed to know. The gods cursed women for their curiosity,

that's what the Granian priests said, but I held my tongue as Bryson led me out of the room. The carpets swallowed our footsteps so we moved like ghosts, without sound, right up until we reached the throne room.

IT WAS a strange place to be emptied of people. The place was too big, too cavernous and too ornate, as if the building itself and all of its majesty wasn't confident enough to just exist. It had to proclaim its self-importance, even when there was no one to see it. But when I went to pull away, Bryson's grip tightened on my hand. He paused, looked over his shoulder and then stared at me for just a second, before drawing me closer.

"You know the Granian version of how we won the war with the Strelans," he told me. "Your school mistress or governess would've taught you."

"Superior might," I said, counting off each reason I'd been given. "Better coordinated troops. Supply lines from the Farradorian Empire that brought more food, more weapons, more soldiers to fight, when the Strelans had no such ability to resupply."

"But what happened when those supply lines were cut?" Bryson asked, willing me to see it. "When our knights and soldiers dwindled and so did our food supplies. This is a rich land, but then it was torn apart by war, crops weren't planted and those that grew were either harvested and redeployed or burnt in the fields. Both sides were struggling, until..."

The answer would come from where he was taking him, that much was clear, so I held onto his hand and then followed as he led me up to the lion throne itself.

"Few know this exists," he told me. "Only the devout and..." He shook his head. "My father. My grandfather showed it to him, hoping he'd understand, but my father..."

Bryson shook his head and then moved behind the throne. He let go of my hand and I felt that warmth still there when he pulled away, then watched him do something very familiar. He pricked his finger with his belt knife and then pressed the welling spot of blood to a small carving in the back of the grandly carved seat.

One that was familiar.

The black sun and the white jaws of the wolf represented as a crescent moon. I frowned at the sight of them, remembering my father's rants about

cultists... I stared at Bryson and he met my gaze with equanimity before pressing the blood to the black moon. I'm not sure what I expected to see, but it wasn't this. A mechanism engaged, a small whirr alerting me to that, and then the back of the throne sprang apart, revealing a darkened doorway.

"What—?" I started to ask.

"You were raised to believe in the imperial pantheon of gods," he told me. "Then you learned about the goddess and her three faces, but... The church may say that the triumph over the Strelans was ordained by the gods, but it was actually one god in particular."

I stared back into the blackness now, seeing it as if for the first time. No, the second. The depths seemed to swirl, having a life of its own and then there was the sound. A regular hush that seemed to draw out, then rush back in again. My focus shifted to the king, searching his face for some sort of hint of what lay beneath. Instead of explaining, he pulled a flint out and an unlit torch that had been set in the doorway for just this purpose. He lit the torch and then stepped in.

WE WALKED down a steep flight of steps, the cool of night getting colder, developing a nipping bite with each step. My breath came out in great clouds of vapour until Bryson stopped and detached the heavy fur cloak from around his shoulders. He set the torch in a holder inset into the roughhewn stone wall and then held the cloak out for me.

"Then you will be cold," I said.

"I've suffered worse than that," he said, before moving behind me and wrapping the cloak around me. Once it was set on my shoulders he gave me a squeeze before pulling away. I was about to ask what, wondering at the pampered life of a prince, but the look he shot me kept me quiet. "This way."

But when we got to the bottom of the stairs, I saw it. The floor spread out, covered with a finely made mosaic that I only caught glimpses of. Of wolves and women, of battles and a black sun burning in the sky. He walked over all of it, as if none of it mattered, bringing me to a stop here.

I'd wondered at the massive black wolf statue in the cave of the Morrigan, but I think I began to understand it here. This cave was made of crystal, just like those that belonged to the goddess, but the power here, it didn't light up at my approach. Because it wasn't mine, it was his.

His, Bryson's, the king of all of Grania, but more than that. His, the

massive black wolf with eyes made of actual gold, the eyeballs having been carefully carved and inset into the statue's face. A statue that loomed up, up, above both of us, because as I came to stand before it, I barely reached its knee.

"The wolf that ate the world," I breathed out.

"That's what we call him," Bryson said. "He's a leftover figure from one of the empire's more... reluctant member states. The wolf cultists were monotheistic, not polytheistic, so they resisted the imposition of the imperial pantheon, even as they tried to include the wolf in their number. The resistance of the original worshippers is what led to the church transforming the more nebulous notion of the Devil from a dark spirit, to this."

We both looked up, the statue staring at the steps, gaze unending, paying us no mind.

"It preyed on believers' primitive fears, of the wolves that sneak up to a fire at night and drag away the unwary, of being prey, not predator. That fear became personified in the form of the wolf. A symbol of evil, of a ravening hunger that knows no boundaries. A man experiencing the very human lust one might feel for another man's wife..." He looked down at me. "That's explained away as the Devil's work. A man who murders to take another's riches? Also the Devil. The wolf that ate the world became the reason for all of the world's ills and the church stole the original religion's rituals for warding him away, but not the means to summon him..."

"Summon him?" My hand went to my sword as I took a step back, my focus shifting from him to the wolf statue and back again. "Why would anyone...?"

But then it occurred to me why I was brought down here in the first place. To learn how the Granians had won that last battle with Prince Callum's forces, the one where they managed to kill the prince of the blood and the hopes of defending their own land in one fell swoop. So I changed my line of questioning.

"What did they do?" I reached out and grabbed his arm and he stared at where our bodies met. "What did they do, Bryson?"

"No one calls me by my name." His voice sounded huskier then, hoarser. "Only you. Like my breeding, my lineage means nothing." His eyes became molten gold and when he twisted his arm to grip my hand with his, I saw it. Black claws where there were perfectly manicured nails. Dark fur prickling across his skin. He shifted to face me and I saw the change in his demeanour

instantly. How had anyone ever mistaken him for anything other than this?

“You’re a wolf shifter?” I barely squeaked that out, but when he smiled I saw the cruel points of his fangs, making me question the wisdom of coming down here with him.

“You can shift from one half of yourself to the other at will,” he said, his voice a low growl. “But me? I have no such control. When the full moon rises, I rise with it.”

He grabbed me then, wrapping his hands around both wrists and tugging me closer. Bryson was strong, so bloody strong. I fought against his grip, but that just seemed to egg him on, a low growl forming in his throat. And where was my beast in this? I reached for her but didn’t feel her, as if Bryson was somehow negating all magic in his sphere but his own, and so I was dragged closer.

“Do they tell you how sweet you smell, those lovers of yours?” I let out a sobbing breath as he grazed his nose down my throat. “The scent of it drives me to distraction. I’m trying to keep a million balls in the air, manage a brother who will do anything to take the throne for himself, to make my father’s wish come true, to stamp out this dark legacy of our line.”

“What dark legacy?” I asked through little pants. “What dark legacy, Bryson? You haven’t told me.”

“And what will you give me if I do?”

Linnea had read to me what were supposed to be pious tales for young women, of girls being met on the road to their grandmother’s house by the Devil himself, of him offering her all manner of worldly goods and power, in return for her soul. I’d nodded along to her sermons about resisting temptation, but... Part of me, perhaps a part of all young women, was seduced by the story. Of a dark creature that knew all of my secret wants and desires and was willing to give me each one. What need had I for a soul in return for that? I sucked in a breath, that amber and sandalwood cologne of his transmuting, becoming something deeper, darker. Like the scent of night blooming jasmine or ozone on the wind as a storm built. Something wild. But I was wild too, I couldn’t forget that, so I broke his hold with a twist of my wrists and then faced him down.

“What do you want?”

“Everything.” He didn’t bother to bargain or barter. “I want everything.”

“I can’t give you everything,” I reasoned, then touched the marks on my neck. “I am mated. I belong to—”

“Me.”

He herded me back with all the expertise of a hunting wolf and I didn't even realise until the backs of my legs hit the cold stone plinth of the statue. I put a hand up to stop him, but he grabbed it and slid it under his shirt, letting it stay over his heart.

“Each one of them gives all of themselves to you, don't they?” he asked, his mouth hovering over mine, not looking like a prince but a dark beast now. “And you just take it. Then take me, Darcy.” His hand tightened over mine, forcing both our nails to dig into his chest. “Take all of me.”

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## Chapter 44

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I readied myself to say no, that I had four mates and needed no more, that a very nice Granian woman would make him a far greater queen than I, but then he said the words. Just like the Devil in the stories, he offered me everything I ever wanted.

“The Granians won the day against the Strelans because they knew the only way to fight fire was with an answering fire. Some of the scholars discovered this chapel when we took what would become Aramathia, and they recognised the statue here, the stories. The wolf that ate the world? Many cultures tell of his story in one way or another, because at some point his worship was widespread. But those penitents wouldn’t have dared do what the general of the Granian army did. Gods and goddesses need avatars if they’re to have a direct impact on the world, but few are willing to host the dark power of the wolf...”

His smile spread slowly, all sharp white teeth.

“None but the desperate, and none were more desperate than them. The general bound his bloodline to the wolf in return for his power...”

And that’s when I saw it.

Granians didn’t like to admit it, but when I was growing up there was a kind of grudging respect for the two souled, able to fight as both man, wolf and a combination of both. Half of the revulsion towards contemporary Strelans came from the fact they’d lost that martial form when the queen came across the border.

But what if they’d possessed a similar power themselves?

Heavier armour would’ve only gotten them so far, especially if they

didn't have the might of the empire to keep supplying troops. The Granians had committed so much blood, sweat and tears into the invasion of Strelae, so to lose in the crucial last push was unacceptable. But with the break in supply lines, that's what they'd be facing. The Strelans didn't have to occupy and hold the land. It was theirs, they just had to push the Granians back and so the general would've been looking for any possible advantage to decisively win this last battle. I looked up at the wolf statue, seeing the bottom of its jaws from this angle, then back to the king.

The king of what exactly?

A stolen land, a stolen power? My hand shook as I reached up, watching those golden eyes darken, right before they closed. Because when I touched the side of his face, feeling the strength in his jaw, the stubble on his chin, those fangs pushing against soft, soft lips, he moved his face into my hand and told me.

“Granians feel like they sit in a position of superiority. Human ingenuity beats animal might, but they don't know. Callum came onto the battlefield in full wargen form, but...” One eye opened to regard me steadily. “So did the general. The letters from the time back to the empire make it clear. He didn't think he had any other means of winning the day.”

I'd seen visions of the final battlefield, but they always showed what happened after the dust had settled and so many Strelan men's bodies littered the field. The ravens had croaked overhead, then picked through the corpses for the tastiest of pieces, but what if...? What if we rewound time to several hours before? My hand spasmed, gripping Bryson's cheek, hearing his breath match mine, growing fast and raspy as I saw this.

CALLUM STORMING ONTO THE BATTLEFIELD, any number of two souled warriors at his back, all in the half-wolf form. They fought with devastating effectiveness, smashing into lines of knights on foot, clawing those on horseback down from their steeds to the sounds of men and horses screams. They were saving nothing back because they couldn't. This was their last stand, because the Strelans were weakened as well. They'd been fighting for too long, on too many fronts, having lost key areas of land due to Eleanor's prevaricating. Everyone was pulling out the stops, including him.

The general tossed off his cloak in my mind's eye, leaving one of his squires to fetch it, still others rushing in to help him with his armour. Not to



don't, but to remove it. The sight of this was hidden, could be explained away by the church as some kind of divine event later, or just simply hushed up and ignored, because in the end they and every other Granian would have what they wanted. The good land, the fertile one, to create the empire's breadbasket, if they could only defeat the Strelans decisively. I felt my fingers dig into the side of Bryson's face, into his chest when I saw this.

Men always looked so naked when they were out of armour, thin, spindly legged and vulnerable, but while the general was all of those things, it wasn't for long. He raised a golden medallion, one I recognised from Rake, later the king's possession. Rough warriors clustered around him chanting words I didn't understand in a language I didn't speak until this happened.

No smooth shift for the general, it was as if his flesh fought the process, the muscles jumping and twitching on his bones. He tried to shout, to scream, but the warriors around him began chanting louder, drowning him out. As the Strelans grew closer, smashing through the Granian front line, their words came faster and faster, until... The general dropped to his knees, hands slamming down on earth he had no legitimate claim to, as his head was thrown back.

I slipped from one form to another, just like breathing, but the general, black smoke poured from his lungs only to resolve itself as this, a very familiar black wolf. It didn't look surprised to be here, unlike most other people around it. Those not fighting pointed or gaped at the sudden appearance of a massive black wolf on the battlefield, all but the Strelans and the warriors who had summoned him. Cheers went up within their number, right up until those golden eyes landed on them, then there was only silence, as the wolf stepped out.

Dying men were silenced as he passed, going limp as they finally crossed over into death. Any grass or foliage that had managed to survive the battle died as soon as those paws touched it. Horses stopped screaming, armour rusted, leather rotted and then there were the Strelans. Some of Callum's warriors paused in the face of it, which was not smart.

That massive muzzle darted forward, gripping them between its teeth before shaking them the way a cat would a rat it caught. The two souled didn't expire like the humans did, that detail I caught, but they died of much more prosaic means. Spines snapped, skulls smashed back and forth and necks were broken before they were tossed aside, then it went back for more. Callum paused where he was, his wolf sniffing at the air, trying to ascertain

what this new threat was and decide on a response, right as he saw his men killed.

His cry, as it raked through the air, was part wolf, part man and all pain. He'd already endured so much, from ineptitude and apathy, to misdirection and mismanagement. All he wanted to do was keep his country safe and now... He stared at the black wolf, his brow creasing, his mouth sucking in breaths as he felt something die.

Hope.

But he couldn't relent. He knew what would happen if he did. He'd already seen the massacres when the Granians took over an area. They picked off his people one by one, like a farmer might rats in a granary. It was only when the land was completely denuded of its native occupants that they would shift their focus to another area and another. The process wouldn't end until the country was scoured clean of Strelans, and Callum couldn't allow that to happen.

