ALISON ARCHER

SHADOWARD



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For those who became whoever they needed to be to survive,
and are on the journey to who they want to be.

CONTENT NOTE

This book contains content some readers will want to know about in advance. Your mental health matters. To learn more about the contents before you read, visit:

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GLOSSARY

THE GODS

Ignar: God of sun and consumptive flame. Province: Ignos. Bloodline: ignarian.

Marith: Goddess of water and swimming things. Province: Marithos. Bloodline: marithian.

Nyvorn: God of air and flying things. Province: Nyvos. Bloodline: nyvornian.

Mordyn: God of earth and crawling things. Province: Mordun. Bloodline: mordynian.

Vernalia: Goddess of life and growing things. Province: Vernys. Bloodline: vernalian.

Thanovar: God of death and decaying things. Unlanded. Bloodline: thanovarian.

Cyralia: Goddess of seasons, time, and cycles. Province: Cyralon. Bloodline: cyralian.

Sophiri: Goddess of wisdom, clarity, and memory. Province: Sophys. Bloodline: sophirian.

Delvara: Goddess of dreams, chaos, and prophecy. Province: Delvos. Bloodline: delvarian.

Arastor: God of night and the eternal void. Province: Arastos. Bloodline: arastorian.

ORDERS OF BEINGS

Gods: Disembodied divine beings who created the world, existed outside it, then faded. Each created one incarnial.

Incarnials: Incarnate vessels of the gods' power. They appeared seven thousand years ago and started the divinial lines. They were killed throughout the Incarnial Wars or shortly after.

Divinials: The ruling class. Part-divine descendants of incarnials and mortals. In the case of two divinials pairing, the resulting child inherits one divine line, with mortal blood from both parents.

Mortals: Ordinary humans with no divine blood, who didn't know the gods existed until Sophiri delivered a message to the prophets through Delvara's dreams.

THE INCARNIAL WARS

Wars fought over the gods' intentions after the arrival of the incarnials. There were three factions:
1. Those who believed mortals should rule themselves.
2. Those who believed divine blood had the right to rule.
3. Those who believed the blood of Ignar should rule above all.

The wars ended three thousand years ago when Ignar's incarnial, Illio, signed treaties giving the divinial lines provinces and rights to self-govern, while granting himself supreme authority as emperor. For their role in helping mortals kill incarnials and divinials, the thanovarians were left unlanded. Emperor Illio died chasing the thanovarians out of the new empire, leaving his son, Emperor Belzas, to take the throne.

RADIAL DIRECTIONS

Flameward: Toward Ignos and the Eternal Flame.

Shadoward: Away from the Flame, toward the colder edges.

CARDINAL DIRECTIONS

Mountainward: North, toward the mountainous region.

Seaward: South, toward the sea and Marithos.

Earthward: East, toward the canyons of Mordun.

Windward: West, toward the origin of the winds and Nyvos.

HIGH HOLIDAYS

Somnus: Autumn equinox, last day of the first month of autumn.

Noctus: Winter solstice, last day of the first month of winter.

Vernus: Spring equinox, last day of the first month of spring.

Embrus: Summer solstice, last day of the first month of summer.


THE BARRENS
NYVOS
ARASTOS
VERNYS
Erbos
IGNOS
Illios
CYRALON
SOPHYS
MORDUN
DELVOS
Shadoward
Flameward
MARITHOS
Mountainward
Windward
Earthward
Seaward

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Thank you for reading
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About the Author

1

Walk across the courtyard and get a glass of wine, Lysandra. No one will notice if you're quick.

The night is stifling, and the wine fountain beckons, but I press my back against the cool marble column instead. This spot is too good to give up; no one has approached me in the last hour, but I'm visible enough that Seran can't accuse me of hiding. I'll just go thirsty. Better to get through this party unbothered and unburned.

I don't know why Seran insisted I come tonight. I usually spend my birthday alone. But an hour before sunset, he showed up at my door with an order to attend and a dress with barely enough fabric to count as a scarf over one arm. So here I am, one year older, *not* hiding against this marble column in a scrap of silk, *not* counting the minutes until I can return to the Sunrise Palace.

The courtyard spins around me, chatter and clinking glasses and gold flashing under rows of glowing torches. I check the positions of the people who could make tonight miserable. I'm about as far away from my father as I can get without being in the hedges. Emperor Belzas sits on a dais, his flame-red hair swooping upward, his tanned skin burnished like he spends his days in the sun instead of this white marble palace. Even from here, I can see the heat waving the air around him.

I'm usually beneath his notice, and I doubt tonight will be any different, especially considering he's distracted. A woman in his lap giggles and tosses her white-blonde hair. She has one thigh draped over his armrest, her

skin a shade past rosy from the heat. He plucks a grape from a golden dish and presses it to her mouth, his thumb following the fruit between her lips. She holds his gaze and sucks until her cheeks hollow.

Impressive that she can do that without choking. Mother must be thrilled. Thank goodness I haven't spotted the empress yet tonight.

Three of my half-brothers cluster close to the throne, their bronze skin casting off simmering energy, their crimson heads catching the firelight. Marus, three hundred years my senior, and Borin, two hundred, usually don't seek me out. Marus is more concerned with his own nose and Borin with drink. But Jasper, youngest of the seven princes, seems to take special pleasure in reminding me I'm the lowest in the pecking order. As if I could somehow forget it.

I avert my eyes so I don't accidentally pull his attention toward me.

The party is growing livelier by the minute, guests swaying to the music and raising their voices. The court is here celebrating the last day of summer, but the end of the season hardly matters when the emperor's power makes it balmy year-round, one sun-drenched day melting into the next.

The dancing will begin soon. This seems like the perfect moment to exit…

My father stands, dumping the woman off his lap. The music stops mid-note. Conversations cut off, and in seconds, every eye is on the emperor. It's so quiet, I hear the *clunk* when his hand lands on his goblet.

"To the last night of summer," his voice booms out. "Though our bright days never end." He lifts it, and everyone in the courtyard does the same.

He downs the drink, then holds his goblet out for his attendant, who leaps forward to refill it. I swear I've seen more faces cycle through that position than any other, being slow or sloshing wine guaranteed to get a burn. This slim young man angles the pitcher to fill the goblet in a breath, and steps back without a drip. *Well done him.*

My father raises his newly filled cup. "And a toast to my youngest daughter, Lysandra."

I blink and shake my head. I could not possibly have just heard my name come out of his mouth. I misheard. I hallucinated.

But when I refocus on him, his golden goblet is tilted in my direction, his ember eyes on me. My skin erupts in chills.

"A blessed twenty-first birthday to the Princess of the Dawn. To her beauty and her future."

Glasses rise, then tip toward mouths.

Oh no.

Now I know why I'm here tonight.

He just reminded every person here what twenty-one means: marriageable.

He just told the lords at court I'm on offer.

My father resettles himself in his chair as eyes around the courtyard peel off him and find me. Chatter picks up, murmurs accompanying glances in my direction.

This column at my back is no longer my friend. I push off it in a daze, heading for the closest wine fountain. I don't know what to do about all these stares, but I know I'll bear them better if my throat isn't so dry.

How did I not see this coming? I never imagined, not even for a second, that this birthday would matter. The emperor waited half a decade to find Thalia and Evinestra husbands, and even longer for Esmerelda. Perhaps seeing Rinalda unwed these last fourteen years as part of her punishment led me to believe I would be left alone in the Sunrise Palace too.

But then again, my red-haired sisters are perfect vessels for Ignar's power. Our father can show them off proudly. My value to the throne will only ever be in the heirs I produce, and it seems like he has no intention of wasting time before collecting.

I reach the fountain, the overflowing basins bubbling black in the torchlight. I snatch a cup and dip it into the flow. I sense more than see the lords closing in as I take one quick gulp.

"The Princess of the Dawn, at last," a lord with a cropped beard says. He takes my hand even though I didn't offer it and studies my hair. "The name suits you. Like the first blush of dawn."

A pretty way to say *not red.* I can thank Seran for that clever packaging. I fold my discomfort down inside me, turning up the corners of my mouth in a polite smile. "Thank you, my lord."

"I've just come back from purchasing land in Mordun. The sunrises alone are worth the journey. The cliffs make for spectacular views, and I have plans for a manor—"

"Your highness!" Another lord shoulders in as the first one glares. "I don't believe we've spoken before. You're not easy to find at these things."

True, though I sincerely doubt he's ever tried to find me before.

"Tell me, do you prefer riding or archery?"

I haven't spent much time on horseback, but I have never held a bow at all. "Riding."

"I've been shooting since I could walk. I could show you sometime on the grounds of my estate, just outside Illios."

I suppose my preference for riding was irrelevant, then.

A third lord doesn't bother with a greeting, speaking as soon as my eyes flick to his face. "Which of your father's castles has he given you? As a personal holding, I mean?"

At least this one is direct with his priorities. I've barely left the Sunrise Palace in ten years, let alone laid claim to any castles. "None, my lord."

I don't hear his reply as more lords join the circle, talking over each other. As soon as my eyes move off one and onto the next, a new conversation starts.

"Oh, how interesting," I say. "I've never tried it…not as many as I'd like…I've been once." Words find their way to the surface in response to each lord, although most of their questions are just thinly veiled excuses to speak of their strengths.

I stiffen my upturned lips to ensure my smile doesn't falter. One man grabs my wrist and kisses my fingers, and another takes my wine to refill it even though I never had a second sip. Someone shows up with a new cup, shortly before the prior lord brings my original back.

I accept both. At least no one can take my hands when they're full.

How did my sisters ever survive this? I wish I had their power to singe a few eyebrows as the lords lean in.

A hand claps on my shoulder, and I jump.

"Back off, leeches. You'll have to find another bloodline to dirty with your insipid seed."

Jasper bares his teeth at the lords, who have the good sense to shrink away. I wish this was salvation, but whatever he has in mind, it's not for my benefit. I barely manage to set down my cups of wine before he steers me through the quickly parting crowd toward the dais. He stops at the edge of the raised platform, outside my father's line of sight, in front of a broad-chested man in crimson silk.

"Lysandra, this is Weslyn Gavros. He's been dying to meet you." Jasper squeezes my shoulder, and heat builds under his palm. Just enough to remind me what he can do.

Weslyn looks me over in excruciating detail, eyes lingering on the dip of my neckline.

Great. One of Jasper's friends.

"Your highness." Weslyn bows. "I must say, the view from afar doesn't do you justice."

How I wish I was afar right now. "Lord Weslyn…" With Jasper gripping my shoulder, I can't think. "Have you been to the end of summer party before?"

"Who hasn't been to the end of summer party?" Jasper asks, shaking me.

Weslyn smirks. "Your brother tells me you're the quiet one."

"She keeps to herself," Jasper says. "But she's agreeable."

He's pitching a horse to a buyer. *She stays in the pasture. Doesn't bite. Trots for an apple or a switch.* I'm sure my smile is as stiff as my shoulders.

"My family provides the wine for this event every year." Weslyn gestures to a fountain. "The fountain was my new concept. As you probably figured out, we own the Gavros vineyards."

I hadn't. "And where are the Gavros vineyards?"

He grins as if he's being good-natured to indulge me. "Vernys. We just finished a new wing on the estate. Forty rooms. Plenty of space."

I almost sigh in relief as he blathers on about the fountains, his estates, and the superior quality of his grapes. Weslyn will never be my husband. My father will not pair me with a vernalian lord.

The houses that backed my grandfather in the Incarnial Wars were repaid in rich, flameward land. Vernys's vines ripen all year, and Delvos harvests again and again, while the shadoward provinces scrape through cold winters. A lord like Weslyn would lose everything if frost ever chilled his fields. That is the surest loyalty the emperor knows.

My father will send me to a colder, shadoward land, with looser reasons to be loyal. That's what he did with my other sisters: Esmerelda is already in Mordun, Thalia and Staci in Marithos, Evinestra and Kytra on the edges of Sophys. Perhaps I'll end up in Nyvos.

My gaze drifts, landing on the fair head of a lord from Nyvos: Cantor. His hair is almost colorless against his olive complexion. He's speaking with a lady and laughs at something she says, easy and open. I've noticed him at court a few times before. I could picture myself in Nyvos, with those windswept lords in their high towers, and a husband who laughs with me.

I would choose someone like Cantor.

I shake the thought away before it can take root. I don't get to choose.

"You disagree?" Weslyn asks, his grin absorbing into his face like it was never there.

"Be nice, Lysandra." Heat flares under Jasper's fingers, causing a flash of pain that makes me flinch. I doubt my skin will blister, but I'll need to dab lobellum there so I don't have a red spot tomorrow.

I have no idea what I just shook my head at.

"Ah, no," I reply. "I agree with what you said, Lord Weslyn."

That seems to appease him as he continues with talk of his harvest and his hounds. I make sure to bob my head along.

I don't get to choose my husband, and even imagining I might feels like an invitation to disaster. Rinalda took someone for herself without the emperor's permission, and what did she get? Instead of a wedding, she got a scorched funeral, forced to burn her lover herself in the Crimson Square.

"Why doesn't this party have any servers?" Jasper mutters. "Hey! Hey you! Come here. Fill my cup."

Jasper catches the ear of the young man standing just behind the throne, holding my father's pitcher of wine. Indecision flickers across the server's face. The rough silk of his tunic and trousers is fine for the weather but will provide little protection from royal fire. He's not allowed to step away from my father's side, but if he ignores Jasper's order, there is only one possible outcome.

No one cares whether a server regains the use of his hands. If his flesh is too melted to hold a pitcher, he will simply be replaced.

"You mentioned the wine fountains, Lord Weslyn," I interject, taking a step toward him. Jasper's hand tightens, his attention returned to me. "It was your idea?"

"It was." He swirls his cup, lifting it along with his chin. "A brilliant way to aerate the wine and enhance the flavor."

"Yes, the flavor was perfect," I lie. I gesture toward the closest fountain. "Can you show me how it works? I'd love another taste."

"Don't be greedy, Lysandra," Jasper says. "No one likes a lady who's a lush."

"Then more for you, Jasper, while I show her the mechanics." Weslyn grins, as he waves us toward it.

I spare a glance back at the server, the relief clear on his face. He tucks closer to the throne, his pitcher at the ready for the emperor's slightest twitch.

Weslyn reminds me of Marus—pacified, as long as I defer to his intellect and opinions. If I attract Marus's attention, a few simple questions and wide-eyed interest in his answers are often enough to avoid a burn. Borin isn't violent, as long as I encounter him at least two cups in, but no more than six. My other four brothers only come to court from time to time, although the rarity of their visits makes it harder to read their moods when they're here. And my only sister at court is Rinalda, who tolerates me at mandatory functions, and otherwise avoids me.

As if summoned by my thoughts, I spot Rinalda over Weslyn's shoulder, her amber eyes on me. Her long scarlet hair is arranged in perfect waves, her haughty expression unreadable. Princess of the Blue Flame, named for her fire that burns so hot, it glows cerulean. Like me, she is only brought out of the Sunrise Palace for high holidays, or events important enough for the whole family to attend.

My fingers curl into my silk skirts. Was she invited to this party just to see my presentation to the court? Is my father taunting her, making sure she's a witness to the attention I'm receiving, when she's been secluded since her lover's execution?

I would prefer to skip every party, narrowing my entire world to my marble room and our private gardens. But I don't know how Rinalda feels. I don't know if she sees the Sunrise Palace as her sanctuary or her prison.

We were closer once…or at least, she was a bright point of safety in the Central Palace as I grew up. She wasn't warm, exactly, but she didn't treat me differently from my red-haired cousins. To young, pale-haired, flameless Lysandra, that was enough.

Now, we've spent the better part of ten years sequestered in the Sunrise Palace together, and I can't even read the expression on her face.

Jasper finally lets my shoulder go, focused on filling his cup. A marithian lord with blue-streaked hair pulls him into conversation. Weslyn rambles over the swelling music about the proper temperature for wine. I keep my smile carved on my face and my chin bobbing.

In the corner of my eye, the first figures take to the floor. I need to get out of here before the dancing starts. Judging by the number of lords Jasper

chased off, I'll be scrubbing the oily feeling of unwanted touches off my skin for days if I stay.

"You couldn't guess how many barrels it took to fill it—"

"I truly couldn't. Excuse me, Lord Weslyn," I say, forcing my desperation into some corner of my chest so my tone stays light and airy. "Princess Rinalda is beckoning me."

I duck my face and hurry past him. My sorry excuse for a dress flaps indecently wide as I rush through a gap in the crowd.

The clearest way out is the archway across the courtyard, but Captain Orso is posted beside it, hands clasped behind his back. His blocky head stays forward, even as his eyes sweep the guests. He won't stop me from leaving, but whatever he sees gets back to the emperor. Walking out past him would be the same as announcing my early exit.

The hedges it is, then. I swerve toward a break in the dark leaves.

A claw-like grip closes around my arm, jerking me back.

"Leaving so soon?" My mother's voice is soft in my ear.

She's in unusual disarray. Orange curls have slipped free from their pins, one whole section listing to the side. She hooks my elbow and steers me back the way I came. I try not to pull away, but my arm jerks once.

Keep calm, Lysandra. Showing my mother a reaction will only make the situation worse. I smooth my face and bury my nerves, even though they're still sparking in my chest.

"I was just going to join the dancing," I lie.

"Ah yes. Time for all the lords to circle round." She keeps her voice low, nodding to several guests who bow their heads as we pass. "Now that you are a flower ready to be plucked."

We stop at a table where the white-haired empress *pi mata*, Rinalda's mortal mother, sits. She's well over a hundred now, but still with decades left thanks to daily vernalian potions. My mother leans her hip against the table and collects her cup.

From this vantage point, I am reminded of what has probably been needling her all night: the woman back in my father's lap, with her mouth on his ear. An empress *pi mata*, aged out of fertility, might have to endure a new empress, but mistresses are usually kept behind closed doors.

My mother is the current empress, still fertile, and she's being humiliated.

She finishes her wine without a break for breath and wipes her mouth. “Do you feel hopeful? Joyful? Looking forward to what your life might be? I did too.” She curls one lock of my hair around a finger. The strands are pale, with only the slightest hint of rose in the light. “I should have known yours was being traded for mine as soon as I saw that hair.”

My marriageability should be a gift, a chance to make a favorable match and increase her influence. But I can see my birthday is bringing up her own twenty-first year.

She was twenty-one when she married the half-divine Emperor Belzas. Twenty-one when she gave birth. Twenty-one when he stopped coming to her rooms after the disappointment that followed…me.

She retakes my arm and marches straight toward the dais. I try to pull back, and her nails dig in. My mother is full of wine, and my father is full of fire, and the two won’t mix. We’re close enough now that I feel the first wave of heat radiating off his skin. Any moment, the emperor’s head will turn and his ember eyes will land on us.

Seran steps in front of us, blocking our path.

“Pardon me, Empress,” he says, bowing low. The muted olive tones he always wears give his russet skin a grayish cast, while his straight hair hanging in a tail accentuates his long features. “Could you spare me a moment of your time?”

“Ah.” She peels her attention off the throne. “What is it?”

She may be teetering on the edge of reason, but she knows Seran is always on her side. He’s the advisor who elevated her from her ordinary mortal life and put her forward as a candidate to become empress. His standing follows the curve of hers and, by extension, mine.

“The delvarians are asking about the venue for the Somnus event.” He gestures toward a cluster of courtiers dressed in richer jewel-tones near the far wall. “There has been some question about using the seaward private gardens.”

“They’d be destroyed,” she snaps, her grip on me loosening a fraction. “Tell them no.”

“I did, Empress, and I think they know they’re reaching.” His tone is as mild as ever, his heavy-lidded eyes calm no matter the situation. “You know how they like to agitate things.”

“Chaotic vipers,” my mother hisses.

“A word from you would go so much further in protecting the gardens from their…excesses.”

She smooths her wayward curls. “I’ll speak to them.”

“Thank you, Empress.”

“And my cup is near empty. More wine.”

“Of course, Empress.”

She gives him the cup and wraps her arms around me, pulling me close. Her mouth at my ear sends sparks of warning down my spine. “Enjoy twenty-one, darling. May you never live to endure what I have.” She pulls away. “Even if that’s exactly what you deserve.”

She releases me and sways toward the delvarians, tossing her head back.

Seran’s hooded gaze settles on me. “You look well tonight, Princess. The dress suits you.”

I look exactly like you wanted me to. Clearly, Seran knew what was going to happen tonight. That’s why he picked a dress I can’t take a full breath in without my chest bulging against the seam of the silk.

“Thank you,” is all I say.

“You should expect more invitations to these types of events. The more lords you meet, the better.”