He roared to his warriors, the process somehow similar and completely different to the way he was with his Reavers. Those fighters were two souled, where the Reavers had none. So they rallied, coordinated, worked out how to stage a response to the appearance of the massive black wolf and they tried, gods how they tried. Strelans attacked the beast from all sides, stabbing blades into its flanks and clawing their way up, swarming around it, trying to take it down one piece at a time, but...

"Do you know when the first Strelan earned another soul?" Bryson's voice was that of a storyteller gone hoarse from delivering too many tales by the fireside. "Do you know how they went from human to wargen?"

"The goddess—" I said, but he cut me off.

"This temple predates the Granian invasion. It predates the Strelans even. They conducted rites in the chapel of the Morrigan during the winter but..."

I saw a woman dressed in a long, severe gown of black, stepping into this cave, a golden crown on her head. She moved with a grace I'd never imitate, her dress pooling around her on the mosaic floor as she passed. The queen did not falter when she saw the black wolf statue, nor when its golden eyes gleamed, not even when it shivered, coming to life in her presence. She merely held out a hand for the massive muzzle to snuffle, then stroked her hand across the broad space between his eyes.

As I did Bryson now.

I blinked and all my visions fell away, replaced only by this. By him and

by me, standing in this old, old temple.

“People have been coming down here and stealing the power of the wolf for some time,” he said. “My people were just the most recent. Yours were the ones that came before. I have it, as did my grandfather before me, but my father, my brother, they hate that the throne has always depended on it. Father sought to extinguish the dirty family secret.” He smiled slowly. “Me. It’s why I was never married off, endorsed completely as crown prince.”

“He wanted your brother to inherit, to try and stamp out this taint?” I whispered.

“And to find a prince more amenable to his ambitions.” Bryson picked me up like I was a doll, setting me between the feet of the wolf statue, then stepping in between my legs. The intimacy of that was somehow unsettling and thrilling all at the same time. “Those of us that wear the mark of the wolf, we can’t make dynastic marriages, because there is only one woman for us.”

“Your fated mate...” I murmured.

“You’re mine. You’ve always been mine. Your father was raised up and kept at arm’s length because of it. You were left to grow wild as a result, unable to be brought to court and presented to your peers. Anything to keep us apart, because...” His mouth dropped down, hovering over mine. “I wouldn’t have tried to break you if I’d found you first.” His mouth moved slowly, as if caressing the small sliver of space between us. “I’d have found you beautiful swords and finely made bows, taken you all across the country to hunt all manner of prey.” His hand landed on mine, lacing with my fingers. “Your strength wouldn’t have been a threat to me, but rather exactly what I needed.”

His devilish speech was oh so alluring, but something occurred to me then which had me planting my hands on his chest and shoving him away.

“So why didn’t you?” I jumped down from the plinth and advanced upon him, jerking my sword free. “Why didn’t you come and save me? My father ignored me at best or beat me within an inch of my life at worst, for being the thing I was brought up to be. Where were you, Bryson?”

“I was just as trapped as you were, perhaps more.”

I let out a sound of disgust at that.

“Trapped by all of this privilege,” I sneered. “Trapped by everyone bowing and scraping around you.”

“Trapped because what I am is potentially powerful enough to demolish the games my father was playing,” he said, catching my hand and pulling me

closer. “But not powerful enough to do anything until my mate decides to accept me. I can’t tap into any of my powers without my queen to keep me anchored, because rather than destroy those that deserved it, I’d destroy everything.”

The Devil doesn’t ply you with gold and jewels, if wealth isn’t your weakness, nor power and influence, if you’re a modest person. The church harped on and on about being the kind of person who couldn’t be tempted by anything. But I was neither modest, nor immune to displays of power, not while I longed to wield it myself.

“What can you do?” I asked, the worst thing I could’ve done. I stroked his cheek, watched his eyes grow heavily lidded. “What can you become if I make you mine?”

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## Chapter 45

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Bryson snorted then, wanting to laugh but unable to, not when I was so close. He kept inching closer and closer, until I stood in the shadow of two creatures: the statue of an old god and his much more recent avatar. Power, that's what I felt, cold as ice and making each breath hurt just a little. Pure, pure power. But while I liked to think that was why I touched him now, it wasn't. My mates would've hated every moment of this, shouting their dismay, tearing Bryson away from me, but... It was them that liberated me away from the social mores that had me thinking their pleasure was important, not mine. Because I felt a thrill of it as I traced the line of Bryson's open shirt.

"What can you become?" he asked, a small frown forming, then those full lips twisted. "Gods, woman, don't you understand? I've watched you fight, you struggle when I know I can step in and remove everything that stands in your way."

He jerked free of me then, striding over to a small brass brazier. A familiar black smoke seemed to curl free of his hand, right before he touched it. It didn't set fire, instead the wood turned to dust in seconds, then the brass dish the firewood had been left in turned green, then black, then the metal became threadbare and thin before crumpling and turning to metal filings.

Bryson wanted to do more. I could see it in the shake of his hands, that need. Or perhaps want was the wrong word. It was like I felt on the practice yard. After I'd done my chores and all the other tasks set for me by Linnea, I'd reason with myself that my time was my own and I could spend fifteen minutes, perhaps half an hour working with my bow or my sword. But as

soon as I gave myself over to my weapon, time, responsibilities, my governess' stern face meant nothing. There was only the freedom that comes from surrendering to the truest part of your soul and that's what had me moving.

"Your power is like his," I said, moving closer and he flinched habitually when I touched his arm, but the black smoke didn't want to attack me. Rather I felt its silky caress, right before he took a shuddering breath in and pulled it back.

"More than his." There was pride, a need to prove himself in his gaze as he stared at me. "He needs to rape and pillage to rouse his power but I..." He swallowed hard. "I have to hold it back. Every day since the moment I went from boy to man. I killed my tutor when the gift came upon me. My father was disgusted, I was devastated but my grandfather, the king at the time, beamed and patted me on the shoulder. But with you..."

He touched my hands, my wrists, my arms slowly and carefully, watching the black smoke rise and play across my skin. Bryson stared at it in wonder, forcing me to question whether he'd let himself touch anyone like this. When his eyes met mine, there was something terribly vulnerable in them.

"With you I have control." He grew bolder, gripping my wrists and stroking them with his thumbs, seemingly transfixed by the sensation of it. "If we were mated I could bring the Reavers low, destroy Callum."

I smiled then, my eyes aching as they creased up. The moment he revealed this information, my mind had begun to race, to try and see a way forward and each one seemed to end in pain for someone.

"I don't get to make that kind of decision without consultation," I told him, squeezing his hand, then pulling away. "That's something you learn about having fated mates. Destiny is only one part of the equation to any decision."

"But Darcy—"

I pressed my fingers to his lips, feeling guilty when I did and that's why this had to happen. I offered him my hand instead.

"Take me back upstairs and to your chamber." His eyes flashed brighter then. "Back to my mates. You've made a very persuasive proposal but I can't make any decision without them."

"They call you queen." It felt like it was Rake's brow that rose then, not Bryson's, the impudence plain. "Surely you make decisions and they follow them."

I let out an involuntary laugh just then.

“If only...”

But as he said the words, I knew there was some truth in it. My mates had made me queen in their mind, but they ignored what that might mean. Kings and queens were forced to make tough decisions, ones their subjects didn't like and I was fairly sure my mates would hate this.

Do queens feel pain at their subjects' suffering? I wondered, as Bryson escorted me out of the chapel and back into the throne room? I'd felt the tug of a cloak around my shoulders in my dreams and I felt it again now. My brow was light though, for now, right up until we walked into the room.

“There you are.” Gael's voice was full of warmth, right up until he saw the cloak around my shoulders, then its owner. His mouth thinned. “Where have you been?”

“Working out a way to win the war against Callum,” I replied crisply. “Let's get everyone in the room, because a decision needs to be made.”

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## Chapter 46

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“No, absolutely not,” Weyland snapped after I put the proposal to my mates, his arms crossing his chest. He adopted a square stance, as if ready to tackle Bryson at any moment.

“Mate...?” Axe looked pained and that hurt far worse. Gael’s fury, evident as he paced back and forth across the floor, Weyland’s anger, they were far easier to weather than this. “But we just... And he...”

I know what he was trying to say because my heart said the same. I’d made him wait for so long, after we’d been through so much, but as I gritted my teeth, my eyes dropped to the floor. I would never have suggested this, not if I didn’t need to, but—

“So this is how you do it.” Dane slipped off the bed, standing tall and then walking slowly towards me, but I wasn’t his focus. Those ice blue eyes bore into Bryson’s. “I knew you had designs on Darcy but—”

“If you say no, then no it is,” I said and that’s when all eyes came back to me. “I would never impose this on you.”

“But you want us to say yes.” Dane’s gaze softened in its intensity, but he still watched me closely. “You think it’s the only way.”

“They have the same power.” I’d explained all this before, but I could make my case again. “Bryson is the only means we have to counter Callum’s power. It’s either this or I try to take him on myself again, but his power eats mine.”

“Or we don’t factor either of you into the fight,” Weyland said. “The king can sit back here and deal with the pit of vipers he surrounds himself with—”

“No.” Bryson hadn’t said much until now, but his voice tone was very



firm now. “You know that will never work. I don’t know Darcy like you do —”

“Damn right you don’t, king.” Only Gael could make that title sound like the worst of insults. But he jerked himself away from the others and came to me. His hands went to my shoulders and I welcomed their weight, his gaze as he stared into my eyes. When he was touching me, still engaging with me, I felt there was still hope. “Darcy, lass, we’ll find another way. One that doesn’t include tying you to a man, a fucking Granian, for the rest of your life.”

“So what is it?” I asked, hating that I was doing this, just as I knew I had to. “What is it, Gael? Callum is marching his Reavers on the keep as we stand here and argue about this. We’re tossing around ideas about how to fight him, but he knows how he’ll win. He’ll destroy everything and everyone in its path.”

“And that’s what you can do?” Dane the man was shoved to one side, but Dane the advisor was back in force. He eyed the king like he was a thing, another sword with miraculous powers.

“I don’t know the full extent of my powers.” Bryson’s cheeks flushed as he admitted that. “I’ve never dared let myself go that deep.”

“But you have that same destructive power?” When Dane eyed the king’s hands, the others did the same.

“Dane, he showed me—” I started to say.

“Show me,” my mate insisted.

I could almost feel the cogs inside Dane’s head whirr as he watched Bryson sigh, the roll his sleeves back again. There was a hiss from Axe when he saw the black smoke begin to ooze from Bryson’s fingers. The king scanned the room, then walked out onto the grand balcony adjoining his suite, walking towards a neatly trimmed rose bush in a marble planter.

I wanted to stop him. The bush had been trimmed and trained within an inch of its life, but it was still a living thing. Bryson caressed one of the sweet-smelling flowers, the perfume sharpening, right before it soured. The petals gleamed bright, bright red, as if coming to the peak of their bloom, right before this happened.

“Gods above...” Weyland swore, taking an instinctive step backwards, because the rose shrivelled, blackened and then fell away to dust, but the king didn’t stop there. His breath came in rapid pants as the rot spread to the leaves, then the branches. The darkness seemed to be coming faster and faster

and when I saw a frown form, the muscle in Bryson's jaw ticking, I moved closer.

"Darcy, no...!" Dane snapped, reaching for me, but I dodged past him and then placed a hand on Bryson's forearm.

"Fuck, no!" Gael shouted as they all watched the black smoke engulf my hand.

It was cold, but not horridly so, crisp like a spring morning, but I sucked in a breath at the feel of it. Bryson's focus jerked to me, his brow smoothing as he stared.

"You want to give in to it," I said, knowing somehow exactly how he was feeling. I was pretty sure it was the way I felt when I had a weapon in my hand. "You want to let it go, dive into that feeling." Just a small little nod. "You'll get lost in it, somehow you know that, but gods..." I let out a sigh then, a feeling of longing rising inside me. "What a way to go. It'd be bliss, to stop wanting, stop needing, stop fighting."

"Gods, yes," he rasped.

"So stop fighting," I told him.

"I can't." That tension was back in his face and the desperation in his tone. "I can't, Darcy. It'll spread and I won't be able to stop it and I'll—"

I moved then, the others cursing as I placed my hand above the king's heart, over the top of his shirt, so as to not incite my mates. I sucked in a breath and felt it. The rapid beat of his heart, the noisy inhale and exhale of his breath coming faster and faster and knew. Selene had shown me how to connect with others, to create a pack, but what if...? I reached out then, tentatively, unsure of what exactly I was connecting to when I felt it.

Psychically, Bryson was just like the wolf in my nightmare, a great swirling vortex ready to suck me in. With others I connected with them, I controlled the depth of that, but not Bryson. His soul felt like it grabbed onto mine, his grip snapping tight.

"Darcy?" Weyland asked in a wary tone, creeping closer. "Darcy, tell me you're alright. I'll lop this bastard's head from your shoulders if you're not, so—"

In my dreams I had fought the pull, the feathers stripped from my wings one by one, making me unable to fly, but what if...? Nordred had taught me how to sink down into myself, become one with the weapon, but he'd also shown me how to come out of it.

"Focus on the here and now." His face swum into view as he came to

stand before me. “Is it hot or cold right now?”

My teeth chattered, my skin suddenly prickling, as if only reacting to the temperature when he drew my attention to it.

“Cold.”

“Cold like ice, or cold like a cool breeze?” Nordred asked.

“Breeze.” That part was clear, but I frowned then, searching for more words. “A winter’s wind, right before the snow comes.”

“That it is, lass,” he said with an approving nod. “So what will that mean for the farmers?”

I answered easily now, because such simple questions brought me back to the familiar. Everyone spoke of the weather and the crops, the stock animals, because that was where our food and our fortunes came from. I repeated what I’d heard, about bringing the cattle in under shelter and the sheep in one of the hollows, protected from the wind...

“Where are we?” I asked Bryson.

“What?” His eyes had a familiar glazed expression, because part of him resisted any attempt to bring his rational mind back on line.

“Where are we?” I repeated. “Is this the old king’s chambers or—”

“No, mine,” he said between gritted teeth.

“And this was always yours?” I asked, like someone might inquire idly about your day.

“No.” A sharp shake of his head. “We were in the nursery first, then given our own rooms when we were old enough to sleep alone.”

“And when was that?” I asked, peering into his eyes.

“I was three.” I frowned then, thinking that a terribly young age to be living in a massive room like this. “My brother was born and so...” He blinked, the haze leaving, and when he looked at me now, it was the king I saw, not his power. “And so I needed to show I could sleep independently, because my mother’s attention needed to be directed at him.”

He let out a long breath then and we both watched the black smoke engulf what was left of the plant. It fell apart, leaving a little of bark and dried leaves on the tiled floor and then even they broke down to nothing.

“Well, I think we’ve seen—” Dane started to say.

“Break down the pot as well,” I told Bryson. “The earth as well. Reduce it all down to nothing.”

My mates muttered, discussed with each other what they thought about this, but I couldn’t focus on them right now. I was Bryson’s tether and he felt

the restriction, the security I now offered him. He smiled, a quicksilver thing, there and gone again, before he exhaled again and that's all it took. The stone planter shattered, then the pieces crumbled, then became dust that billowed around our feet. When he was done, Bryson stepped back and looked well pleased with himself.

"If he can do that without mating marks, then there's no need—" Gael said, stabbing his finger into the air.

"Yes, there is." Dane knew, he always knew. I wasn't sure if it was the new connection between us or his formidable observation skills. He prowled closer, looking the two of us over. "What she's doing, it's not enough, is it?"

Bryson took a shuddering breath out, then closed his hands, extinguishing the black smoke from his hands.

"It's like a rope thrown your way when you're drowning at sea," he replied. "Better than nothing, but still a slim thing to be clinging to."

"And what happens to Darcy if you tie yourself to her?" Dane shifted towards me, taking my hand and cradling it in his.

He wanted to do more, I could feel that now, this relentless tug he felt each time I got close and that's what made me stare at him. My prince stared at the king with a degree of empathy.

Because he realised Bryson felt the same thing.

"You could just as easily kill her with that power of yours," Gael snapped. "You want her to control you—"

"Not control. Anchor."

That quiet admission was all it took. Each one of us knew what it felt like, to be lost in your own power, riding the thrill of it even as you wondered where the hell it would take you.

"Callum doesn't need one," Weyland added with a mulish look Bryson's way.

"Callum wouldn't." Dane stared into space, his eyes flicking back and forth, as if he saw something I couldn't. "He doesn't want to preserve anything. I'm not sure if he even intends to rebuild once he's driven out the Granians. Vengeance is all he can think about." His attention flicked back to Bryson. "If we do this, we'll need to test your power and the way Darcy handles it."

"We won't get that," I told him. "The attack on the keep is imminent. We'll need to move troops, weapons—"

"Then if we can't do a controlled test of the way you two fight together,

we'll need to control this.”

When Dane held his hand out, Bryson just stared at it, not able to understand what was being offered.

“Each one of us had to prove that we were worthy of becoming Darcy’s mate,” he told Bryson. “And every day we get up and do that again and again.”

“I’d welcome that opportunity,” Bryson replied, ever the politician, but his delivery was ruined by a ragged voice. “You know I would, because you felt the exact same thing the moment you saw her.” He scanned each of my mate’s faces. “And you are also aware of the need to serve her, in any way, every way possible.”

“Dane, you can’t be considering—” Gael snapped.

“Of course, he is.” Weyland smiled but it was a twisted thing. “Darcy just handed him the biggest baddest weapon he can deploy on the battlefield against that bastard, Callum. Our brother could never look past a useful asset.”

But that’s not what Bryson would be. I felt suddenly shy as I realised what this would mean. We’d all jumped at the chance of deploying an equal and opposite force against Callum, but to use it, I’d...

Did he scent me like my other mates did? Bryson shot me a sidelong look and then held my gaze. His nostrils worked, breathing me in with slow, steady breaths.

If we decided this was our only way forward, I’d be claiming the king of Grania as my mate before the sun rose again.

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## Chapter 47

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“Tell me this is what you want.” Gael had moved past anger and into concern and right now he had me pinned against the wall, my head in his hands. “If this isn’t it, we’ll find another way.”

I closed my eyes then, resting my cheek in his palm.

“It’s not as if I’m unused to fate pushing me into connections with strange men,” I replied with a smile.

“Darcy...”

My eyes opened again.

“And I’ve yet to regret it.” I touched his face, feeling the tension thrumming inside him. “Not one day. We’re fated, yes.”

“Written in the stars, love,” he told me, that soft, sweet tone of his back. He edged closer, his mouth drawn to mine like a magnet. “Until death and beyond even.”

“Let’s have less talk of death, yes?” We both smiled then. “But if fate is at work here. If this is how it’s meant to be...”

In some ways he and his brothers had it easier. They’d all known I was the one for them, and they could wait patiently for me to come to the same realisation. This was their first time experiencing the vagaries of fate, of feeling forced down a path not of their choosing, of having to find a way to deal with it with grace.

But if I could, so could they.

“Tell me this is what you want, lass, that’s what I have to hear.” Gael turned me around then, kept me cradled in his arms as he directed my gaze back at the king. “I’ll make room for anyone if that’s what you wish.”

“Not much more room.” Weyland’s smile was bright, cheeky, all him, but there was an edge to it. “We never have enough time with you as it is.”

“But that’s what this is about, isn’t it?” I said, clinging to this idea, even as I outlined it. “Freeing us from Callum. We don’t have to deal with your parents anymore. Once he’s defeated—”

“The king will be busy running his country while we run ours.” Weyland’s smile was smug. “We’ll arrange visitations, of course.”

“Or we find a way forward from this.” Dane’s eyes gleamed. “One where Strelans and Granians are no longer at odds. One where—”

“If this is what Darcy wants,” Axe broke in, intent obviously in curtailing his brother’s ambition and bringing our attention back to the now. “Then how do we do this? Allow him to bite her? She bites him?”

“I can’t...” Bryson’s voice broke before he stood tall and eyed the lot of us. “Is that how it was with all of you? You had the woman you’ve been longing for all your life and then what? A bloodless bite. An alliance forged?”

It wasn’t and we all knew it, which left the thing we’d all been skirting around since I walked back into the room, but I wouldn’t any longer. I reached up and jerked open the top toggle of my armour, then the next, before hands went to mine and stopped me.

Bryson felt so warm now, his skin hot where it’d been ice cold. He smiled slightly, rubbing his thumbs over my knuckles, no doubt feeling the same thing I did. A deep pulsing pleasure that washed over me like it did each time any of them touched me, my body making clear how this would be. His lips fell open and he blinked through the waves.

“This isn’t the way I wanted to do this. I dreamed of laying the world at your feet before I came within ten feet of you. I was going to prove myself to you, that I was worthy of your love, but...” His grip tightened. “Fate brought us together, but fate has some strange ideas about how that should happen. This is rushed and I don’t want that for you.”

“What I’ve learned,” I said, nodding over his shoulder, “since I met my mates is what we think and what we need are two different things. You need me.”

He stepped closer then, tracing the shape of the next one of my toggles with his finger.

“Gods, yes.”

“And I’m going to need you too, aren’t I? It’s always been slower for me,

I'll make that clear. They knew everything, but I have to learn things my own way. I'll need time."

Bryson was standing toe to toe with me, and I could feel the hot fan of his breath across my skin.

"Whatever you need, Darcy."

But right now he was offering the promise of his skin against mine, that pulsing heat growing into something else. I felt it in the way he shifted closer, in the way his head dropped down to get closer to mine.

"If you're not going to be a part of this, you need to get out of the room." Dane's voice cut through something, forcing the two of us to jerk apart, but not for long. I saw my mate over Bryson's shoulder and his eyes held mine. "I've always tried to make sure you're safe during the times we've come together. I've made sure my brothers held back, didn't rush you. I can do that now, Darcy."

"There's also the matter of them," I told Bryson. "Weyland is all about pleasure."

"I knew I was the one you liked the best," my golden mate said smugly.

"Gael is the feral one that will tear your face off if you hurt me," I continued.

"You can say that again," he growled.

"Axe is my defender, my rock and he'll be the one to hold me close and protect me if this goes wrong."

Axe's hand strayed to the hilt of his weapon.

"And lop your fucking head off if it does. Don't care if you're a king or a pauper. You won't get a chance to hurt our mate."

"And Dane..." I sighed and looked at my mate, seeing him flush, because he knew what was coming, but he was completely unrepentant about it. "He controls everything. You think you want to be joined to me, but you'll be joined to them, him as well. His father raised him at his knee to take over Strelae, to find a way to take back the land from Grania. That's who you'll be allying yourself with."

I stared into Bryson's eyes, trying to make him see.

"And what will he do, when I make you mine?" was Bryson's only reply.

"Tell you what to do and how to do it." I watched the king frown. "You might rule all of Grania, but you don't here. They call me queen, but Dane was raised to be king and so ruling us is as natural as breathing. He'll do the same to you if you become part of this pack."



“Is that so?” Bryson stepped back from me and for a moment my fingers twitched, wanting to pull him back, the impulse feeling like it came from nowhere. “Well, then, Dane, king of the Strelans, what would you have me do? I won’t walk out of here without making Darcy mine. I can’t. I need to protect her just the same as you do and it’s not a feeling I can deny.”

“That so.” Dane smiled then, offering his hand again. “Well, then, welcome aboard.” Bryson moved forward, clasping the other man’s forearm rather than his hand and the two of them nodded before turning to me.

They were wolves, even if they were of different kinds, and I felt that right now. Those keen eyes that glowed in the darkness. Those powerful bodies, those sharp teeth. I’d fall beneath them before the night was done and my muscles tensed, ready to run, but Dane spoke up.

“On the bed, Darcy, if this is what you want, or walk out the door if you don’t. Whichever way you choose, we’ll find a way, I promise.”

He knew exactly what he was doing, taking fate, destiny, the war off the table and putting the choice back in my hands. I stared down at mine, saw the scarred fingers, the calluses and then clenched them tight, right before I walked over to the bed and lay down on its surface.

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## Chapter 48

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Was Bryson as nervous as me? I scanned him as he approached the bed, but Dane stopped him.

“You don’t know Darcy. You’ll need to listen to me. You want her to be your anchor when you use your power? I’ll be yours now.”

Bryson looked down at my mate’s hand on his chest.

“I don’t know any women.” There was something so very plain about his admission, as if it hurt for him to do so. “I didn’t dare...”

“None?” Weyland’s brow creased.

“Not such an impossible thing, when you know where your heart lies,” Gael said, shooting his brother a dark look. But he turned to Bryson and nodded. “You waited for her.”

“I knew...” Bryson hissed and then pressed past Dane’s hand and walked over to the bed. “My mother and I theorised that Darcy was my fated mate. She had to be. My father and hers worked so hard to keep us apart, but... The king thought he could break that need, dilute it with other women. He pushed them towards me, slipped some into my bedchamber at night.”

I jerked up and off the bed, a growl in my throat, and where the hell had that come from?

“But I sent each one packing, some with gold in their pocket, to ensure they circulated rumours about our night together.” Bryson shook his head. “Ones that weren’t true.”

“So you do need our help then.” Axe settled down on the bed beside me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders before pulling me towards him. He kissed me with a smile. “The first time I was with a woman it was a bloody

shambles.”

“Over in less time it took to get your boots off,” Weyland drawled. “Barely worth the effort.”

“I’m fairly sure you cried after your first time,” Axe shot back.

“Tears of joy, just like the girl did.” Weyland’s smirk widened.

“So what, you want to school me through this?” Some of the regal air came back into Bryson’s voice. “Just because I’m untried, it doesn’t mean I’m unknowledgeable.” He stared down at me. “I’ve thought of this moment so very often.”

I wondered then, what it would’ve been like, if a young stripling prince had visited a wild Lady Darcy back at my father’s keep. Would Linnea have knocked my sword from my hand, hissing to me about all the ways I dishonoured her and Father, right as my gaze locked with Bryson’s. Would we have taken stumbling steps towards each other, despite what our fathers had to say? It didn’t matter, neither man was here right now.

Just us.

I reached out then and all the chatter in the room seemed to fade away when Bryson’s fingers touched mine.

“I thought Rake was an arrogant idiot,” I told him in a low voice.

“I was baiting you,” he said with a smile. “I needed to know what kind of woman you were.”

“And what am I, King of Grania?” I asked as he bent his head down.

“My queen...”

Each one of my mates gave me that title with such reverence, it made sense he would do the same. I watched his brows crease, his lips part right before he darted close.

His mouth on mine, his lips parting and mine doing the same. My hand went to his hair when he went to pull back and I held him right where he was. Bryson made a low noise of appreciation in the back of his throat, right before going back for more. One kiss bled into the other, layering themselves on top of each other until my mouth stung and my body craved more, but Axe had something to say.

“You’re getting lost in her, aren’t you?” Bryson pulled back for just a second, eyeing the other man that lay beside us. “It’s what made me confident I could survive battle fever. If I could come up for air after diving deep in her, no fight could take me away from myself. Because I always feel Darcy.” I tilted my head towards him, like a flower following the sun. “My

true north.”

“Axe—” I breathed out his name, ready to say something, anything, but he kissed me long and hard, then directed me back to Bryson.

“The boy is barely holding on by a thread,” Axe told me.

“Boy...” Bryson growled, his eyes flashing bright.

“Have pity on him,” I was instructed. “I know what it’s like to want something so bad you can almost taste it.” Axe nodded at Bryson. “Makes him seem a lot more palatable than before.”

“You’re a lucky fucking bastard,” Weyland said, coming to sit on my other side. “Not getting shoved through the door of a whorehouse by your father to ‘make you a man’. If Darcy’s really your first, there’s no topping this.”