The idea of having to spend even one extra night out of my rooms feels like a threat. I want to object, to come up with some excuse. I’m sure his impassive scan doesn’t miss the crescents my mother dug into my upper arm, or the red mark Jasper left on my shoulder.

But I bury my *no*, keep my face flat, and give him the affirmation he’s waiting for: “I will.”

I would rather deal with Seran than my mother or father. Seran doesn’t care about me, but he isn’t volatile or vindictive. He works around my shortcomings as calmly as any other problem.

He gives me a nod and follows the empress.

I don’t hesitate. I whirl and weave through the crowd as fast as I can, racing back to the opening in the hedges. I hope no one sees me as I dive into them and push through the leaves and branches. My carriage will have to find its way back without me.

My skirts swing open as I cross courtyards and plazas, past fountains and through covered walkways, and down a path lined with cypress trees. The Sunrise Palace is at the edge of the Citadel, so I’m wheezing by the time I spot the gate. The guards open it on my approach.

My shoes echo off the marble as I hurry to my rooms. I close the door behind me and exhale.

I thought I just had to get through tonight, and I would be left alone until Somnus. Now, I'm supposed to attend parties and entertain lords, while dealing with my mother's outbursts and Jasper's fire?

I tear off the silk dress and toss it across the marble, trading it for my cotton nightgown. Every surface is covered with roses. They arrive yearly on my birthday, the established way for lords and ladies to send their respects to a princess they rarely see. The sunrise colors of peach, pink, and gold pay homage to the Princess of the Dawn. I ignore the ornamental blossoms and go straight for the flowers potted on my balcony.

If I'm going to endure more time outside these rooms, I'll need a fresh crop of lobell. I stroll along the row of pots, tracking the progress of my seedlings and bushes. I pause at one with a few crystalline petals peeking out from twisted leaves.

Almost ready.

The amount of lobellum I went through as a child made my flamelessness harder to hide. Without any power to direct fire away from my flesh, every burn was a mark of difference as plain as my hair. But the healing salve made from lobell flowers leaches its magic in a matter of weeks. My constant requests for fresh jars drew unwanted attention from the vernalians at court.

So, I started growing my own lobell bushes and making my own ointment, reframing my need as a hobby for a bored princess. My skin was the landscape of my experiments, cosmetics hiding red welts when batches didn't work. I sent whole flowers, mashed flowers, dried flowers, leaves and stems, and even the entire plant to be imbued, testing what could hold the magic longest, before landing on ointment made from the buds.

Over the years, I've selected the seeds that produce more and larger buds, cultivating a new variety with clear petals instead of the typical translucent green. They require more care, and if I don't prune them in time, the heavy flowers will break the stems, but a jar made from these will hold the vernalian healing magic for seasons.

In another week, I should have enough for a fresh batch.

I close the balcony doors and uncap my latest jar. It's pearlescent, a sure indicator the magic is active. I dab a little onto the red spot on my shoulder,

and the crescents on my arm. The shallow marks fade while I watch. They'll be gone by morning.

If only my father's announcement were so easily erased.

I flop back on the bed.

I knew I wouldn't be allowed to hide away in the Sunrise Palace forever, but I thought I'd have more time. I've perfected the art of keeping a straight back and a slight smile on balconies and at high tables, one pale head in a row of red. Now I'll have to learn how to deal with clamoring lords, and fast.

I also need to figure out how to slant the selection process in my favor. I won't hope for a handsome lord from Nyvos, but I can't be sent away with a man who is anything like Weslyn Gavros.

I slip between the soft sheets and pull them up to my chin. The scent of roses fills my nose, both familiar and suffocating. I drift into sleep.



My eyes snap open and land on the clock. It's midnight. And I'm certain of only one thing: if I don't get out of here, I'm going to die.

2

I sit up, breath coming quick. I glance toward the balcony, the dressing table, the door. Nothing is unusual but the lumpy piles of roses in the dark. The nearest one could be someone crouching. I stare until it is only roses again.

But something is very, very wrong.

Is someone here, in the room, breathing more quietly than I am? I strain to listen, but I can't hear anything over my pounding heart. Is there a body tucked into the gap beneath the bed, close enough to feel the mattress give under my weight? I can't bring myself to lean over the edge and look. My eyes bounce around the room, but the darkness reveals nothing amiss.

Cold needles prickle up my spine. It's like lips whisper in my ear: *you're in danger.*

I kick free of the sheets and leap to the marble. I back toward the door. My heart is thundering so hard I can feel it in my teeth. I'm certain if I look long enough into any shadow, I'll see a face peering out.

I fumble for the handle behind my back, yank it open, and run.

I race down the shadowed corridor. It feels longer than it did an hour ago, the end of it stretching away from me. If I stop, whatever is chasing me will catch up. I turn toward the stairs and slam into a figure coming the other way.

A maid and I both crash to the floor.

"Your highness." The maid scrambles upright, doing her best curtsy from her knees. Wine spreads around her on the marble, the tray she was

carrying overturned. She curls her shoulders—she thinks I'll burn her. "Forgive me, I didn't see you. Are you hurt?"

It's one of Rinalda's maids; I think her name is Portia.

"It's alright." I force myself up, pain shooting through my elbow. "It's alright. It was my fault."

Portia breathes again. Her shoulders relax. She gets her feet under her, takes my good arm, and eases me up. "Let me help you back to your rooms, your highness."

She steers me in the direction I came from.

I wrench free. "No! I'm not going back there."

She stumbles a step, both palms coming up between us, her expression tight. I see my panic reflected in her eyes, alongside confusion. But I don't have time to explain. Even as I stand here, it's like someone runs a finger up my spine and whispers: *run, run, run.*

I'm about to obey that voice when another calls from the end of the corridor: "What's going on out here?"

Rinalda glides toward us, long red hair glinting in perfect waves, her robe draped as elegantly as the gown she wore to the banquet earlier. Her eyes rove over the mess, then land on the maid. "You. Leave."

Portia curtsies and hurries down the stairs.

Now Rinalda turns to me, eyes flashing. "What are you doing, Lysandra? Go back to your room."

I don't obey, but I don't run either. Do I feel safer now that Rinalda's here? Or am I just frozen to the spot because of her icy glare?

"Rinalda." My voice shakes, her name a plea. She was my only comfort at one time, and something small in me aches for her to make sense of this. "Something bad is happening. I need…I need to leave."

Her eyes widen the barest flicker. "Leave? Why?"

"If I don't get out of the palace, I'll die." As soon as I speak the words, I know they're true. My lips quiver.

Her brow wrinkles. "Did something happen? Is there someone in your room?"

"No…I just know. I woke up and I knew. Something terrible is going to happen to me here."

Her eyes narrow. "What are you talking about? That's ridiculous."

I hear how it sounds. "You're right. It's ridiculous."

It's ridiculous, even as phantom fingers curl around my throat. The voice inside my head is chanting again: *go, go, go*. I can't stay here another second.

"You had a nightmare." Her haughty expression makes it clear she expects me to relent the way I always do and remove myself from her presence. "Stop acting like a child."

"You're right, I'm sorry," I say. She's between me and the stairs. "I'm sorry. I'll just go…"

Confusion ripples across her face. "Go back to your room, Lysandra."

I keep sidestepping, shaking my head. "Just ignore me. Pretend you didn't see me." Just a few more steps toward the stairs…

"Stop." Her eyes fly wide, and blue sparks flash at her fingertips. They are not a bluff.

I stop, then. "Please, Rinalda. You don't have to help me." Why can't she be the cold, standoffish sister she always is and just go back to her room and forget I exist? "You don't need to get involved…"

She watches me, expression cycling between disbelief, confusion, and disdain. "Guards! Guards, come here! Princess Lysandra is having a fit."

That cracks through the last bit of my composure.

"No!" I lunge toward her and grab her arm. Guards won't let me go—they'll keep me in. "Rinalda please! I've never asked anything of you. Please let me leave right now, or I'm going to die."

"Let go, Lysandra," she hisses. "Let go, or I'll burn you."

I release her, but I can't give up. The guards' feet pound up the stairs, their armor jangling. Despite her threats, I dart past her and race down the corridor.

"Guards, come quickly!" she calls behind me. "Take Princess Lysandra to her rooms and lock the door."

I speed up, but metal steps clang after me and rough hands close around my arms.

"No! Please!" I struggle, but the grip I'm fighting is too strong.

Rinalda watches as they drag me toward my room, her face a familiar, disdainful mask. "I'm getting Seran."

“No!” I whimper as the barricading bar clangs into place outside my door. I slam my hands on the wood. This whole palace is poison. This room most of all. And with guards outside and Seran on the way, I’ll never get out of here.

I don’t understand what is happening to me.

I made a scene in the hallway and pawed at Rinalda, but for once, I can’t wrestle down my impulses. The fear is too strong, driving my voice and my feet, while my sense lags a step behind.

Even when I know a lick of fire is on the way, I’ve always managed to bury fear deep enough to stand straight with a smile. When I try to shove this fear down, it crawls right back up my throat like a spider.

I curl my fingers against the door, as I try to negotiate with the fear: I should not leave the palace. I should stay in my room and wait for Seran. Seran doesn’t want me to die. He’ll have the guards search every closet and corridor, and if there is some real danger, he’ll take action to protect me.

But if the guards find nothing, he’ll think it’s the end of it. And I’ll know it’s not. I don’t know how I know, but I need to leave the palace right now to survive.

I push away from the door and pace. Can I convince Seran to help me leave? He won’t listen if I babble on the way I did with Rinalda, but is there a plausible reason I can present?

Rather than letting him search, I can tell him I saw an intruder. An assassin. I could pretend there was a man with a knife on my balcony. But if Seran believes me, he won’t let me leave…he’ll post more guards between me and the exits.

My eyes fall on the lantern. I could light a fire. It would get me out of this bedroom, and maybe even out of the Sunrise Palace. But my thudding heart tells me leaving the Sunrise Palace is not enough. I need to get away from the Citadel entirely.

Something bad is going to happen to me here.

With the door barricaded, my only option is the balcony.

I throw on a simple dress and cloak. I tie up my long light hair and cover it with a large scarf. The shade might only have a pale hint of the family’s ignarian red, but it is rare enough to get me noticed.

I grab a velvet bag and stuff more clothes and a handful of gold jewelry inside. The stables are too far to consider taking a horse. Even though I plan to go on foot, my riding boots are sturdier than my silk slippers or heels. I

pack my jar of lobellum and the seeds from my latest crop. If the palace really does come down behind me, at least I'll be able to start fresh.

Seran won't be long now. I hurry out the balcony doors.

The private gardens stretch below me, silver and black in the moonlight. Hedges form shadowed geometric patterns. The white outer wall of the Citadel encloses the garden. Beyond that is Illios, the Burning City.

My cloak tangles around me as I swing one leg over the railing, then the other, and perch on the narrow ledge. I can jump to the sloped roof above the garden entrance, then climb from there. I look down and my stomach drops, the dizzy pull of gravity tugging at my toes. The ground is farther than I thought. For a second, my body locks, my fingers fusing to the railing.

The whisper in my mind becomes a roar. Whatever is waiting for me in this palace is worse than the ground. As if there is a beast in my room or a raging fire or an archer with an arrow pointed at my head, I believe with all my heart that gravity is the safer opponent. The fall might kill me. Staying definitely will.

Terror moves my legs for me and I jump.

My chest and arms smack into the roof, but my legs swing beneath me, feet scuffling uselessly against the wall. The tiles slide under my palms, and I skid off the edge.

I hit the ground hard, pain flashing as my ankle rolls under me. I hold back a scream.

When I'm sure I can stand, I hobble, then run through the dark garden, my lungs heaving. If any guard looks out and sees me, they'll drag me back and lock me in.

It takes some time to find the dried fountain with a sun carved on the edge of its basin. There is a tunnel here, known only to the heirs of Ignar. Even Captain Orso doesn't know about it. It will take me under the wall and down into the city. A turn of the stone sun opens the trap door in the bed of the fountain and admits me into the depths.

The narrow passage is pitch black, and I have to brace my hands on either wall to keep my balance as I find each step. I cringe as spiderwebs break against my face and arms. It feels like I'm descending farther into the ground, when really I'm following the shape of the city downhill. I try not to think about all the dirt and stone piled on top of me, as the tunnel keeps going, and going, and going.

This is bad. This is so bad. I'm breaking so many rules. I would never leave like this. I feel like I'm in a nightmare where nothing quite makes sense.

I finally emerge in the crypt beneath Ignar's temple, the door unlocked from the side where only the dead should be. The crypt opens behind the giant golden statue of the sun god and his Eternal Flame.

As I stumble out of the temple, a dog howls in the distance, and another answers. When Captain Orso and his men do not find me in the palace, they will search the city.

Which means I can't stay in Illios. I need to get to the river.

I head through the temple district, grand houses lining the spotless streets. The wide roads narrow, and the homes grow humbler, marble houses traded for rough stone and mortar. I smell the waterfront before I reach it. After about five more turns I spot the river, cutting through the city like a shimmering lifeline.

Even at this hour, a few men unload cargo under swaying lanterns. A lone man is bent over a smaller vessel, coiling a rope. I limp straight toward him.

"I need a boat." My voice comes out steadier than I feel.

The smell of fish and sweat rolls off him as he faces me. His gaze finds me slowly and he grunts. "Not a ferryman."

"Then where can I catch a ferry?"

"Here, sometime."

"When?"

"Morning." He shrugs at the stars. "Not a timekeeper either."

I can't wait until morning. By now, they will have found my room empty. By dawn, the city will be full of dogs and Orso's soldiers, every gate watched, every boat stopped.

"I can pay." I reach into my bag and pull out a gold chain with pearls dripping from it. I hold it between us. "I need to get somewhere else I can catch a ferry. A different port. Right now."

His focus narrows on the necklace, and I can tell I have his interest. "What trouble comes with that gold?"

"No trouble. If we leave now." I keep my voice low and hope it's convincing. "So where to?"

His gaze flicks from me to the pearls and back again. After another moment, the necklace disappears into his fist.

“Any place you can put yourself below deck is yours. It’ll be a few hours to Sessia.”

Sessia. A neighboring city. “There are ferries in Sessia?”

“Ferries to everywhere. Many as you like.” He gives a little hand flourish, stepping aside to make room for me to climb onto the swaying boat.

I clutch the railing and plant each foot as I descend below. There is almost no space amidst the crates and canvas and nets, but I wedge into a nook. My muscles tense as I wait, ears straining for the shouts of soldiers or the baying of dogs.

Just when I’m about to go above deck and tell the man we need to leave, the boat creaks into motion. We rock our way out of the harbor and join the smoother flow of the river. I don’t relax until a few more minutes have passed and no soldiers from the shoreline have shouted for the boat to return.

I close my eyes and tuck my cheek against my knee.

I’ve left my room, the palace, the only home I’ve ever known. Now what?

3

"Sessia!"

I jump, limbs unfurling only as far as the cramps will let them. Morning light filters through the cracks in the boards above me. I'm not in the palace in my bed. I'm in a stranger's boat, farther down the river than I've ever been. And for some inexplicable reason, that feels like a relief.

I climb from the hold into gray morning light.

The small boat is lashed to a stone dock, the water level keeping us bobbing feet below the cobblestones.

If I had gotten a good view of the boatman last night, I don't know if I would have been brave enough to approach him. His clothes are stiff with grime, his hands cracked and blackened in the creases.

I smooth my skirts. "This is Sessia?"

He nods.

"And the ferry?"

"Ferries to take you in any direction. Just ask around the docks."

I don't think pressing him will prove fruitful. "Right. Thank you, then."

I reposition my velvet bag around my shoulders and step closer to the wharf. His bright, beady eyes follow my movements, like he wants to say more. Maybe to ask why I needed the ride, or what else is in my bag.

I pause. "I want your word that you won't tell anyone you saw me last night. No matter who comes asking."

He grunts. "I only see what I'm paid to see."

He thinks that's reassuring, but my father could pay him in palaces.

“Then let me tell you how to keep your payment.” I draw myself up, trying to channel Rinalda. “If anyone comes looking for me here, I’ll say you stole my jewelry. And you won’t just lose the gold. You’ll lose your head.”

His small eyes narrow further. My heart pounds, and I root around in my velvet bag, until my hand closes on a bracelet. I hold it out.

“Stay quiet, stay rich, and we’ll both keep our lives. Melt it down before you try to sell it.”

He accepts the bracelet from me, and I hoist my hip onto the street level. I struggle with my cloak as I clamber onto the wharf.

Even though my ankle still aches, I pump my legs to put distance between me and the water’s edge. Did I really just threaten him? I have never spoken to anyone like that before. But I had to. That boatman is the fastest way the guards could find me.

Despite the early hour, men haul nets and heave crates onto carts, their voices ringing out as chains clang. Every loud sound sends my heart into a frenzy. Even if the boatman doesn’t talk, I can’t have sailors here reporting the arrival of a strange woman with a scarf covering her hair. I pull up my hood and dart down an alleyway.

I hide myself in a gap between two stacks of crates. My ankle throbs and my hands shake as I gather my cloak around me. Even though the air is warm, I still shiver from adrenaline and lack of sleep. I have never been outside the Citadel without an armed escort before. I knock my head against the stone behind me.

What am I doing here?

No one at the palace will believe I fled because my life was in danger. They will think I ran from the prospect of marriage. I’ll be just as bad as Rinalda. Defiant. Disobedient. Unwilling to play the role I was born for. But I have no lover to burn, and I already live sequestered in the Sunrise Palace. I can’t even guess how my father will punish me.

All I know is that it will be bad, and it will probably last years. Staying away longer will only make it worse.

But I can’t go back.

Even thinking of returning makes my muscles lock up. I suck air in and let it out slowly, waiting for the grip on my spine to loosen. I do it again, and again, until the creeping feeling like lips at my ear or hands near my throat fades.

I'm away from the palace now. Distance is good. Distance helps.

But I can't stay here, crouched in an alleyway. My throat is dry and my stomach is hollow. I don't know how safe it is to be alone on the street. Even though I'm sure I saved myself from something sinister at the palace, I could fall prey to someone who sees a woman alone as an easy target.

I need a plan, and fast.

The safest place for me is in some distant noble house, under the care of my father's allies. But if I show up and knock at a lord or lady's door, I'll be sent straight back to Illios. No one would hide me from the emperor once they found out I ran.

I need my father's permission to leave the Citadel. I need proof there is danger for me there.

I need a prophecy.

I sit up straighter. The river runs through Delvos, the lush province given to the blood of Delvara, goddess of prophecy, chaos, and dreaming. One of those purple-eyed lords or ladies could pull my future from the threads of the world and reveal what's coming for me. Prophecies are precious, but I have gold. If I can reach a household with strong enough delvarian blood, I can make a trade.

I can bring a prophecy to my father as proof. Or, if this feeling is wrong and there is no danger in my future, I can prove to myself that I've fallen into delusion, and it's safe to go home again.

The docks are coming alive now, voices multiplying, lanterns snuffed out as the sky brightens. A woman crosses the mouth of the alley with a canvas sack over one shoulder. She is alone. Before I can talk myself out of it, I push myself to my feet, wincing as my ankle takes my weight.

"Excuse me." My voice comes out too high, but it catches her ear and she stops. I clear my throat. "I need to get to Delvos. Do you know which ferry to take?"

She tilts her chin toward the far end of the waterfront. "Every boat leaving from that pier heads toward Delvos. There should be one by noon. Not sure the ports."

"Thank you. And…how do I pay?"

She looks me over. Her gaze catches on my cloak, my boots. "You pay before you board. Should cost about five chits."

"Five chits." All I have in my bag is jewelry. I can't hand another heavy gold necklace to a ferryman and not expect questions. "Do you have any

coins?”

Her expression closes. She takes a step back, her grip tightening on the strap of her sack.

“I can trade!” I reach into my velvet bag and pull out a plain gold bangle, keeping it low between us so no one else can see. The morning light catches the metal. “I just had to leave my home quickly. This is all I could take.”

Her eyes dart over me again, but her appraisal is different this time. She nods, as if she has come to her own conclusion about my circumstances. “I can give you some coins for it. Not what it’s worth, or even close.”

I hand her the bangle and she counts the coins. She gives me a handful of small brass ones I recognize as chits, and two silver pieces. “That’ll get you on the boat, and another if you need it. Is that home you left likely to come looking?”

“Yes.”

“Then you might want to change. You’re going to be the finest dressed person on the river in those clothes.”

The neckline of my dress is lined with pearls, while hers is plain. I hold up the edge of my satin cloak to her rough-hewn gray one. “Would you be willing to trade cloaks?”