“I don’t want anyone else.” Bryson sounded more wolf than man right now and Weyland nodded slowly before looking over at Dane.

“Happy pity on the man then, Brother. He might be a fucking Granian, but he’s not bad with it.”

“Undo the toggles of her armour and then push it down her arms,” Dane ordered.

“He thinks he’s going to tell me exactly what to do?” Bryson asked me.

“We go along with it to keep him happy,” I said, grinning when Dane let out an outraged snort. “He has to think he’s still in control. But...” I grabbed Bryson’s jaw, rubbing my thumb in the stubble there. “He’s right more times than not. Whenever we let him tell us what to do, it usually leaves us gasping.”

“This does?”

Bryson obeyed the letter of Dane’s law, if not the spirit, sliding his hand down my throat, feeling the rapid skitter of my heartbeat, right as I bared my neck to him. The beast in me saw the one in him and she acknowledged his power, showed him her vulnerable place. Probably because she knew it’d be like this. Kisses pressed against my pulse, tracing the quick beat of my heart until it began to race faster. The feeling of burning following the trail of his kisses, but it wasn’t a pain, but a pleasure. My breath came in faster, my chest heaving, and the others took note.

“Looks like you’re doing just fine, lad,” Axe said, an incongruous thing for a Strelan to say to a Granian king, but perhaps that was right. Here we weren’t our countries but ourselves. Darcy touched Bryson, raked her fingers across his back just to feel the flex of his muscles, the pleasing breadth of his

shoulders.

“Pull back,” Dane ordered.

“What?” Both Bryson and I asked that, but our focus quickly shifted back to each other, the kisses growing deeper, fiercer, with fangs and tongue.

“Pull back. Resist her,” Dane said.

“No, don’t do that.” I pressed my forehead to Bryson’s, forcing him to stare into my eyes. “I’m the one you want, not him. Listen to me.”

“No, listen to me.” Dane appeared beside us and those cool blue eyes watched the two of us. “Because you’ll need someone... unaffected to keep an eye on the proceedings, make sure your power doesn’t spill out and hurt someone.”

“I’d never hurt Darcy,” Bryson snapped.

“Perhaps not, but Weyland? Axe? You hurt them and you hurt her just as surely. We grew up expecting to share, but I’m guessing you didn’t. You’ll have to.”

“I know that,” the king said, but he paused for a second, sucking in breaths before looking down at me. “They own parts of your heart.”

“And that will never change,” I confirmed.

“Then hold onto that,” Bryson told me. “Hold onto the love you feel for each one of them, because the wolf inside me? It doesn’t recognise words or rank, or wealth or anything, but it does recognise you. What’s important to you is what’s important to him, so keep that in your heart and see...” He let out a long breath. “And see if you can let me in.”

We found a rhythm then, one where Dane gave us small orders and we followed each one of them, slowly baring each other’s bodies, then touching, teasing, feasting on each part of them. He was golden, beautiful, like Weyland, but Bryson’s glow was the much darker one of old gold, not Weyland’s newly minted one. I slid my hand down Bryson’s muscular chest and Dane forced him to endure that. His whole body thrummed with the tension that came from holding himself back. But then Dane gave the word and Bryson snatched my hand away, scooping his beneath me and then dragging me up off the bed, my back bowed so my breasts were presented to him.

He paused at that, eyes flicking over my whole body as if memorising me, but he couldn’t just look for long. Kisses along my ribs, then my sternum, then radiating out until my body screamed for more.

“Please, Bryson...” I murmured.

“You know what she wants.” Dane had lost his cool, his voice ragged now. “Give it to her.”

Lips closed around one nipple, fangs grazing my skin before he started to suck.

I felt like a line being wound tight, each pulse of his mouth and his fangs and his tongue twisting me tighter. My hands moved restively across his head and his shoulders as I murmured nonsense words, needing more. He pulled away when one breast was red and swollen, then completed the same torture until my thighs started to rub together. I was wet, slick, ready for him and I told the king that, right before all of them interrupted.

“You know how a woman’s pleasure works?” Weyland asked with a frown. “You don’t just stab your rod into her until you’re done.”

“Go slowly,” Axe advised.

“Let her set the pace,” Gael added.

“Touch her here.” Dane’s hand slid between us and I jolted as he found my pearl, Bryson watching my every response as my mate forced me to twitch and jerk at his touch. “You’ll hit this spot with each thrust in, but you need to be deliberate about it. It’s just something big and unrelenting rubbing her raw if you don’t. Just as the head of your cock is terribly sensitive, so is she right here, aren’t you, love?”

I couldn’t reply. I was close, so bloody close and I tried to communicate that in my gaze. If he’d just moved faster, push me harder I’d... I let out a sobbing breath when he jerked his hand away. But when Bryson moved between my thighs, parting them to reveal my most tender flesh, I felt it.

We’d been here before, Bryson and I. Not in this life, not in these bodies, but still. I saw priestesses lying in the heather, men with wolf masks pulled down over their heads, as the women pulled them closer and into their bodies. I saw that queen with the grand dress I’d spied in the temple, the silk pooling around her like spilled gold. She smiled wild as her hulking male companion leant over her, but when her legs went around his waist, so did mine. We tipped our lovers over onto their backs, because that was how this went.

We were queens and they were but kings for a day, or for as long as we needed them. We ruled this land, but the wolf god, he visited sometimes. A place was made for him in the old, old rituals, the peace and prosperity of the goddess interrupted by the chaos of the wolf god. They were all part of the cycle that turned and turned. The queen arched her hips, took the wolf man’s swollen length in hand and caressed that bulbous knot, smiling as his cock

jerked, as seed smeared across her palm, just as Bryson's did mine. And I felt like I wore a crown as I mounted him, watching his every response. The pain of anticipation was in that small frown, the pleasure of being finally touched came from his hiss, and then there was the hot stare as I worked him inside me. The wolf man, Bryson let us take our fill, but once he was seated deep, he took over.

Dane couldn't order him around now, because Bryson's hands slapped down around my hips, holding me still as his rolled, pushing him deeper inside me. and my body moved in response, like kelp on the sea bed, floating, flowing with each pulse of the current. I tightened around him, wanting, needing that hardness to anchor all my softness too. But then I released as well, letting myself slide down lower.

"Gods, Darcy..."

He said my name like a prayer and well he might. For the first time in my life, I truly felt like an avatar of the goddess. Mighty, invulnerable, heir to all the world's pleasures, my hips bucked harder, faster, in time with his. Because while this was all very nice, I needed something else. An ache had set up deep inside me, one the head of his cock grazed with each pulse. But that wasn't it, not what I truly needed. I shifted up, then came slamming down, grinding into this.

"She's going to take him," Gael said, wide eyed and my hand lashed out then, grabbing his.

"You going to knot this kingling?" Weyland asked, rising up onto his knees to press his mouth against mine. "You'll have that death wolf following you around like a puppy after that. No one can resist that pleasure, Darcy, especially not from you." His hand slid down between us, flicking his fingers across my pearl until I was clamping down tight around Bryson, but that wasn't enough.

"More," I told him, the queen demanded of the wolf man. "More!"

"I have everything you need, little queen."

That wasn't Bryson, but something else altogether. A dark force that rose up from the depths and stared at me through his eyes, right before he jerked me down. My body sang as it was forced to part, the knot feeling too big, too big, right before it became just what I wanted.

"Oh, gods..." I felt lightheaded and dizzy, the combination of pleasure and endorphins making me feel like I was about to fly away when whatever animating Bryson spoke.

“We meet again, my queen.”

The Morrigan had spoken to me so many times before this, her voice was always the rusty rasp of a knife being sharpened inside my head. This time my lips moved, but her words came out.

“Always, beloved.” We pressed our mouths together but didn’t kiss, something shifting back and forth between us along with our breath. “It’s been a long time. I feared you’d never come again.”

“I’ll always come for you.” Our bodies moved now, in long, galloping strokes. “The world might grow smaller, more complacent, the barriers between us steeper, but I’ll always come. But now that I’m here, do you accept my claim?”

“Always,” she said, I said, the queen from my vision said, right as the wolf man’s jaws snapped closed on our necks. “Always.”

“DO you think this will be enough?”

We’d all fallen onto the bed in a messy pile some time afterwards. Bryson had come back to himself, then wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. He was doing that even now. But I’d woken up to find Dane sitting on the bed, staring out onto the balcony at the nearly full moon.

“It’ll have to be,” he replied. “Whatever power Bryson has, it’s more than we had before.” He looked down at me. “Sleep now. We’ll be holding a planning meeting for the defence of the keep and the lordlings here will want to um and ah about it all, but we’ll need to move through the caves to the keep come midday if we’re to have a chance to bring everyone inside the keep walls.”

“We’ll be facing a siege,” I said, beginning to fight my way free of Bryson’s grip, but Dane shook his head.

“Best we find a crystal cave somewhere on the keep grounds then. Your father’s seat was built to keep the worst of the wargen out, so we’ll need to find a way to bring food and water in, but that’s for us to worry about in the morning. Sleep now, because tomorrow we’ll need to use whatever power we’ve gained to bring to this fight.”

I shouldn’t have been able to sleep after that. Dane couldn’t, but my lids felt heavy anyway. When the darkness reached up to tug me under, I wasn’t scared. I saw a pair of golden eyes watching me from within it and that didn’t worry me at all.



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## Chapter 49

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I stood on the parapets of my father's keep and stared out over the now empty fields and during that terrible lull before a battle, I wondered how the hell I came to be here.

I think Bryson had been surprised that he'd had to argue hard for the defence of his own country in the Royal Council meeting, but he had. Tristan had learned some humility in the incursion into Snowmere, but once he was safe behind the walls of Aramathia, some of that arrogance returned. Other southern lords who'd only heard what had happened discounted the tales not due to their veracity, but because the truth told was an inconvenient one. But Bryson had shown that he was the right candidate for king.

"There is no arguing this," he told each one of them as he stood at the head of the table. "This isn't deciding whether to raise or lower taxes or if a new capital works program is needed. This is about our survival." I saw some faces harden, some lips twist, but they stayed silent as their king spoke. "I have seen the Reavers and if my word is not enough for you, then ask Lord Freeling, Lord Kendrick or any number of your fellows who have experienced the terrible ferocity of these beasts."

His lips thinned and his eyes flashed as he regarded each man around the table.

"Your forefathers didn't baulk from fighting the dreaded wargen. How will you be recorded in the history books?"

That appeared enough to get the bastards moving. Men were supplied, as were weapons and armour, but... I scanned the open fields, watched the way the wheat rippled as the breeze passed through it. Would it be enough?

“You’re worrying about the fight to come.” I spun around to find Dane standing there, the last rays of the sun casting his face in red gold. His lips twitched as he stepped closer. “You’re not sure we’ve done enough.”

“And how do you know that?” I asked, eyes narrowing. “Do you possess the ability to read minds and haven’t told me about it yet?”

“It’s the same thing that any commander thinks on the eve of a battle,” he told me, drawing closer. I stood tall on the parapets, my sword at my hip, my quiver strapped across my back, my bow over one arm, but when he wrapped his arm around me, I felt myself sinking into his side. “Will I be enough?”

“You know everything,” I said in a slightly querulous voice. “Will I?”

“We’ve done everything we can, Darcy.”

That was true. We’d rounded up every single person around the keep, stuffing the Snowmere refugees, the remains of the Strelan army and all of the local people I’d grown up around into the keep walls. Cattle, sheep, chickens and barrels of grains and root vegetables were brought as well, just in case this turned into a siege. Then once that was complete we’d started the process of preparing for the Reaver attack. It was the fact that was all complete that had me standing here. There was nothing more to do other than wait.

Dane squeezed my arm. “We’ll have to be. The gods are on our sides.”

But what of the goddess? I stared out into the sky, seeing a lone black bird flying in the sky. Was it a crow or a raven? I didn’t know, so I waited.

They came through the trees and across the plains like a pack of dogs, dark creatures that moved and kept on moving with mechanical efficiency. I floated above them, getting a bird’s eye view of the Reaver force. Literally, it appeared, my beak moving, a harsh caw expelled from my throat. And he looked up, the only creature wearing a human face in this dreadful host, but he was the most bestial. Those keen eyes of his sought me out, then smiled as he watched me pass, right before I jerked awake.

“You fell asleep.” Gael was sitting beside me now on the parapets, the cold of the stone transmuted by the thick blanket he’d tucked around me. “You know there’s a perfectly good bed downstairs.”

We’d requisitioned my father’s marital bed, the massive expanse the only bed big enough for all of us. The chamber maids had heard my requests, then set to work, stripping the bed, the room of everything that belonged to my father. He sat in a small room now, kept fed and cleaned, but little else, just as he had me.

“The fight will be here,” I said, pushing aside the blanket and then getting up to stand against the stone crenelations as I stared out into the fields. “Tonight, I can feel it.”

Gael groaned as he got up, obviously stiff and sore for sitting on the stone for so long, but there was something soft in him as he drew me into his arms.

“And we’ll be ready for him, lass. I’m done with that bastard taking everything I love.” I shivered at that, memories, too many memories rising at his words. “We’ll take him down, use this king of yours you roped into the cause and then... Callum died once but he didn’t have the good sense to stay dead. We’ll correct that error tonight, I’m sure of it. Now, you might want to see to that pet Granian of yours. The moon? it’s making him shifty.”

I walked into the bedroom we’d claimed to see Bryson pacing back and forth, back and forth across the flagstones. Weyland and Axe eyed him warily.

“Have a drink, lad,” Axe suggested, holding out a drinking horn.

“No!” Bryson blinked, then dropped his head. “I apologise, but... I need all my wits, not to dull... this.”

And this was the black smoke that was curling up off his skin in longer, more twisting plumes. That’s what kept my other mates back, the whites of their eyes showing.

“Bryson.”

I moved across the floor despite the others’ murmurs of concern, feeling the trail of his smoke across my skin like a series of cool caresses. It helped dispel the fog of sleep, make my mind sharp, so when I touched his bare chest, I felt all of it. The satin of his skin, the shift and flex of his muscles, the quivering tension that as soon as I touched him, settled. He pulled me close, wrapping his arms, his smoke around me, which had Gael clearing his throat abruptly, but he didn’t know. I closed my eyes, resting my head against my newest mate’s chest and felt completely safe.

“You are in control, not the beast,” I told him. “Your power is pushing at you.”

“Always does closer to the full moon,” he said through gritted teeth. “I used to have to excuse myself from court events in the days leading up to it, pleading a sick headache, an absence my brother exploited. I’d lock myself in my room and try and wait it out.”

I grabbed him tighter then, hearing the pain, the loneliness there and he hugged me right back.

“You have no idea how good it feels to touch you right now.” He barely whispered that, but I heard it. “When I do, I feel more in control, that the power isn’t trying to fight free of me.”

“Then you should do so until the full moon passes.” I leaned back to stare into his eyes. “As much as you need to.” I smiled. “And even when the moon wanes.”

“Darcy!”

“Gods, why do children wake so bloody early?” Axe groaned, going to the door and letting the children in, Jan rushing forward, even as Del froze in the doorway.

“No, Jan,” he growled, leaping forward to grab her arm and stopping her from rushing towards me. “No!”

It felt like I moved all too slowly. I could let Bryson’s power touch me, but nothing and no one else could say the same and survive. I pulled free of Bryson’s grip, throwing my body forward, but Jan had done the same. She jumped into my arms every morning, so why would this be any different?

But things had changed.

I’d explained about the shift in my relationship with Bryson and Jan had just smiled, telling him that she expected a very grand palace of her own when she was grown, even as Del eyed him warily. He didn’t seem to hear anything but our warnings about Bryson’s power.

If only she’d listened.

She hit me like a ton of bricks, so much power in such a small body, and that had me stumbling back, right into Bryson’s arms. They went around us on reflex and with them came the fluttering plumes of black smoke, engulfing the three of us.

“No...” I begged, moving as fast as I could to pull free, trying to search Jan for any sort of injury at the same time. “No!” But the little girl I called daughter just smiled and raised her hand. I’d dragged her away from Bryson, but she reached back, beckoning the black smoke towards her like another child might do a puppy and Bryson’s power came willingly. We all let out a hiss as it played across her palm like a wriggly snake, but did no damage to her.

“Jan...” Del skidded to a halt, struggling to take this all in and we were right there with him. She giggled.

“It tickles.”

“It could’ve bloody killed you, that’s what.” Del grabbed her from my

arms and tugged her close. “Jan...” But he inspected the back and palm of her hand and saw she had come to no harm.

“I’ll have a wolf like you for my mate when I’m grown,” she announced gleefully. “He’ll be big and strong and protect me from everything.” Her smile faded as she regarded Bryson steadily. “Just like you will.”

“Of course, princess.” Bryson performed a courtly bow and that had her giggling again. “And each one of us will make sure he’s worthy of a place by your side.”

“How can she—?” Axe started to ask.

“I’ll be damned if I know,” Weyland replied. “But is it...?” He looked at the king and then our daughter, with a slight frown. “Is it because she is pack?”

“Perhaps.” Bryson looked equally befuddled by this. “It’s not something I’ve experienced before but...” His focus slid to me. “I’ve never experienced anything like this before. Perhaps this will mean that I will not form a threat to those who fight on our side when the battle comes?”

That was a good question and one we’d all been pondering in our meetings. We’d created a Royal Council of our own, out here on the border, made up of northern lords, Strelan commanders and the remains of the aristocracy, as well as key stakeholders like Annis and the Maidens. We’d argued about this back and forth, but got nowhere with it.

“We’ll find out soon,” I promised. “The Reavers will be here by nightfall.”

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## Chapter 50

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“What’re you looking for?”

It was mid-afternoon and I found myself back in my childhood room. Jan was bored and wanted something to do, so I’d come back here, pawing through my old possessions, looking for something that might amuse her. I’d found a sketchbook Linnea had given me, hoping plein air painting might take my fancy, rather than my long, hopeless rambles along the moors, but I’d tossed it in a drawer and not looked at it again. I grabbed out the book, the pencils and paint set I’d been gifted as well as an old doll and a ball I used to bounce ‘incessantly’ against the keep walls when bored, and was prepared to bring my haul back to Jan.

“Looking for something to keep our daughter amused. We aren’t even enduring siege conditions yet,” I told him, “and she’s already bored.”

“Our daughter...” He stepped into the room and right then I saw the ghost of him, the one that had swept me into this room when I was having breathing problems, who’d loosened my stays. “I bet you never thought you’d be saying those words when we were in here last.”

“I think I was planning your slow and painful death,” I replied with a smile, setting my burdens down. “And my long and happy marriage to Kris.”

“Ach, that milksop.” He wrapped an arm around my waist and tugged me close. “You’d never have been happy with him.”

“That’s true,” I admitted as his mouth drew closer. I watched it curve into a smile.

“He never would’ve led you on such adventures,” Weyland continued in a low purr of a tone.

“I’m fairly sure he didn’t want me stepping two feet beyond the birthing room or the kitchen,” I replied, then reached up to trace the shape of his lips. “You were the far superior choice.”

Praise was always the key with Weyland and that smile broadened.

“You see it now, that we were always made to be together. Until death do us part, or even beyond.”

“I think I saw it then.” My hand slid down to his neck, coming to settle over his heart. “That’s what was so terrifying.” I dared to look into his eyes, feeling suddenly shy. “You offered me the one thing I’d wanted all my life but given up thinking I’d get. Love.” His smile faltered but something much more intense rose to replace it. “I had been brought up to believe all I could hope for was to choose a man my father approved of who wouldn’t be completely terrible to me.”

“You deserve far more than that.” He grabbed my hand and placed a kiss on the palm. “You deserve everything. I thought I loved you then, when I brought you into this room. My heart was fair bursting out of my chest.”

“And something else as well,” I said, sliding my eyes down his body.

“That as well...” He herded me backwards until my legs hit the edge of my old bed. “That Weyland wanted you so fucking badly. You were his queen and he just wanted to worship you, but I...” Weyland paused then, studying my face and while there was heat there, it was only part of what he expressed. “I didn’t know how incredible you would become, Darcy, Wolf Queen of my heart.”

His kiss was slow and sweet, everything his kisses then were not. We weren’t past the animal need to tear each other’s clothes off, but our relationship had grown to include more, like this. Of the incredible sweetness of his mouth, his taste, the sound of him around me, of Weyland, my mate. It was that feeling of connection, throbbing strong between us that helped wash away my concerns, ease the tension in my body, right up until someone knocked sharply on the door.

“Darcy,” Axe said. “The Reavers have been sighted.”

Weyland groaned as I pulled away from him.

“That bastard is like a rival suitor, always trying to get your attention.”

“One I seek to spurn decisively,” I said, pulling the door open and then flagging down a nearby maid, asking her to take the toys and books to my daughter because I had business to attend to.

Moments later all six of us stood on the parapets along with the northern

lords and General Rath.

“Not as many as before,” Rath said, handing the spyglass to Lord Kendrick.

“More than I’d like,” Kendrick added.

“No matter the number, we know what we are to do,” I said, turning to face them all. “We have a plan, so let’s put it into place. Archers!”

Men with bows scrambled to take their place along the parapets and I did the same. Boys ran down the line, depositing small buckets of pitch between us, because we were the frontline defence. I dipped my arrows in the sticky stuff, right as the others came to my side.

“Stay here,” Dane urged. “Stay safe. We’ll lead the ground defence.”

“Can’t fucking wait for it.” Axe’s grin was wild as he hefted his weapon. “Cracking Reaver skulls? It’s almost as good as sex.”

“How about you handle those bastards and I handle the sex part?” Weyland said, shooting me a wink.

“I’ll be with the ground crew on healing duties,” Gael told me, “but if you need me, just call. I’ll find you wherever you are. You need to be safe, Darcy.”

But there was no guarantee of that. Each one of us knew that, but if we focussed on it, we couldn’t function, so we did what we could instead. As I bent down, soaking the rags wrapped around my arrow heads with pitch, I felt two hands on my shoulders.

The cold prick of his touch, that shiver that came every time he was near, it alerted me to who this was. I leaned back into his arms, feeling the black smoke wrap around me. It didn’t seem to be destructive currently, my presence able to neutralise it, but the other archers eyed us warily.

“Aim true,” Bryson told me. “Shoot far and hopefully this will all be over soon and then...” The future, that was the tantalising mirage on the horizon. It beckoned us forward, tugging us along, despite ourselves.

“We’ll either be celebrating in my father’s hall,” I replied, “or in the feast hall of the gods themselves.”

He squeezed my arms, pressed a kiss to the back of my neck and then was gone again. When all of the distractions were gone, I settled down into that bottomless well of myself Nordred had helped me discover. We had a purpose today and I barked it out for the others.

“Today, we set fire to all of the hard work of the people of this keep. We destroy the fields that would otherwise feed it, but we make this sacrifice...”



You want death, I told the Morrigan inside my head. You want destruction.

“For the greater good of both our lands. Let’s set these fields afire, create a great conflagration and then see how those bastard Reavers fare, wading through fire and destruction. Light!”

The boys rushed forward with lit torches, touching them to the points of the arrows, but when Del moved to do mine, I smiled and breathed out, watching his eyes as I set the arrow alight with my mind. His eyes widened, then he shot me a great grin, thrilled by this display.

“Pull!”

The sound of hundreds of bows being drawn went up and down the line, my own creaking the same way. They felt the tension like I did, our bodies fighting the wooden staves of our bows, forcing it to flex in a way it did not want to do. That thrumming tension, if created a strange kind of excitement in us now, that was about to explode.

“Release!”

We all watched the flaming points sail through the sky. Some flames fluttered, threatening to go out, but I urged each one to burn bright as I watched them fly. Burning arrows weren’t all that effective in razing fields, but I was able to compensate for that, because as soon as they landed in the grain beyond I breathed life into each spark.

*Then how about this*, I told the Morrigan.

*Burn*, I urged the grass, feeling how dry, how brittle each stalk was. It was harvest time, and in any other year the people would be busying reaping and gathering each head laden with grain, ready for processing. Instead, with a wantonness that felt wrong to me, I made a sacrifice of all of this hard work to her. *Burn, burn, burn*, I commanded.

And burn it did. Cheers went up as flames began to spread, as they ate at the wheat in little mouthfuls at first, then great gulps, points of light forming here, there, everywhere.

“Fire at will!” I commanded and we did just that.

My body became a machine, plucking rag wrapped arrows from the buckets beside us, dipping them in pitch, setting them alight and then drawing my bow to shoot them into the fields. We repeated the process over and over until all of the fields were set alight. It turned the Reavers into silhouettes when they appeared, dark shadowy figures. They seemed to pay no heed to the fire, not until it started to nip at their heels, the sounds of their

screams as they patted at their fur, then floundered, some sense of self-preservation finally kicking in.

But it was too late.

You want sacrifices, dread lady? I said, her silence somewhat discomfiting, but I felt the Sword of Destiny pulse at my hip, the power within it flowing through me as I drew the bow I had set aside for just this purpose.

To use fire arrows a bow string must be relatively slack, so as to not extinguish the fire on the tip as the arrow passed rapidly through the air. But the bow I picked up now had no such allowance. It felt good in my hands, because Nordred himself had formed it, just like the bow I'd used that morning on the moors.

I kissed the string, staring out into the chaos before us but finding those Reavers that floundered with ease. I loosed my arrow, watching it sail through the air and into the chest of the closest. But unlike that morning, there was a short pulse the moment it struck home, something that turned a screaming Reaver into a man. One that fell naked and floundering, weak hands gripping at the bolt buried in his chest, right before I went back for another and another.

Cheers went up below, urging us on, but I didn't need it. Never did I feel like I was fulfilling my life's purpose than when I had a weapon in my hand. I loosed arrow after arrow, my fellows doing the same, our collective might somehow become greater than the sum of our parts. But my focus was on them, my eyes keen as a hawk's, as a wolf seeking its prey, as I scanned the masses, then picked off Reaver after Reaver until I found him.

Callum didn't look dismayed by the battlefield conditions. Rather his eyes glowed with a hectic light. My heart pounded hard and fast in my ears, even as my aim was rock steady.

*Morrigan, dread queen.*

My prayer was silent, secret, but no less sincere, because if she gave me this? Then the war would be over.

*Gift me strength of arm, so I might reap the souls of the unworthy in your honour.*

Because Callum wasn't worthy, I'd decided. A monster motivated by revenge, he destroyed his own people far more comprehensively than any Granian had managed to. No invader had managed to infiltrate Snowmere and in his careless cruelty, he'd razed it to the ground.

*Make me your vessel, death dealer, slayer.*

That part of the prayer was the most fervent as I found the middle of Callum's chest in my line of sight, seeing the point of my arrow line up with it. I wanted to become just like Bryson, every part of me a destroyer, an obliterator of that which was not worthy.

*Let me grace this battlefield with his filthy corpse, food for your divine beak.*

But I heard her chuckle low in my ear as I loosed the arrow.

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## Chapter 51

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*Why do you pray to me? she replied. You have everything you need.*

The Morrigan didn't queer my aim. The arrow flew true, streaking through the air like a raven in flight. My eyes followed its path up, up, into the thin, smoke filled air, something I sucked deep into my lungs, then down again as it stooped like a hunting hawk, seeking its prey. And Callum? His head jerked up, his eyes and smile widening as he saw the arrow come for him. Not to dodge away, but to throw his arms out wide. Because while I shot true, just as I had with the stag, and the arrow buried itself deep in his chest, a small trickle of black blood making clear I'd injured him.

But not killed Callum.