I exchange mine for hers. It hides the top of my dress, at least.

She loops my fine one around her shoulders. “A word of advice: bargain first. Pay second. And try to find yourself some different shoes.”

I nod, throat tight, as she strides away. I realize too late I should have asked if she had any food.

Bargain first. Pay second.

I hide myself back in the alley and wait for a ferry to arrive at the pier the woman pointed me to. By the time it does, I’ve watched enough passengers board and disembark to mimic them. With five chits ready in my hand, I square my shoulders and walk across the cobblestones with purpose.

The ferry at the pier is a flat, low boat with a canvas roof stretched over the deck.

“I’m going to Delvos,” I say to the man posted alongside it.

“A tag is ten.”

“What?” I saw passengers accepting tin tags as some kind of ticket, but I can’t tell if the man is cheating me. “I heard it’s five to Delvos.”

He pats his wooden box. “Tag is for disembarking and re-boarding at ports. You give me ten and I’ll give you five back when you get off the last time in Delvos. Unless you don’t plan to leave the boat the next few days?”

“No…no, I’ll take a tag.”

I stumble out of the way as other passengers come up behind me, exchanging their ready coins for a piece of stamped tin from the box. I rifle through my bag, hoping I have enough chits. I do, although this only leaves me with three, plus the two silvers.

“Here.”

He hands me one. “Don’t lose it, or you’ll have to buy another tag. Women sleep stern side, below. Any spot you can find is yours.”

I cross the deck to an empty spot against the far railing. New passengers arrive, offering chits. Others return, showing their tin tags to get back on. Soon, the deck is crowded, and the ferryman rings a bell. The boat lurches as it pulls away from the dock.

The other passengers wear threadbare clothes, with large, patched travel bags. I see now why the woman told me to find different shoes; the gleam of the leather and delicate embossing on mine are far too fine to blend in.

As much as I want to stay glued to this railing, quiet endurance won’t work. I need more common clothes, I need food, and I need more coins instead of a lump of tangled jewelry. At the first stop, I approach a woman with her tin tag out, taking it as a sign she is disembarking permanently. I trade an embroidered tunic for a crumpled handful of dirty clothes. I remember too late that I should have asked her if she had coins or food.

Bargain first, pay second.

At the next stop, I exchange another garment for a waterskin. At the stop after that, I swap my fine riding boots for a scuffed pair and a few more coins. My lobellum would be as precious as the gold, but I keep the jar at the bottom of my bag, unwilling to part with it. I rip the pearls off my dress and trade them for a loaf of brown bread and a small folding blade. By nightfall, my clothes look like they could belong to any woman on this river, and I have gathered enough food for a few days.

The crew lashes the ferry to a post for the evening, and it rocks gently in the river’s flow. I join the women gathering below deck. I stay out of their fight for the few benches and find a spot where I can lean against the wall. I’m exhausted. My adrenaline spiked every time I approached a stranger, and I only dozed a few hours last night.

But there is one more thing I need to take care of before sleep. If anyone sees my hair, I have no doubt my father will find me within the day. It needs to go.

When the only sound is the constant creak of the hull, I grab an unlit lantern and my folding knife and slip above deck.

The river is black and flat around the boat. There is no crew in sight. I find a section of railing hidden by canvas and crates and kneel beside it.

The knots on the scarf give under my fingers, then the ties beneath, and my waist-length hair spills free around me, ghostly in the dim light. My hands find tangles that never form under the care of my usual brushes and oils, as I separate a section and hold it to my collarbone. I slide the blade underneath and begin to saw. Each pass rasps, until a fistful comes free in my hand. My breath shudders as I set it on the deck.

These long waves have been nothing but trouble. Losing them shouldn't make me sad. But my eyes prickle as I cut the next section. And the next.

My father only ever took mortal, red-haired wives, to ensure all his children would inherit Ignar's power along with his blood's signature physical trait. Before my mother, thirteen mortal empresses bore him children with flames flying from their fingertips and shades of fiery hair.

My mother, red-haired and mortal as the rest, was the youngest empress to ever get pregnant. She was exalted for overcoming the fertility challenges that accompany my father's half-divine blood and thought to be the first who might manage to bear the emperor multiple children. But her pride and the emperor's affections both faded when I was born with milky locks, only a hint of rosiness showing my ignarian heritage.

It was Seran who named me the Princess of the Dawn, describing the color as the white clouds reflecting the glow of a sunrise. Clever words to attempt to cool my father's anger.

It didn't work. From what my mother hissed at me over wine, he never visited her bed again. And when my blood came and I still didn't manifest the flames, it seemed that the color of my hair was not a coincidence, but a true signal of my weak connection to Ignar.

I was sent to the Sunrise Palace to live with Rinalda after that. My face wasn't dry for weeks. I didn't unpack some of my things for a year. But gradually, eventually, I found relief in being hidden away. No matter how closely I read my father's or mother's moods, I couldn't change my looks or my lack of power. Being far from them was easier.

Still, I've always felt something stir in me when the sun rises and sets. A tightness in my chest, pulling my gaze to the horizon. I've always hoped it meant that one day, the flame might respond to me.

I cut through the last long pieces and let the knife rest next to the heap of pale strands.

At least hair this light is easier to color.

The lantern I brought from below is caked with black, and I scoop soot from the bottom and sides. I mix it with a palmful of water from my new waterskin and work the paste through my short hair from root to tip. I once heard maids making fun of an elderly woman who rubbed charcoal into her roots to stretch out the time between dyes, saying it made her look like she stuck her head up a chimney. I'll look like I stuck my head up a chimney, as long as I'm not dragged back to the palace before I get my prophecy.

One coat turns my hair dingy, then a second turns it dusky. I refill my waterskin from a barrel on deck and rinse off the residue. I splash water over my face, then wipe it clean with my cloak.

I hold up the lantern, examining my reflection in the glass. A woman with choppy charcoal hair stares back at me. I give her a grim smile.

We're going to survive, you and I.

I gather the clumps from the deck and hold them over the railing. I steady myself, then let go. The strands scatter over the surface. They float for a moment, waving in the current, before they disappear into the depths.

Princess Lysandra is gone now, sucked into the river's darkness.

4

I barely sleep, but morning comes anyway. Everyone shuffles onto the deck in the pale light, just as the ferry pulls back out into the river's flow. The boat creaks as it cuts through the slow-moving water, its surface a bright mirror beneath the cloudless sky. The air smells of fish and wet wood, and my unwashed skin itches beneath my cloak.

The women huddle on the deck in clusters, their murmurs a constant hum around me. Now that I look like I stuck my head up a chimney and all my clothes are tattered, I'm less worried about sticking out and more interested in what I can learn. I edge closer to a group. One woman glances up, then scoots aside to make space.

I keep my eyes low, flicking from passenger to passenger. Just like me, their clothes are patched and ill-fitting. And the conversation tells me what most of them are here for: work.

"My uncle has a job waiting for me in Strenza. An apprenticeship."

"I'm going to the kitchens in House Buldra. They're looking for a blacksmith too, if one of you knows someone qualified."

"My lord's children are too old for a governess now, so I'm searching for another family," an older woman says. "If you've heard of any, please, I need to send my daughter money."

They speak of lords both cruel and kind, of good places to earn, of cities and towns to avoid. Most of the threadbare, mismatched figures have no destination, just the hope of finding work on the river. A smaller group have

employment waiting for them, their journeys paid for by lords seeking more hands to work in their manors.

Inquiring eyes eventually turn toward me.

“I’m looking for work in one of the manors of Delvos,” I decide quickly. “I’ll take any job I can do there. I’m not picky.”

They nod, accepting the story easily, then fall back into their chatter. It’s not a bad plan. I’ve collected a few things, but unless I step off the river and meet my willing delvarian, I’ll need the protection of walls, food, and shelter. Work will give me a cover to hide my identity; no one would think to look for me among servants.

I expect to hear some rumors about me, some whispers from the palace about a missing princess, but the women don’t mention a thing. While Emperor Belzas resolves many matters with immediate violence and bursts of flame, things that could reflect badly on the throne are handled quietly. Maybe he’s trying to bring me back without anyone ever knowing he ever lost me.

The ferry makes short stops at small ports, but stays over an hour at larger ones, lingering in the harbor as cargo and passengers load and unload. I fidget and pace the entire time, keeping an eye out for guards and soldiers on the shore. Those with employers don’t return, while the ones seeking work come back to the boat when no door opens for them. I breathe a sigh of relief every time we pull back into the river.

The landscape changes around us. The sunbaked stones of Ignos, bleached white and shimmering with heat, give way to greenery. The ports grow lusher, vines crawling over dock posts and market stalls. Trees lean over the water with broad dark leaves. Even before the ferryman calls it, I can tell we’ve reached Delvos.

I step off with the job-seekers, one soot-haired woman among a dozen strangers shuffling to the large houses along the river. I try to blend in as I follow them through the gates of manor after manor, asking about work. A few are taken in. Most are not.

It’s hard to tell which of these households might belong to a lord or lady with strong enough delvarian blood to give me a reading themselves. At first, I hang back and try to guess. But the hollowness in my stomach inspires me to put my hand up for positions.

I get as far as one interview to become a maid. The housekeeper asks me to wring a sheet. I take it in both hands and twist it the way I have seen

servants do. Water barely drips. She watches me struggle for ten seconds, takes the sheet back, and wrenches it in a single motion that sends water splattering across the stone.

A woman with ink-stained fingers asks who can read and hires the first woman who raises her hand. My education was extensive, and is possibly my only advantage, but speaking up is a skill I was never rewarded for. The door is already closing by the time I work up the courage to insist I be given a chance.

By the third day in Delvos, I don't like the way I smell, my stomach is hollow with hunger, and my hope is dwindling.

Maybe that's why, on the fourth day, when I arrive at a manor with gates designed to look like curling branches, I resolve to step forward immediately, no matter what type of work they need. Meek, mild-mannered Lysandra was my strategy at court, but no longer. I will become whoever I need to be to survive.

The woman in the doorway with keys hanging from her waist announces: "We need a governess."

My hand shoots up. The older woman I met on the first day is only a second behind me.

The keys jingle. "I'm Malda, the housekeeper. Come with me. We'll interview you inside."

We follow her across the lush grounds and into the manor. This house is nothing compared to the scale and grandeur of the Citadel, but it is beautiful. The vine motif winds inside across tapestries and glass mosaics. Malda leads us down a long hallway. Tall, narrow windows stripe the walls with light and set the colored glass sparkling.