He jerked the arrow out of his chest, then tossed it aside with as much care one might yesterday's news sheets, roaring out his orders, pointing his finger imperiously at the keep, right before his Reavers started to run.

Fuck.

"Keep firing!" I ordered, nodding to the officer who had been stationed here to take over. "Shoot and keep on shooting those bloody bastards down!" But I tossed my bow aside, wrenching out my sword.

"Darcy!"

Del stepped into my path, eyes wide.

"I need you to stay here, son," I told him in low urgent tones. He was going to argue with me, I knew that, so I reached behind me and grabbed my bow. "Nordred made this bow." I pressed it into his hands. "Honour him, honour me, by staying here and shooting at the enemy."

Keeping him away from the front line, that was what I needed. I couldn't

go into this fight if I didn't know he was safe, but I couldn't tell him that. But Del just nodded, running a covetous hand up and down the bow stave, making me question if he'd even be able to pull it, right before he stepped into my old position.

Gods, watching him grab an arrow and nock it, then wrestle the bow back to aim the arrow. I watched his whole body fight to do it, but he did, then loosed the arrow. I followed its path, hearing his cry and that on my lips as it struck true.

"Just like that, Del." I squeezed his shoulder once, then pulled away. "Just like that."

I couldn't stay to see how he fared further because I had another job to do. I sprinted down the parapets towards the keep gates to meet the fire crew.

"Ready?" I barked.

"The bastards are coming," a gruff voiced northerner said as I appeared. "But we'll set their loins afire with this."

The northerners who dared build castles so close to the border of the two countries had to be ingenious. They were holding a part of the world that was hotly contested, and in the early days that was against the formidable wargen enemies. So they'd ensured to build the entrance to their keeps like this.

A portcullis was set up at the very entrance to the keep, not often used. We'd had to work all day oiling the chains and getting the mechanisms moving again before lowering it. But beyond that was not the gate? There was a long corridor of stone walls that herded the enemy into a closed space, one we would use well.

"Pitch and oil is all set up, milady," one man barked, gesturing to every pint of oil, pitch and flammable fluid we could find in the surrounding land.

"We're ready to burn every single one of them."

I stared out into the battlefield, watching the Reavers draw closer and closer.

"Raise the portcullis!" I shouted to the men manning the winding mechanism.

They'd argued with me about this, the Granian veterans. Wisdom was that you'd let the walls do their job, holding off the enemy, only surrendering ground behind the portcullis when you had to, but what we fought weren't wargen. These beasts had no sense of self preservation, would batter their fellows to death to provide them stepping stones to get over the walls. I knew the keep's were strong. The duke that had built them had ensured it stood

during the border walls and it did still. But we needed to protect them, lure the Reavers to the fight on a ground that suited us better. So when the portcullis slowly raised, the Reavers did just as expected, roared and then ran faster for the ground they felt was being ceded.

“Ready!” the grizzled northerner in charge said, each man moving to get behind the vat, bucket, barrel or Cook’s good stock pot that we’d requisitioned. We’d managed to fill many of them with fuel for this fire. “Hold!”

That command was necessary, because when the Reavers burst into the narrow entrance, the sound they made was terrifying. Their bestial roars, their snarls, reverberated off the stone walls, getting louder and more monstrous as each second passed.

“Steady!” the commander said, eyeing the men and with good reason.

“The fight is ours to win,” I urged and the nearest men flushed then and nodded.

They wanted to tip the oil over the beasts as soon as they came in sight. The instinctive need to run the hell away from such danger burning bright inside each of their chests. I knew that because I felt the same, the sharp blade of fear cutting into my confidence.

I’d been here before, heard those roars, saw them shoving their claws into mortar between bricks and then clambering their way over the walls, but they had no such luck here. Granians might not have wargen strength, but they did have other skills. Each stone was perfectly cut to interlock with the others, something my father had pointed out with pride more times than I could count, so the Reavers raked their claws over a surface that gave them no purchase. But while the corridor was filling, we couldn’t move, couldn’t drop our payload until now.

I’d seen cattle readied for transport to markets far away, watching the massive beasts pushed in tight into the back of a cart, with barely enough room to move their head, let alone their bodies. The Reavers looked like that now as they became wedged in tight, that need to kill us overcoming good sense.

Just as we’d predicted.

*Like this?* I asked the Morrigan, before giving the order.

She would feed richly today and I was the one serving her grand meals. I jerked my hand down and each man moved as one, splashing everyone and everything within that corridor with oil. Burning brands were snatched up

and hurled down with all the desperation of frightened men, but it wasn't them under attack but the Reavers.

Burn... I hissed inside my mind, stabbing the Sword of Destiny down into the stone to help send my order wide.

A boom of energy rattled the very stones of the keep, but it wasn't the walls that were affected, but these invaders. Fire exploded out, forcing everyone back, to the sound of my men's cheers. I looked back into the keep, saw my mates ranged there and Selene and her Maidens. The veterans of Snowmere shouted loudest, needing a victory after such a stunning defeat, the sounds of the Reavers' screams music to their ears.

And a battle hymn for mine.

I snatched my sword up, going to stand at the edge of the parapets, stepping between the crenellated stone walls to get a bird's eye view.

A woman shouldn't glory in the way fire burned fir from skin and then skin from flesh. She shouldn't drink down the sight of blood and bone being exposed, nor the second souls stolen by a ravaging enemy. But I did. The Morrigan was right. I didn't need her at all. We had everything we needed to win the day right here. So for just a moment I treated myself to the sight, the sound of their screams, watching Reavers turn to men, then to corpses that were ground back into the earth they were born from before I turned to the commander.

"The next phase begins."

"Gods be with you, milady," he said with a nod, right before I ran to the opposite side of the parapet and leapt down.

I should've broken all of my bones at this, but instead I landed light as a cat.

"Darcy!" Axe shouted, eyes wild and rolling, the blue blazing almost too bright to look at. "We're ready, lass. We'll bring every single one of those bastards down, just you wait!"

His roar was infectious, other men and some women making the same sound, reminding me of what they were. Granian, Strelan, those labels were meaningless now. People desperate to protect their homes, others wanting to fight to get theirs back, believers in the goddess, the gods or the wolf that ate the world themselves were all clustered close, forming something I needed.

"Get me near the gate," I told Axe and he plucked me from the ground with incredible strength, putting me on his shoulders before wading forward and placing me on a decorative plinth by the gate.

“Good people!” I hadn’t used this voice, the one that seemed to capture everyone’s attention, since entering the court and watching a king die, but I used it now for far greater purpose. “What lies beyond these gates is a foe the like many of you have never seen.” I scanned the crowd, seeing Selene and Orla, seeing Annis and so many of the refugees. “Or an enemy you know all too well. Before at Snowmere, we were caught unawares, but not so this time. Those beasts burn right now.” A roar went up across the courtyard. “But more will come to step over them, to come for you and the family you keep safe beneath this building.” The old, the weak and those that needed to be protected had been quarantined in a massive cellar beneath the keep. “These bastards will kill every single one of them if they get past us.”

Silence at that as people looked at those surrounding them, wondering what I knew, if we would be strong enough to stand against this enemy.

“But we will not let that happen.” Selene had taught me how to create a pack, to link my mind with others and I did that now, on a scale I’d never done before. I wavered for just a second, hit by waves of fear, of anger, of desperation, right before I firmed my stance and pushed back. “We will bring every single one of those bastards low, grind them into the dust and leave the ravens to peck out their eyes for the sin of threatening what is ours. We are a pack!”

Everyone shouted in response to that, weapons thrust in the air.

“And this pack will hunt!”

The men at the gates knew that as the keyword, winding the mechanism back.

*“A shield wall in a confined space,” Dane said, jerking his hand across a rough map that had been created of the keep. The general, the officers and the lords all nodded in response to this. “We will be outnumbered, but if we use the environment to our advantage.”*

*“Their number will mean nothing in such a confined space,” Bryson said, stroking his chin as he consulted the map. “They’re wild, undisciplined, savage beasts and we’ll—”*

*“Meet them with strategy and good sense.” Rath nodded sharply. “This is the only way forward.”*

“Shield wall up!” I shouted, my voice far louder than it should be, reverberating all the way through the keep courtyard. I’d used it to subdue people, to declare my intentions, but right now I ensured every single person, trained warrior, religious dissident or just a common man or woman, could



do the one thing that might ensure their survival.

But not all of them.

I forced myself to look back over each one of their faces, seeing the fervour and the will to survive there, knowing it would fracture the moment the Reavers got through, because right now was a golden moment. All possibilities existed, including that where we survived and Callum and his beasts didn't. Axe threw me a shield from across the heads of the crowd and then my mates and I took our place at the vanguard of the shield wall, ready to defend this keep and its occupants.

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## Chapter 52

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I'd forgotten this, the sounds of their monstrous growls and screams, the stink of their bloodied and matted fur, made worse by the miasma of smoke and burned flesh that hung over this, but some muscle memory kicked in the moment the gates were pulled open.

"Hold the line!" I shouted, many shouted, because here the Reavers came.

They charged at us with all of the finesse of a wounded bull, but with much of its strength. Arms clenched, hands gripped shields tight as our feet dug into the cracks of the cobblestones, desperately trying to do just this.

"Hold it!" Axe shouted. "Hold it, you fuckers! Hold that line because your bloody lives depend on it."

But that was hard to do when hundreds of pounds of slaving Reaver was thrown against your shield. Screams of terror, groans of pain as people struggled to obey, but that's when I reached with my free hand for the Sword of Destiny.

When I skewered it into the eye of the closest Reaver, it felt like something broke. Did the Reavers shout their challenge or screech in fear? I didn't care because that Reaver and the next fell before my sword with all the effort a child might spike a butterfly on a pin, and that's when I reached down for this.

Why did Strelan queens have so many mates when the majority of the population had only one? It was because they had to draw power from them in times of need, just like I did now. Down the link I shared with each and every person here I forwarded Axe's wild glee, all of the confusion, boredom and disappointment of everyday life burned away by the fury of battle fever. I

pushed Weyland's bright energy, his smile in the face of his enemy, growing sharp and wild, his fangs bared in defiance. I shared Dane's cool certainty. He'd planned this all out to the nth degree, knew every angle, now all we had to do was see it done. Then there was Gael's deadly ferocity, a need to protect what was his with every fibre of his being, until his last breath was exhaled. The last I pulled somewhat tentatively, not as sure of Bryson as I was the rest of the mates, but his mind flowed into mine like black silk. Of a dreadful, deadly intent. The wolf that ate the world was riding him hard and it was hungry.

"Push!" I shouted and that's when we all moved.

The collective weight of all of our bodies shoved the Reavers back and with it came our weapons. The front rows stabbed with deadly precision, finding their marks in the Reavers that were pushed against us, then those that stepped up next after the last lot was despatched.

"Push!" I shouted again and we repeated the same process, forcing the Reaver host backwards and out of my keep.

But that wasn't our purpose.

*"Forcing the Reavers to lose ground will help build morale in a short period of time," Rath had said, as we discussed the plan. "It'll make people feel like this is possible, and hopefully dispatch a good number of the bastards but then..." He'd moved some counters around which represented the front line. "We need everyone to fall back."*

*"To what purpose?" I asked with a frown.*

*"To create a kill box," Bryson said with a slow smile and that's when they demonstrated what they meant.*

Right here, right now, we were close to the portcullis, the burning fields coming into view and the Reavers beyond that. I couldn't see how many and perhaps that was a blessing. I firmed my stance, digging in my heels and then shouted the next order.

"Retreat! Fall back! Fall back!"

The beasts were too stupid to see this for what it was. Callum didn't create Reavers to think but to kill indiscriminately, so when we pulled back in a series of coordinated steps, they were like cats being teased with a trailing length of string. Instincts to chase us down, to kill a fleeing prey, kicked in and they surged forward.

But we pulled back to the walls, the entrance into the keep, lining up in number as the Reavers attacked, right before we fought back.

*“Like a hammer and an anvil,” Rath said, smacking his fist into his open palm. “We can keep doing that over and over and maybe, just maybe that will be enough to give us the day.” He frowned as he considered the drawing. “As long as the walls will hold.”*

They would. The keep was many things, but an everlasting symbol of Granian occupation was primary. It’d weathered years of attacks from the two souled. All they had to do was stand through one more battle. Surely they could do that. But the state of the walls was shoved from my mind as the battle raged.

My muscles burned and so did my mind, teeming with the will, the need to see this done. We surged in, despatching the Reavers that made their way into the corridor, then fell back to allow more in before killing them too. The feeling of a plan coming together, it sang in my blood, forcing me to grin through each stab.

But what happened during every moment of happiness?

Hubris is a sin the gods punish us most for, when our confidence rivals even their certainty, and the goddess was as cruel in her punishment of it as any other deity. I heard the Morrigan’s low chuckle, my head whipping sideways to see Callum approach.

I wanted my bow, cursing myself for leaving it above for Del to use, even as I knew it’d be useless right now. He was close, so close I could see the smirk on his face, and his hand as it rose. Others stabbed at the Reavers around me as I watched this.

I knew what it was, the black smoke that rose from his fingers and I felt myself go cold with fear at the sight of it. And when he reached out, I knew what would happen. First to a Reaver, he owed them no loyalty, no care as he melted the flesh from their bones, then turned them to dust, the darkness curling around him flickering higher as if feeding from this death.

But it wasn’t his own troops he confined his attention to. He carved a swathe through the ravaging Reavers, the two of us oddly working in tandem to eradicate their numbers, but each time we killed a Reaver or he did, it fed his power. He’d always drawn power from death and destruction and we...

My head whipped around and I found Dane’s eyes in the mass, saw the same knowledge there. But more than that. I caught the moment when his widened. Because when I turned back, Callum caressed the stones the people beholden to the past duke of this keep had carefully dug out, formed and laid down to create this wall and then watched something I never expected to

happen.

They crumbled.

Not fell down, somehow destabilised, but eradicated, turned to dust before my very eyes. My mouth fell open in an unspoken scream, the sound stuck in my throat, unable to fight its way free, until this.

There was a flaw in our plan. There always was. People looked back over military history, pinpointed the things that had brought a side down before and then planned around in the next battle. But the insanity of the attack on Snowmere? It didn't reveal this.

What Bryson was, so was Callum

The power of the wolf that ate the world was a destructive one, just like the Morrigan's. They both drew power from darkness. The wolf's power came from human initiated destruction, hers from the natural cycle of life and decay, but the end result was the same. With just a touch, Callum could destroy everything protecting our loved ones.

And that's when the plan changed.

The Reaver king stared into my eyes, seemingly wanting to watch my every expression as my realisations came, smiling when the last one came.

"You want me, not them," I told him.

"Darcy, no!" Gael shouted, fighting to get closer, but unable in the melee.

"It's all I ever wanted, my love." Callum's voice was an insidious imitation of my mates' softer ones. "You put all these people, all these things between you and me, despite the fact we are joined. The... links you share with these men you style as your mates, they're nothing compared to what we share."

He took a step forward and I fought the urge to pull back.

"I don't have to kill anyone if I have you."

But he did, that was obvious. It's how he got his power. And even if he didn't, he'd kill me, sapping my strength over and over as he brought the world to heel. All of that training Nordred gave me, moving me over and over through endless drills, I knew what it was all for now. I had the Sword of Destiny and I would kill him.

"Get everyone back inside and get that portcullis down!" I shouted, the command in my voice absolute.

I didn't encourage, direct people. I coerced them as brutally as Callum did his Reavers, feeling them move instantly. My mates fought against that, I felt it, not wanting to pull back but to rush to my side, and there they would

just be liabilities. *Be my strength from within the keep*, I begged furiously. *Keep them safe, all of them*. The bond between us bucked and twisted, like a new colt on a lead rope, but I pushed them back anyway. They made me queen and I exercised that power now.

“You want me?” I asked, brandishing my sword. “You know I’m never going to waltz straight into your arms.”

“I wouldn’t want you if you did,” Callum replied with a slow smile. “A fight then? I’ll let you get this all out, you desire to resist, to rebel, and then when it’s done, you’ll be right where you’re supposed to be, by my side.”

“Or your head will be where it’s destined to be, lopped from your shoulders and lying at my feet,” I countered.

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## Chapter 53

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What remained of the Reavers fell back now, forming a loose, hostile ring around us. The battlefield had been determined, it appeared. I heard people shout from the castle walls, from beyond the portcullis, but I couldn't focus on that right now. Just this. I took a deep breath, then another, drawing my attention back to the sword in my hand, its weight, the way that was distributed, how it became an extension of my hand. The flames along the blade fluttered as I sliced it through the air.

"A sword?" Callum made the request with a bored air, but a weapon sailed through the air, tossed by one of the Reaver host, and he caught it without even looking before facing me. "This is pointless, you know."

He was talking as a means to try and distract me, but I let his words wash over me like they were nothing more than the flicker of the flames, the sounds of the birds of prey wheeling above the fire, picking up wildlife as they fled. I paced around him and he moved too, as if in the steps of a savage dance.

"I'm sure Nordred taught you well."

There, that shoulder tip as the muscles bunched and he lunged towards me, I was out and away from the spot his strike hit, before he got even close. He telegraphed his blows, however subtly, and that's what I focussed on.

"You probably think yourself a proper little warrior."

Again, shoulder dipping, muscles tensing and then I moved, but I had to shift quicker now, he feinted right, then went left, anticipating my sidestep. My body felt as light as a leaf tossed on the breeze so I was able to lunge out of his way, but it wouldn't forever. The fight, the preparation, I was burning

through the reserves of my strength so I needed to be careful.

“A warrior queen.”

His body was held looser, and he already had some momentum up from his previous strike, so he struck faster. Fast enough for me to feel the whistle of the wind as his blade almost grazed me. I lifted my sword, blocking his and that’s when I felt the weight of this task. He was strong, so hellishly strong, my muscles screamed with the effort of blocking his strike, but Callum grinned as if sensing what I’d realised, and then stepped back.

“If that’s what you need to be content, I’ll let you play at queen. It would be good to restore the traditions of the past. You’ll be my puppet, of course.” I felt like one as I dodged and then blocked his strike, the sound of the blades grating against each other. I was being forced to move to his tune, not strike back myself. “Women are weak, too swayed by the vagaries of the heart.”

And that’s when he nodded to the place just past my shoulder.

“Darcy!” Weyland snapped, his voice finally filtering through.

“Keep your sword up!” Dane urged. “Don’t let him get under your guard.”

But that’s exactly what he did when my focus was split. I was forced to stumble back one step, then another, Callum lashing out with faster and faster strikes until I stumbled and fell, then rolled out of the way. I sprung to my feet, balancing on the balls of my feet, my heart beating far too fast as I tried to find my way in this fight.

*“Break the line,” Nordred said. He’d drawn it in the sand of the practice ground. “Each time they strike out at you, there’s a line between their starting position and their endpoint.” He skewered his stick into the ground. “For them, that point is somewhere in you.” He poked my breast bone. “In your heart.” Then my neck. “In the big arteries here, or here.” He tapped my thigh. “Somewhere vulnerable where they can open you up and bleed you out, so you need to break that line.”*

*He stepped sideways.*

*“Get out of the way, then when their back is unprotected.” He twisted and tapped my lower back. “Stab them in the kidneys.”*

*“The knights say that’s ungentlemanly fighting,” I’d said.*

*“Perhaps it is during a bout on tourney day, but not on the battlefield. Kill or killed, those are the only rules.”*

I blinked, seeing Callum smirking at me, as if he saw my little reverie and was laughing at its contents, but I just raised my sword and nodded to him.



That lack of humility, of compliance had his smile fading. He didn't telegraph his strike this time, but somehow I knew it was coming, sidestepping at the last moment out of his way, then turning my sword around, the flames flickering, right before I stabbed down.

His whole body bucked upwards, his eyes going wide, his mouth falling open with pain. I'd managed to press the point of the sword into the wound I'd left, tearing it wider.

Black blood sizzled as it dripped free, as if the earth itself rejected its fall, but I grinned, feeling my fangs snick down. I shook my head, the half-wolf form coming to me easy as breathing and with it was everything else. I'd been gifted this form by four of my mates, knitting the two parts of my soul together, resolving my breathing issues. Rather than try and steal my strength or oppress it, they helped it flourish, and it was that I carried with me right now. Because it wasn't just Nordred's lessons I needed to lean on, but them.

I had Gael's lightness on his feet, but Axe's strength. I assessed Callum like Dane would, catching the moment his mask dropped and the real rage rose. I shot him a smile that was the spit of Weyland's, full of cocky arrogance, but when I lifted my sword, that was all me.

"You think drawing on a beast's power will help you? I command a legion of them." And with that the Reavers all threw back their heads and howled.

"But not me," I said.

I watched his cheeks flush bright red with anger, because that was the fragility of this man. He'd wreaked havoc with the Reavers at his back and yet still I could ruffle his feathers. Each one of these creatures would sit, roll over and beg if that's what he required, but that used his power, didn't reward him with it. To get more, to do what he needed, he had to pull it from me, just as I did my mates.

And that infuriated him.

He didn't want to need me, didn't want to be connected to anyone, and so he tried to force that to happen now and failed. I smiled as I flicked my sword, shaking off the aches and pains inside me and then faced him down.

Callum was growing sloppy, not even bothering to hide his tells. I blocked this strike and that, parrying his and then driving my own home, loving the feeling of my weapon piercing flesh each time I stabbed into him, ready for more as soon as I kicked him free. His blood turned the earth black and smoking, our feet churning it to mud, but I was determined to give it

more. Parry, parry, strike, I felt like I was falling into a rhythm until the battle turned.

I felt like I was winning as I'd stabbed my sword into his thigh, sending him spiralling forward. When he went down onto one knee, I whirled. Sword upraised, the blood lust was upon me, I saw only the sight of the back of his neck unprotected. My sword would bite through it, that I knew. I felt like I thirsted for that thick blood, just like my blade did, as I went to lop off his head. My sword was wrenched up and over my head, leaving my chest completely exposed, because I thought I had him down for the count.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

He spun around, swiping his leg out and knocking mine out from beneath me, aborting my strike as I landed heavily on my back. For a moment, I just stared at the sky, seeing the smoke and the birds circling ahead, reminding me of the plains outside Ironhaven. My lungs felt heavy, impossible to fill, despite sucking breaths in and while I did, Callum appeared above me. The moon was rising over his shoulder, forming a cool halo around his head and those red eyes of his, they gleamed brighter as he smiled.

"Silly girl." He shook his head slowly. "You thought you were holding your own here? Don't you know that every man that allows you into his meeting, his war band, his throne room, is doing so to flatter your feminine ego."

He tilted his head to one side to look me over.

"He wants your presence by his side, validating his power. Your attention being focussed on him and only him." His eyes slid down my body. "Then there's the feel of such a tight little body under his, right as he ruts into you, filling you with the only thing you really need: his seed. You're a receptacle that's got ambitions above its station and that's all you'll ever be."

"Really?" I croaked, my hands clawing at the earth. "Look behind you."

Bryson stood on the battlements of the keep. Well, I'm fairly sure that dark hulking shape was him. We both looked closer to be sure. But in that moment, the figure launched themselves off the parapets, then landed on the ground with a great boom that had everyone standing stumbling back.

But I was already lying down.

Black paws appeared at the four points around my body and I looked up at the softest, thickest black fur, right before I heard a terrible growl and when I scrambled to my feet, I saw others do the same to get away from him.

Bryson, my mate, the king of Grania, wasn't here, but the wolf that ate

the world? I heard the ragged calls from the battlements and was sure it was Higgins and his crew. The moon had risen and the wolf had risen with it.

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## Chapter 54

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Bryson wolf snarled and that's when Callum went very white, then very red in the face.

"Found yourself another pet wolf, did you?" Somehow Callum's voice was all I could hear in the cacophony. He grinned then, and never had he looked more like the corpse he was. The tendons in his face stood proud, the hollows in his cheeks pronounced. "I am trying to be jealous." His eyes slid up and down Bryson wolf's form. "But I don't think he's worthy of such an emotion."

"Oh, I don't know." Callum's brows creased as I stroked my hand through all the velvety fur, the smoke curling off it wrapping itself around my wrists, there and gone again. "I think he's rather impressive."

The wolf dropped his head and I was treated to the pleasure of a massive beast presenting his nose for scratches.

"Hiding behind a man," Callum sneered.

*And our bond reminds you of the terrible loneliness you've felt every day since you died on that field.* Bryson's voice was disembodied. I could hear it inside my head and by the way Callum jerked, so could he. *You've burnt half the world down trying to get to her and still you are empty handed.* The wolf took a decisive step forward. *And that's how you'll end the day.*

And with that, Bryson's wolf lunged forward, grabbing Callum by the scruff of his neck and whipping him back and forward like a dog would a rat he'd caught.

The sound of Callum's screams, the crack of his bones, it was savage music to my ears, everything I needed to hear right now. Reavers

instinctively pulled back, some even losing their wolf form, looking down to see they'd become thin, naked men again and running off as a result. Bryson wolf let out a muffled growl, then tossed the broken form of the Reaver king off into the burning fields like yesterday's rubbish.

"By all the bloody gods, he did it."

I spun around to find my mates had appeared beside me.

"What the hell are you doing out here?" I snapped. "Get back behind the walls!"

"Where it's safe?" Gael asked, cocking an eyebrow up. "You first."

"I'm not what's important—" I started to say.

"Now, that's where you're wrong, lass." He nodded to the keep walls, to the people in silhouette watching from the walls, still others pressed against the portcullis. "All of this is because of you."

He didn't realise how that stung, because that was true in more ways than one. But my link to Callum was over, right? Right? I sought reassurance like a child that the abuse was over.

But of course, it wasn't.

Bryson wolf stalked forward, his head dropping down low, those terrible jaws opening and that's when I saw it. My knee gave way and I was forced to tighten my muscles to stop myself from falling, but while my mates called my name, the other gave way as well. I fell forward onto the churned up earth and my mates swept in to drag me back up onto my feet, when they fell too.

"Darcy...!"

*I protected you.* Callum's voice, the Morrigan's voice slid into my skull, feeling like it left a greasy residue. *You hurt me over and over and still I kept this back from you.* My hand slapped down over my side, feeling the bone deep ache of an old wound that just wouldn't heal. I screamed as I felt each one of the wounds I'd left on him open on my body...

And the bodies of my mates.

"Darcy...!"

Gael ground that out, flames flickering on his hand as he tried to raise his healing power, but there was no cure for this.

Bar one.

He slapped his hand down over his thigh to try and staunch the blood flow, screaming as he felt the customary ache.

But no relief.

Red, red blood coated his hand and that was the point my field of vision

took on the same colour.

Red fields, dark red sky, red flames. I grabbed the Sword of Destiny and used it not as a weapon, but as a walking stick to haul myself up with. And that's when I heard Callum's chuckle. I'd stumbled over to Dane, to Axe, seeing the blood bloom on their skin, seeping into the earth, my hands sliding as I tried to staunch it. But Callum's laugh, it was a leash around my neck, hauling me away from that which I cared about and back towards him.

*We are one and the same*, Callum insisted.

"Never," I growled, lurching closer.

Bryson wolf was standing over him now, a wolf with its prey. His jaws widened and I saw the fear on Callum's face.

"You want to call back your dog," he hissed and I had a sharp retort to that on my lips, right before I fell to my knees. The sword was the only thing keeping me up right now, the aches multiplying by the second, but more than this. I felt the kind of exhaustion that comes from pushing yourself beyond the limits, day after day.

Like I had been lately.

"Never..." I whispered rather than shouted.