She pauses and lifts the chain of keys from her hip to unlock two doors. She gestures for my competition to go through one and beckons me through the other.

I trail her into a simple den. Her keys clink as she takes a seat. I do the same.

I am not qualified to be anyone's governess. But with my life and sanity depending on it, I must lie.

Malda has light eyes with pinprick pupils that don't hold any warmth. The neat, tight coil of her gray hair makes me even more conscious of the choppy, soot-stained locks I scraped back into a tail this morning. I keep my

posture straight, which isn't difficult—the muscles of my shoulders seem to be perpetually tense.

"Our last governess disappeared on us. I need someone who can manage the children without oversight. The next few weeks are going to be extremely busy for the household as we prepare for our Somnus ball. You've worked with children before?"

I nod. "I have many siblings."

"Ages?"

"All ages." That sounds too vague, but admitting I have thirteen siblings ranging from decades to centuries old won't help. "They're three through seventeen."

"But have you been employed as a governess?"

If I say yes, she might ask for the household. I dip my chin, heat creeping into my cheeks. "I cared for my little cousins as well."

I can tell by the twist of her lips that she is about to dismiss me.

"I can read," I blurt. "I've been tutored extensively—language, arithmetic, history. I can help the children get ahead in their lessons."

"That would be an advantage," a voice says from behind me.

I look over my shoulder. A finely dressed man stands in the doorway, hands clasped behind his back.

"Apologies for interrupting," he says, entering the office. "Curiosity about the candidates got the better of me."

"Of course, my lord," Malda says, rising and moving away from her seat.

He is dressed in deep green, his light brown hair coiffed high, with just a bit of silver streaking through it. When his eyes lock on me, I struggle not to gasp.

They are a deep, unnatural violet. Unlike the blond hair of Vernalia, or the fiery hair of Ignar, this trait of Delvara isn't shared by pure mortals. It marks him clearly as a delvarian.

I catch myself staring and curtsy. "Apologies, my lord…"

"Please. Norville." He lifts a hand, waving away my concern. "You say you are educated?"

I nod, keeping my eyes down.

"Then, are you familiar with Lord Radna Tevis?"

The question is so simple, I think there must be a trick. Tevis isn't a name you would need a tutor to tell you. His statue is in a major square in

Illios.

This lord doesn't expect much from me. Norville probably thinks I learned my letters and had a map at home. While I was lying about being experienced with children, I wasn't lying about my education. It was only for the benefit of the emperor's pride and a future husband, but I was taught the same facts as my brothers regardless.

"Tevis recorded the history of the Incarnial Wars and the three factions: those who believed mortals should rule themselves, those who believed divine blood had the right to rule shared equally among the lines, and those who believed Ignar's blood should rule above all."

He nods with a polite smile, clearly expecting this. I can't stick to obvious answers.

"But I prefer to supplement Tevis with Deft, who focused more on how the factions formed. Deft recorded that Delvara's incarnial was the first to break with the other divinial lines, and support Emperor Illio's claim."

I don't mention the report said she didn't join my grandfather's side out of true belief or loyalty. Delvara's incarnial turned two sides into three out of a simple love of chaos.

His brows rise. "You've read Deft?"

"About her and from her. Reproductions of her records and correspondence."

For a moment, I worry I've revealed access to documents a servant wouldn't have. But he doesn't react. He goes to the bookshelf and tugs out a tome. The embossed red leather is familiar. "What about Satchee?"

"Satchee documented facts about incarnials themselves. What it meant to be an incarnate vessel of the gods' power, what's known about each of their lives, and how each of them died."

Illio, my grandfather, was the only incarnial to survive the wars. Flame flying from every step, sunlight spilling from his eyes and fingertips, he insisted Ignar's blood gave him the divine right to a crown. The fighting only stopped when he and the part-mortal descendants of the other incarnials signed treaties granting each divinial line a province and powers to self-govern, while giving him supreme authority as the first emperor. Only the thanovarians, divinials of death and decay, received no lands. They murdered Illio as he chased them out of his newly formed empire, and my father's rule began.

“My, my. You are well read.” Norville snaps the book shut. “Where are you from? Miss…?”

The name of Rinalda’s maid is the first that comes to mind: “Portia, my lord.” I pick a port city. “From Trellis.”

“What a wonderful education they have so close to the capital,” he muses. “Lucky for us that you made it this far without some other family scooping you up.” He smiles, the curve of his lips and his white straight teeth instantly making him more handsome. “I must speak with our other candidate, but don’t go far. Malda?”

The housekeeper stands and follows him out, leaving me alone.

Those purple eyes. Norville might be just the delvarian I need. With a few strands of silver in his hair, and creases at the corner of his mouth, he appears about forty. If he was really born forty years ago, he probably has too little divine blood to deliver a prophecy. But with divinials, appearances can be deceiving. He could be much, much older.

My father has lived three thousand five hundred years and still looks like a man in his mid-thirties. My oldest brother looks about the same at seven hundred.

I cannot know the age of this lord based on a little gray. He might be exactly as old as he appears. Or his violet eyes might be a hint that his divinial blood runs rich and threads of the future are only a shuttered-eye away.

I wait ten minutes. Then twenty with my knee bouncing. I stand and pace. If they are going to turn me away, I need to hear it soon. The ferry will leave without me. I cross to the narrow window and search for the sun.

Through the glass, I see the front garden and the river glimmering in the distance. A figure walks along the path toward the gates—it takes me a moment to recognize the ex-governess I came with. She holds her head high, one hand clutched around her shawl, her travel bag in the other.

She’s leaving. That means I was chosen. I do not have to go back on the river. I press my hand flat against my chest. I can stay. I can stay and try to get my prophecy.

Still, I know the other would-be governess was desperate too. I touch my own travel bag, wondering if I can catch up to her and give her a piece of my jewelry. The glass of the window is sealed around all the edges, so I can’t call out to her…

The door creaks open, startling me, revealing a stern-faced Malda.

“Lord Norville and his wife, Lady Rodania, are happy to welcome you to their home.” She says it like she doesn’t share the sentiment. “You’ll care for the children starting tomorrow. I’ll show you to your rooms.”

She turns and leaves, expecting me to follow. I won’t be able to catch up to the other woman headed back on the river now. If I found work, she will. Besides, every piece of gold risks attracting attention, a gleaming trail leading my father right to me.

The next piece of gold I reveal will be in exchange for a prophecy.

5

The black uniform pinches at the waist. I am still working the buckle on my boot when Malda appears at my door, her gray coil of hair tight as a fist, her expression tighter.

Yesterday she walked me through every corridor of the manor, listing the children's routine without pausing for breath. This morning she picks up where she left off.

"They're dressed for the day. Their play clothes are in the cedar chest, not the wardrobe. Laundry goes in the basket by the door, never on the floor."

I follow her, noting as many details as I can. Storage, schedule, meals. Which days tutors come. Playtime and bedtime.

Outside the playroom, she stops. "You won't see much of the lady. Don't let the lord's friendliness make you forget your position. Simply curtsy and keep quiet around him. Bring any issues or questions directly to me."

It's like she read my mind. Norville's friendliness made me hopeful that I might be able to ask him right away.

Malda opens the door. Three brown-haired children look up from the floor. Bowan, the oldest at nine, stands when we enter, puffing out his chest. Ana, seven, is mid-sentence and doesn't stop despite our arrival. Elva, the youngest at five, sits cross-legged with a doll clutched in both hands, watching me with eyes of vivid violet, brighter even than her father's.

As Malda covers a few more details, the children grow restless. One strand of pulled hair turns into shrieking, then chasing, then fighting. But by the time Malda leaves, the two little ones have fallen in line to commands from the oldest, participating in some unknown game.

I sit in the corner with my hands clasped, trying to contend with the fact that I signed up for this. I haven't spent unchaperoned time with children since I was one myself.

But I have to do well here. As tempting as it is to go straight to Norville's office, I can't just march in and ask for a prophecy. I'll be thrown out so fast, I might be able to run and catch the ferry in the next port. Prophecies are delvarian currency. Even as a princess, I never received one, although that was mostly due to the implied insult to my father if I ever questioned the future he had planned for me.

I have to try to figure out if Norville is the sort of lord who might be generous with his powers or tempted by my gold. And if not, I need to be patient. Malda mentioned they are hosting a Somnus ball here in three weeks. The autumn equinox is Delvara's high holiday. The ball will give me the perfect time to find some purple-eyed lord or lady to read my threads.

For now, I just have to hold onto this position and the roof over my head that comes with it. After a few minutes, I relax a little. The children continue playing as if I'm not even here.

This isn't so bad. I can sit in a corner for three weeks.

As if she heard my contented thought, the youngest one throws her head back and wails. "I'm hungry!"

"It's breakfast time," the middle one echoes.

"You were supposed to take us a while ago," the oldest says, addressing me in a nasal tone. "Our last governess was never late."

"Right." I stand so fast my chair nearly tips. "Breakfast."

Breakfast is a disaster. I start eating before they are all served, which gets an immediate correction from Bowan. Ana uses the tablecloth instead of her napkin for half the meal before I notice, and Elva pours most of her porridge into her lap.

"You're supposed to feed it to her," Bowan says, far too late to be helpful. "Now it's garden hour."

I've barely gotten in a bite. I check the clock on the wall and put down my spoon. "Right. Garden. Let's go."

The garden is walled, overgrown at the edges. While the children dig for worms, I crouch by a row of plants I don't know. My lobell bushes struggle under direct sunlight; I wonder how my seeds would do in this patch of dirt. My bushes are probably dead by now, bloomed and broken on the balcony.

A rising wail draws my attention.

Maybe I should have applied to be a gardener. At least plants don't move, and I've cared for some before. It's my last undisturbed thought as Elva's wail turns into a shriek.

The children command me through the rest of the day, scolding me when I take them to the wrong room or miss the hour for music time. By evening, I feel more like a child being led by other children than a governess. I have never been responsible for anyone but myself, and even that came with the help of maids, attendants, and Seran.

I return to my rooms exhausted. My feet ache. My voice is hoarse. My skirts are dirty with something Elva smeared on them. I remove my uniform and fall back on the bed, only to wince. The mattress is like granite.

Then again, after a week on the river, I'm grateful to have a bed, and a private room that doesn't rock with the current.

The fear has quieted. I can still feel it, wrapped around my heart, stuck like sinew to my ribs, but it's dormant, at least for now. I'm away from the palace, with no easy trail for my father to follow.

With even a thought of home, it wakes up, vibrating with the certainty that something bad is waiting for me there. I did the right thing, leaving. But I'm eager to find my way back to a life more like the one I'm used to.

Three weeks. It's just three weeks until the Somnus ball.

It quickly becomes clear this is going to be the longest three weeks of my life. I help the children dress and eat, and try to keep them on schedule. There are multiple slips, with spills and screaming fights and an entire art lesson missed. Each night I collapse in my room, certain I have never used more of my voice, mind, or body in my life.

But I do enjoy the children's company. They order me around a fair amount, but it's also helpful; they seem to know how I fit into their world, even though I feel I'll be exposed as a fraud at any moment. I learn in bits and pieces that they've had multiple governesses, so perhaps they're just used to explaining things to changing faces.

It surprises me when they do what I say. They meet my eyes and speak to me joyfully in their little high-pitched voices, and tug on my hands

eagerly to show me things they like. It's loud, compared to daily life alone in the Sunrise Palace. And it's guileless, compared to the events with my family or other courtiers. It's…unexpected.

Even though I repeatedly fail as a governess, I focus on the one strength I do have: my education. I supplement their lessons with history and sums and courtly manners.

I listen in quietly as a tutor spends a morning on the end of the Incarnial Wars, giving what I think is a generous account of how the delvarians helped put my grandfather on the throne. It's interesting to hear what children in other provinces are taught. This tutor makes it sound like the provinces wanted Illio crowned, and the emperor was happy to give them governance of their own lands in return.

I never met my grandfather, but my father doesn't send his daughters to marry in distant lands because he is satisfied with those treaties. While sons are kept close and married to mortal women to produce ignarian heirs to the throne, daughters are sent away to marry divinial lords as high up in each province as possible, with the hopes that they will have ignarian children who will one day rule there.

We princesses are the expansion play, our wombs the only way around the treaties.

Of course, the provinces know better than to give up too much through marriage. So far, my sisters have only received offers from third or fourth sons and cousins in the provincial successions.

The moment the tutor closes his books and departs, the children start play-acting what they heard, dividing up the room into nine provinces.

"I'm Emperor Belzas," Bowan says, taking Ignos at the center. "You all can have land, but no matter what, I'm still in charge. Portia, you get Vernys, because I like you."

I dutifully step into my flameward land of life and growing things, outlined in blocks.

"Ana, you get Marithos, because you smell like fish."

That earns him a stuck-out tongue. If Bowan isn't careful, Ana will bite him. I've seen her do it. But she stomps over to the land of water and swimming things, playing along.

Elva holds up her doll. "Delvos!" she calls.

"No, Elva. We all live in Delvos. No one gets Delvos. You get… Arastos. You get the bad land, over there."

Elva pulls the doll against her chest. “I don’t want Arastos.”

“You have to.” He gives a little sneer. “Arastos is evil.”

Elva’s chin wobbles. “I’m not evil.”

“Arastos isn’t evil,” I step in, before that wobble turns into a wail. “They just chose the mortal side in the wars. And their land is darker and colder, but it’s not bad.” The wobble isn’t stopping. I deflect: “Do you know why there were wars in the first place?”

Ana pipes in. “Because…because the mortal kings wouldn’t listen to the gods?”

I shake my head. “Not quite. It’s because no one could agree what the gods wanted. The gods made this world. They made the mountains, rivers, and air. But they existed outside it, and they didn’t have bodies, or mouths, like you and me. So Delvara had to talk to the mortals in their dreams. Delvara’s the reason we know the gods existed at all.”

Two pairs of dusty purple eyes and one pair of bright ones fix on me. I can tell they like stories about their own goddess the most.

“Thousands of years ago, each god sent an incarnial to the world. They were all-powerful beings with command over everything in their god’s domain. They could feel the steps of every being across the land, and control the tides, and know all truths, past and present. But…” I wag my finger. “Dreams can be tricky. Delvara wasn’t clear about what the incarnials were here to do. Some people believed they were just meant to care for the world the gods created. Others believed they were like kings, meant to rule it.”

“So what’s the answer?” Ana asks. “Who was right and who was wrong?”

“No one knows. The gods all faded a long time ago, so they can’t tell us now.”

“That’s not true! I know the answer!” Bowan jumps in. “Ignarians have the right to rule because the sun keeps the world alive.”

It’s not an answer from the gods, but I just skip the nuance and nod. “That’s what everyone decided.”

They go back to Bowan’s game. Elva is granted Nyvos, land of wind and flying things. It’s just as shadoward as Arastos, but she seems satisfied anyway.

I leave them to it for a few moments to go and fetch their snack from the kitchen. I pass a footman and a maid as gray as Malda chatting in the

corridor. I offer a smile, but they drop their voices as I pass.

I purse my lips and keep walking. The staff has been distant since I arrived, averted eyes and quick hand-offs the limit of our interactions. It's saved me from having to answer questions about my background, but I also haven't been able to learn anything about Norville.

As comfortable as it would be to keep my mouth shut as the cook hands me a tray, I force myself to try again.

"These look delicious." I keep my smile pleasant, even though her frown deepens. "How long have you worked here?"

"Decades. Silverware is just there."

I collect three forks. "You've served the lord a long time. What's he like?"

She grunts and points to the scones. "Those are hot."

She turns to the sink, the dismissal clear. I take the tray and go.

Am I doing something wrong? Is my accent off, or my posture too straight, for a servant who claims she grew up in Trellis?

Earlier this week, I found a footman polishing a bust and asked him about the family's ancestry. He claimed to be finished and scurried away. When I asked the laundress directly whether the lord does many readings, she told me not to concern myself with such things and shooed me off.

No one wants to talk to me.

Maybe it's just the position. A governess sits between family and staff, belonging to neither. The laundress might resent me for eating at a better table. The footman might think I'll report him for idling.

Regardless, I'm isolated, left without answers about Norville or updates from Illios. Has the emperor sent riders to the provinces? Are there proclamations nailed to doors in every port town describing a missing pale-haired princess? Or is my father dealing with my disappearance quietly?

I need to re-color my hair. The soot has faded to a pale gray. I bring the children their scones, guide them through the rest of their day, and then to bed. Once the house is asleep, I sneak into the kitchen to collect charcoal from the hearth and some scissors.

The corridor is dark on the way back, sconces flickering. A door creaks open ahead of me, and a woman steps out. She's tall, in a pale nightgown, barefoot on the stone. Long, tight curls fall past her waist. I freeze as she turns. Lady Rodania. Malda was right; I haven't seen her at all. I only recognize her from the family portrait in the entry.

“Lady Rodania,” I say, curtsying. “I’m Portia, the new governess. Sorry to disturb you.” I glance down at my scissors and my sack of charcoal, wondering if this warrants an explanation.

When I look up, she’s zigzagging toward me, stumbling over her own feet.

“Can I…help you?”

I’m not sure if she even sees me. Her expression is glazed, glassy eyes locked on something in the distance. I take a step back, alarm running cold tingles down my spine as she draws nearer. Her wide gaze lands on me…

“Lady Rodania!” a voice hisses. The grayed maid emerges into the hallway at a hobbling run.

She glances my way but doesn’t address me. “This way, my lady. You’re alright. This way.” She gets an arm around Rodania and guides her back through the door she came from. The door *thunks* shut, followed by the snick of a latch.

Chills creep over me the rest of the way to my room. Lady Rodania is not well. Is this why the staff is so cagey with me, an outsider? I know better than most how power prefers to keep imperfect things private. I’m not going to gossip.

Still, I have trouble calming down, the fear behind my ribs stirring with even the minor shock of a woman stumbling through the halls. I charcoal my hair, then lie awake, reminding myself I escaped. I made it away from the palace. The charcoal clings even better than the soot. No one will discover who I am and make me go back there.

The next day, my eyes are heavy. During garden time, sitting on a bench in the sun, I rest them for a moment.

“Are you sleeping?” Elva’s high voice startles me.

I scooch into a more upright position. “No, I was just thinking. Why aren’t you playing?”

Her serious expression looks out of place on her chubby, childish face. “Did you dream about me?”

“I wasn’t asleep,” I repeat, not wanting word of it getting back to Malda.

“I dreamed of you, before you got here.”

That wakes me up all the way. I study her but see no mischief in her luminous violet stare.

“You did?” I say slowly.

“Yes, and you looked different.” She wrinkles her little nose. “Kind of funny.”

“Funny how?”

“Your hair was long, and different colors, and you looked kind of like…” She stretches her brows high, lets her mouth hang, and stiffens her back.

I blink, skin turning icy in the afternoon sun. It looks like a child’s pantomime of panic.

“Elva!” Bowan shouts. She drops her expression and whirls toward him. She screeches something shrill and takes off after him, her short legs working twice as hard to catch up.

But the image of that strange expression sticks in my mind.

Why would Elva say she saw me with different hair, if it wasn’t a real vision from before I cut it? What else can Elva see?

That night, the dreams start.

6

I find myself in total darkness, unsure of place or time. In the distance, a man appears, his outline indistinct. The details solidify as he walks toward me: black clothes, black gloves, black boots. He wears a cloak with its hood pulled low, and beneath it, a mask that covers his face up to the edge of his eyes.

The closer he gets, the harder my heart pounds, fear constricting my throat. But my feet stay frozen. His steps are unhurried, each bootfall striking the ground with a *thump*. I don't move, even as he pulls out a knife. I watch in terror as he touches the point to my chest long enough for me to feel the cold before he shoves the blade between my ribs.

I choke on my own scream as I wake up, gasping. I clap a hand over the place where the blade went in, expecting to see red spill through my fingers. There is nothing there, but I can still feel the burning pain.

The taste of blood sits on my tongue through breakfast. I have to set my fork down twice because my hands won't stop shaking.

It felt so real.

The next night, I'm choked. The night after, stabbed in the back. Shot with an arrow. Held down and drowned. I don't always see him before the blow, but night after night, one way or another, he shows up in my dreams and kills me.

It's always the same figure: the same black clothes, the same mask, the same flat patience in his movements. And I wake every time with my chest squeezing so painfully I can't tell whether the wounds are real or imagined.

This is the reason I fled the palace, the fear I've felt since my birthday given form. The voice that said *run* whispers new words in my ear: *the masked man is coming to kill you.*

Delvara is the goddess of prophecy and dreaming. Her power saturates this household, this province, the air I breathe while I sleep. Could living here be pulling loose something from my future? Could the hours I spend beside Elva, her violet eyes bright, be filtering prophecy into my dreams?