"You and I are connected, Darcy." I watched Callum's face thin, the bones pressing against his skin. "We have been since you were born and we will be in death." He smiled then, a terribly grim thing. "But not just our death." With an effort, he rolled his head sideways, even as his back arched, mine arched, with the pain. Bryson wolf was sucking the very life from Callum.

And my mate was taking from everyone connected to Callum.

SELENE HAD TAUGHT me to connect to others, to create a pack, but she couldn't have known that my pack was also Callum's. Reavers dropped, died, crumbled, all around us, the earth itself rejecting their presence. The dust of their bodies blew away with the night air, but still the wolf was not satisfied.

I'd set him on this path, to eradicate Callum, not realising what it meant. All of our plans, they came to nothing. I crawled towards Callum, something he would have otherwise enjoyed I'm sure, if he wasn't laid low himself, then grabbed the Sword of Destiny to haul me closer. But as I did, I watched the crystal in the pommel pulse, growing dimmer and dimmer.

Don't pray to me, the Morrigan had said. You have everything you need.

*What does that mean?* I shouted inside my head. *What do you want from me?*

A raven with golden plumage landed beside me, hopping closer and tilting its head to one side as only birds can do.

*You used the strength of the Maiden*, she said and in my mind I watched myself train, strive, fight. *You developed the love of the Mother*. I saw my hands trying hard to staunch the blood flow, but those same hands swept up Jan and set her on my hip. *But you'll need my power before this ends*.

*How?* I howled, but I knew. I'd always known. It wasn't my lot to live a life of love and happiness. I was lucky I'd experienced it for as long as I had, which was more than I expected.

*I will have my due*, the raven told me in a pitiless voice. *All come to me in the end, but you have more choices than most. You decide who comes with me now*.

And that's when I saw it. Nordred had taught me to fight, but in the end he'd shown me the way. To die, that was his final gift to me.

And it would be mine to those I loved.

As I blinked, staring at the sky, I hoped they wouldn't make Jan and Del stand by my funeral pyre. I didn't want them to cut their hair off in memory of me. I wanted them to forget they even knew me, so I could save them from this pain.

"You want me," I told an emaciated Callum.

"No!" Dane's shout was a ghost of his formerly authoritative one and all he could do was claw at the air to try and stop me.

"It's all I ever wanted... Eleanor."

He wasn't seeing me right now, this Reaver king, and I don't think he ever did. It was as if the layers of him were stripped away, just leaving this. A man who was not supposed to be born, the power of the queen split between him and his sister, but that schism couldn't continue. We'd all seen what Strelae had become when this power was split and that weakness couldn't continue.

Because she would need to be strong for what was to come.

When I flopped on top of Callum's body, he went to cradle me close, but I fought that to the last, flipping over with agonising effort, then using what strength I had to raise my sword. In my dream I was a raven, flapping so fast and so hard, trying to stay out of the wolf's maw, but confronted with it now, it wasn't so bad.

“Bryson...” It hurt to utter his name, to say anything, coughs wracking my body, but I forced myself to say it again. “Bryson, come back to me.”

The giant wolf blinked, those golden eyes seeming to finally see me which allowed this to happen. The black fur melted away and the man returned, golden and perfect, as he bent over me.

“Look after them,” I croaked.

“Darcy...” His hands roamed all over me, touching my face, my sides. “Darcy, we’ll find help. I’ll get a healer.”

“Look after all of them. The children...”

“No.” I heard the hysterical edge along with all that royal arrogance as he denied me. “No! Darcy, no...!”

“I can’t do this without you.” My hands shook as I struggled to hold the sword up and his took over without thinking, because some part of him knew. He’d entered this battlefield, ready to lay waste to whatever was upon it.

“Use the wolf,” I gasped out. “I have to go, but I don’t have to take you all with me.”

“No, Darcy...” His hands closed over mine which were wrapped around the hilt of the sword, but he wanted to prise them away from it. “Don’t ask me to do this. Please.”

“I’m glad I found you.” I forced myself to smile, my spare hand rising up to stroke his cheek. “I wish we’d known each other earlier.”

“We can make up for that time,” he told me. “We’ll find a way. Just stay with me, my mate. Stay with me!”

“Break the mate bonds,” I ground out.

“No.”

My arms shook with the effort, the pain starting to spike.

“Break them, please. I have to do this. It’s what I was born to do. Callum would never live if it wasn’t for me, and now we have to die.”

Tears slid free of those golden eyes and I wiped away each one. My own followed suit, dropping into the dirt. Death was coming for me, no matter what, but I would meet her on my own terms.

My Strelan mates, they were of the land, granting me the ability to grow, to change, to build things, but Bryson? His power was always destructive, something that had to be held back.

Until just the right time.

It hurt each time my mates claimed me, their bite marks sinking into my neck, but I’d leaned into the pain each time, embracing what it meant. I did



the same now, as each one was torn from me, an answering shout of pain and loss from each one of my mates telling me that it had happened. Bryson stared down at me, mouth twisting in a grimace, right before he tore the last one from me.

I WAS FREE, floating light as a feather, without a single connection to weigh me down. The feeling of it was dizzying, disorientating. But with what strength remained, I gripped my sword.

“Don’t, please...” Bryson begged. I saw one tear slip, then another and each one that touched me felt like the gentlest of rain. I had Callum’s arms around me, but as I closed my eyes, I imagined they were his, Dane’s, Weyland’s or Gael’s, Axe’s as he snuggled down into my hair. All of them, all at once, that was the point when I could let a sigh out.

And drive the Sword of Destiny home.

I’d thought my destiny entailed fighting for my country, reuniting it, but really it was to die.

And so, I did.

The Morrigan didn’t laugh as she took me. I heard the flutter of raven’s wings, then the soft brush of feathers and then everything went black.

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## Chapter 55

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I woke to the feeling of sun on my face and when I groaned and rolled over, I found myself in a very familiar place. This bed, this room, the way the shadows of the trees outside played along my walls. I blinked and then opened my eyes fully.

I was in my childhood room in the keep.

“You’re finally awake, sleepyhead.”

I rolled over to find a woman standing in my doorway, the smile on her face warming me all the way down to my toes.

No, not a woman, but my mother.

Not the young woman I saw as a ghost. She was still beautiful, but her face had softened and there were fine lines around her eyes as she smiled. Somehow I wanted to count every single one of them.

“Come and have breakfast,” she said. “Everyone’s waiting.”

Everyone?

I flicked back the bedclothes and found I was wearing a chemise, something I hadn’t worn to bed since I lived at the keep, but when I opened my wardrobe, I found the faded blue robe I’d worn over the top my nightgowns since I became a woman, then I walked out.

And into the keep, it appeared. Maids bobbed a curtsy as I passed, but when I entered the family dining room, I saw we had company. A man sat with his back to me, sipping his coffee, but it was his hand that had me moving forward. That scar across his knuckles, that broad expanse...

“Nordred...?” I barely choked out his name when he turned around and smiled.

“There’s my girl!”

He rose and came towards me, smiling in the way I’d seen loving fathers do, but never mine. He pulled me close and hugged me and something inside me cracked at the feel of it. A sob rose in my chest but got stuck there and he seemed to sense it.

“How did you sleep?”

“I—”

My throat caught on the word, then closed over, not letting a sound out and he pulled me closer.

“Shh... Shh... Now, now, what’s wrong?”

“Nordred—”

“Nordred?” He pulled back slightly and stared down at me. “Have you grown so big you can’t call me Father anymore?”

“Father...?” I asked.

“I would think I earned the title, pacing back and forth outside your mother’s birthing chamber for half the night when you were born, only for the midwife to bring me you.” He caressed my cheek then. “The most beautiful daughter a man could have.”

“Grandpa!”

A little voice had us both turning and a girl with light brown hair and bright blue eyes that were somehow familiar rushed towards us.

“Well, except for this little princess.”

She wasn’t Jan. She couldn’t be, and as soon as I thought of my daughter’s name, I felt a wrench inside me. The light spilling into the room seemed to dim somewhat.

“Kisses for your mother,” Nordred told the girl and she leaned over, pressing a kiss to my cheek.

“Look at the three of you.” My mother appeared in the doorway and then went to Nordred’s side and as their arms linked, I was able to put two and two together. They had the kind of casual affection of a long married couple. “Gentle, little wolf,” my mother told this girl as she launched herself into my arms, but when I held her, this felt right. Her weight, her presence, the warmth of her, it seemed to thaw something inside me, heal something that had been long hurting. “Faola was up with the birds again and chattering away to them like she spoke their language,” my mother said, pushing a strand of my daughter’s hair back.

“Faola?” I stared at the little girl, seeing another face superimposed over

hers. Tears pricked my eyes when I realised who's. The girl had some of the strength of Gael's face and definitely his eyes, ones that stared back at me just as steadily as her father's. "Is that what your name is?"

"It means little wolf," the girl told me proudly, "because when I grow up, I'll be big and strong like a wolf, just like my father."

"He's here too?"

I set the girl down, stepping away now, a strange kind of fear building in my chest as I walked from this room to the next.

"Gael?" My voice echoed down the hall that was strangely empty, the rest of the keep so much darker. "Gael?"

"YOU NEVER COULD JUST ACCEPT what is."

Aeve emerged from one room, coming to a stop in front of me, her lips pursing, her hands clasping her walking stick.

"To be fair, that's why we chose her." Pepin emerged as well, then shot me a cheeky wink. "If she was the complacent type, she'd never have done what was needed."

"What was needed? Accept?" I looked up and down the hall, seeing Nordred, my mother and Faola standing on one end and the two women on the other.

"You were never meant to be queen." Aeve was always able to deliver hard truths with a degree of sensitivity and she did so now, watching me closely for my response, some sympathy in her eyes. "As soon as the twins were born, the power of the land was split between the two of them and it stayed that way until..."

She watched my hand go to my chest and then nodded slowly. Because where there had been smooth flesh, was now a long scar. Ragged and rough it felt strange against my fingers, it was completely healed.

"But you forged the way for her," Pepin said, then glanced over her shoulder.

I followed her gaze down the hall and saw a hazy glimpse of something, someone familiar. I moved closer because even when I squinted I couldn't quite make it out. My feet moved faster, my stride lengthened, and when I started to jog, the robe and nightgown transformed, shifting from loose cotton to tight leather.

"No!" Jan howled, her whole face a mask of agony. Tears streamed

slowly down Del's face, but when he went to move towards her, she knocked his arms away. "No. You bring her back!" She marched over to a prone body on a bed. "You bring her back!"

I watched my daughter claw at my armour, push at my unresponsive body. I saw that my impassive face was pale, too pale.

"She is the next queen of all of Grania," Aeve said. "She is of royal blood."

And that's when I recalled the vague memory I'd had of Callum when he awoke at my birth, of stumbling forth like a shambler until he came to the first town he destroyed, of a warm body beneath him as he rutted into her despite her screams.

"Not great parentage." Pepin rolled her eyes. "But the blood doesn't seem to care about that. Jan's grandfather was a prince of the blood, something Callum seemed to sense when he brought his Reavers to Wildeford first."

My mind fought to accept any and all of this, but I didn't get time.

"It's why he attacked there first, to eradicate any threat to his power base," Aeve said.

Jan's screams grew louder, more definite, echoing with command in a way I understood all too well.

"Bring her back!"

She ordered Gael forward and he slumped down beside my body, blue flames in his hand.

"No..." I whispered. "No, Jan—"

"Jan, you can't—!" Del said, but Jan pushed him backwards with strength she shouldn't possess.

"Princess—" Axe was trying to placate her, but I knew exactly what this was.

"When you're young you don't have enough experience to know what's possible and what's not," Pepin told me, watching the same scene. "It means you can imagine the unimaginable and sometimes even make it happen. Jan will be a good queen no matter what you choose."

"I choose?" I asked.

"We figured we owed you that at least." Pepin shot me a sheepish smile.

"The balance has been restored," Aeve pronounced. "The power of the land is back where it's supposed to be. The Maiden will watch over your daughter while she is young and I will be there for her in her old age, but..." She stared at me, that endless wisdom feeling like an ocean I could dive into.

“A girl always needs her mother.”

Mother?

My focus shifted back, to where my mother and Nordred and little Faola stood. Nordred gave my daughter's shoulder a squeeze, and the girl, she lifted her hand. Was it in greeting or... farewell?

“They’ll always be here with us,” Pepin explained. “When you’re done, you’ll all be together here and if that’s what you want right now...”

Gael sucked in breaths, pouring what was left of his power into me until he threatened to collapse, then his brothers clustered closer. They tried to pull him away and when that didn’t work, they poured their power into him. I felt it, a rope thrown out for me to catch in a rocking sea, one that would bring me home if I just grabbed it with both hands. Bryson looked pale, drawn, exhausted, but he jerked himself to his feet and then slapped his hands down on Gael’s shoulders. Each one of them stiffened as they felt the power flow through them.

A raven on a dark current, being sucked into the wolf’s mouth, that’s how it’d felt in the dream and how it felt right now, because that was the thing. The wolf that ate the world, swallowed it every night, but each morning he was forced to expel it out again, as the sun rose. He took life and he gave it back. I took a step towards them, then another, and another, running now, that tugging feeling forcing my feet to move faster and faster, until they skimmed rather than ran and my arms flapped rather than pumped. I was a raven and I was coming home to roost.

My eyes flicked open.

For a moment all I could do was suck in mouthfuls of sweet, sweet air, and feel the too rapid beat of my pulse, but right as I came back into my body, arms wrapped around me.

“Mother...” Jan gasped, her tear sodden face pressed into the side of my neck. “Mum.”

Not every woman had a chance to move through every phase of the cycle of life. Some died as maidens, some as mothers, and only a select few make it to crone. But I would, somehow I knew that, as I held my daughter close. I’d live long enough to see her on the throne, ruling over a united Strelae.

Janila, Wolf Queen, first of her name. Yes, I thought as I hugged my daughter close. That was something fine to aim for.

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Stalk me!

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Stalk me!



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