Even if I don't understand the mechanism, I understand the message: no matter where I go or what I do, by knife or sword or arrow, this man is going to kill me.

I wanted a prophecy to get away from the palace, but the palace isn't the problem. My father could send me to the far edge of the empire, and it would only buy time. Walls can be scaled, locks can be picked, and guards rotate. Even in a distant noble house, he'll get to me eventually.

Now I need a prophecy more than ever. Aimless choices will end in death, but if I know exactly when he'll arrive, I can plan for it. I can be ready.

Each night, I lie awake staring at the ceiling, fighting sleep. When I lose and my eyes drift shut, my rest ends abruptly with violence. My feet drag as I usher the children from meals to lessons to garden time, my sallow face inspiring delighted, high-pitched commentary.

Until finally, exhaustion overcomes my fear of repercussions, and I scour the mansion for Malda. I find her lecturing a footman near the kitchens. I hover at her elbow until she turns to me.

"Portia. Where are the children?" Her tone is tight, like there is no good answer.

"With a tutor. I need an audience with Lord Norville."

"Not possible," she says immediately.

"It's important. I really need to speak with him."

Her attention shifts to a boy approaching us, his arms sagging under a heavy bolt of fabric. "Don't let that drag!" she snaps, then turns back to me. "Then what is it? This important thing you want to bring to the lord?"

I flush. If I tell her I want a prophecy, she'll say no. "It's about my employment here. It's private."

Malda stares at me a beat. "Do not bother him, Portia, under any circumstances. Somnus preparations have his full attention. Focus on your duties. Stay out of his way."

She stomps after the boy with the trailing fabric.

I consider ignoring her and racing straight to Norville's office. But Somnus is so close. Every corridor hums with preparation, every servant carrying or building or polishing. Taking risks that could get me fired will cost me my chance to be here when the hall fills with guests, including purple-eyed delvarians.

With drink and celebration and masks, and the surge in power that accompanies high holidays, I should be able to find someone willing to exchange a prophecy for gold. Or maybe a laugh. I am more than willing to beg.

If I fail on a stranger, at least I will still have a bed to return to that night. If I get fired, it's the ferry.

Still, the days leading up to Somnus are agony, so I turn to the only option I have: Elva. She's so young, anything she can see would be too fuzzy to trust. I wouldn't be able to use her words to enlist my father's help. But at least she might be able to convince my racing heart and itching feet it's safe to stay here another week.

"Elva, can I ask you something?" I sit next to her as she builds a castle of colorful blocks. "Do you dream of me?"

She doesn't take her eyes off the structure. "You're here living with me. Why would I dream of you?"

I glance at the two older children to make sure they are occupied. "Could you do something for me, though?"

She nods, luminous purple eyes shifting off the blocks and onto mine.

"Can you try to picture me? Not right now, but sometime soon?" I don't want to ask directly about the future. I can't have word of a request like that making it back to Lord Norville or Malda.

She stares so long I wonder if she's understood me.

"It's not soon. But I can see you," she says finally.

I lean forward. "What do you see?"

"It's dark. You look strange."

"Strange? Strange how?"

She folds her hands on her heart and closes her eyes. I wait for her to do something else, but her stillness sends creeping chills down my spine.

A knock startles me, and I jump.

The door swings open, revealing Malda. "Lord Norville has requested your presence, Portia." She eyes me sternly. "I'll watch the children. So go

now."

I recover myself and smooth my dress. "Yes. Right away."

I want to believe what Elva just mimed was nothing. A five-year-old's imagination, a silly answer to a strange question. But the unease in my chest coils tighter. It looked like she was imitating me with my arms crossed over my heart, dead.

I hurry to Norville's office but hesitate at the open door. I have only curtsied and exchanged mumbled pleasantries with him since he hired me. I lock my knees as he looks up from his desk.

"Portia," he says. "Come inside. How are the children?"

I step into the office, unsure if I should sit. "Very well. The children are wonderful."

"I'm sorry I haven't had much time for you." He shakes his head. "I usually like to be more involved, but I've been busy with the preparations. How are your rooms?"

"Excellent."

"The staff?"

"Everything is wonderful." I make an effort to return his smile.

"Good, good. I wanted to make sure you are prepared for tomorrow night's event. Somnus is an important evening for the family." He points behind me. "You'll attend the ball with the children and wear that."

I turn to the armchair in the corner, where a folded garment sits. At his nod, I unfold it, revealing a velvet version of the black uniform I usually wear, with a fuller skirt and thin lace trimming the edges of the three-quarter sleeves. Paired with it is a simple black mask of the same material, also trimmed with lace.

A strange familiarity settles over me as I hold the dress—it's a far cry, both in purpose and coverage, from the scrap of ivory silk I was told to wear on my birthday. But at the same time…it's not so different from what I'm used to. Being told what to wear feels familiar. This deference feels familiar. Becoming a servant takes more energy, but it hasn't required as much adjustment as I would have thought. It's just a different role to play. A different set of rules to survive.

I curtsy. "Thank you, my lord."

He nods. "Then I'll see you tomorrow night."

I step toward the door and hesitate.

"Is there a problem?" he asks.

I shouldn't risk it. I'm so close to Somnus. I almost lose my nerve. Almost.

"I was wondering if…" My fingers curl into the fabric of the dress. "If you would be willing to read my future. For the holiday."

"Ah." His brows lift. His mouth curves up, before his expression smooths. "You've surprised me again. It's a bold request."

"I understand. I'm sorry. I can pay you…"

He raises a palm, quieting me. I wait as he considers. "But you are such a find, and my children seem to really enjoy you." He locks eyes with me, the violet deeper than the day we met. "I suppose I could consider making a special exception."

I squeeze the velvet. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

He waves his hand. "It's not as much trouble close to the equinox. After the party, we'll discuss it further."

Someone knocks on the door. "My lord? If I can get your signature…"

"Ah yes. Bring it to me." He shifts his attention to the newcomer, an attendant whose name I don't know.

I take the cue and go, clutching the velvet to my chest.

I hang the dress off the frame of my door, smoothing the lace at the cuffs. I hold up the mask, eyeless and waiting. Somnus parties are always a bit looser, a bit more fun, the crowd emboldened by masks and the chaotic energy of the delvarians at the height of their powers. But tomorrow is special. This equinox will bring me what I need.

Still, with Delvara's high holiday tomorrow, the nightmares are worse than ever. I wake four times. Each time the masked man is closer, his gloved hands reaching for me, just as I open my eyes.

I give up and lie awake until dawn.

7

I barely recognize the manor tonight. Every surface has been draped in jewel-toned fabric, and garlands of dark flowers wind around the columns. The ballroom and alcoves are thick with candles. Hundreds of them, in wax of all colors, cast an amber glow on the vaulted archways.

Wearing the dress Norville gave me with my plain black mask tied tight, I huddle the children to the side of the stage as the crowd fills the room.

The Somnus celebration at the palace is not like this. I'm used to decorative half-masks that cover the eyes, but I never had to wonder who was in the crowd. Hanging beads and hoods and masks that leave only mouths free make short work of identities. There are plaster masks shaped like animals, masks shaped like clouds and wings, and bejeweled masks that catch every candle.

Somnus is Delvara's high holiday, the time of dreams and chaos. Here in Delvos, no one is themselves tonight.

Lord Norville takes the stage and welcomes the crowd. Maybe it is because of his long robes, embroidered with a kaleidoscope of jewel tones, but he looks bigger. Vines like the ones on his gates cover half his face but do little to hide his bright eyes and wide smile. It's clear Delvara's wild power is coursing through him.

I have seen the way high holidays pull at divinials plenty of times at court. The stronger the blood, the harder it is to hold steady when the god's power peaks. My father and siblings burn hotter at Embrus, their flames

closer to the surface with every lick of temper. With any emotion, magic leaks, following the bearer's true nature.

Norville is showing the same signs. His violet eyes are too bright, almost fevered, and his hands sweep wide when he speaks, claiming the room with every gesture.

I don't listen closely to the speech, my attention focused on keeping the children quiet. Elva tugs my hand, her little fingers sticky with something I did not see her get into. Ana whispers loudly, while Bowan holds the stiff expression of a boy who has been trained on the responsibilities of nobility. Their brown curls are styled high on their heads, their masks purple around the eyes to accentuate their god-touched trait.

I tune into the speech just long enough to hear my cue. I usher the children onto the stage to join their parents, then step back a few paces behind them.

The ballroom is dazzling, but my stomach turns at the number of anonymous partygoers. Anyone could be in the crowd tonight. *He* could be in the crowd tonight.

I examine faces, searching for the specter haunting my dreams. The man wears a cowl pulled low, a dark mask hiding his nose and mouth so only his eyes show. Most guests wear their disguises the opposite way, brows and cheeks covered, mouths and jaws left bare for drinking and laughing.

None of them match. But I can't stop searching. I scan the masks, unsatisfied when I don't spot him, just in case the crowd parts and reveals the one I'm looking for.

My gaze catches on a figure in the middle of the crowd and my heart squeezes.

It's not him, I insist to myself, as my mind catches up to my eyes. This man doesn't match the silhouette in my head. His dark hair curls freely around his ears and neck, his bright silver mask fitted close from his brow to his cheekbones. His jaw and mouth are bare. And with a glass in one hand and the other in his pocket, nothing about his posture suggests knife-wielding murderer.

Then what caught my attention? This stranger is tall, his shoulders cutting a line above the silk and feathers of the guests around him.

But it's more than that…

Is he staring at me?

While every other face in the room is turned toward Norville, his chin is squarely pointed my way. I search for the eyes behind the mask. For a second, I think they're silver, but as the candles flicker, they're dark. And on me.

Definitely on me.

I resist the urge to reach up and check if my mask is in place. There is no way he could recognize me. With my charcoaled hair and features covered, I hardly recognized myself in the mirror.

So why am I looking at him? Or are we both stuck wondering why the other is staring?

I startle as Elva collides with my skirts, the three children returned to me.

"Portia," Norville says, as we all walk off-stage. "Happy Somnus."

I curtsy as best I can around Elva's grasp. "Happy Somnus, my lord. Happy Somnus, Lady Rodania."

Lady Rodania blinks at me slowly, her skin far more ashen than in her rosy-cheeked portrait. I wonder if she has any idea who I am. Her vine mask doesn't hide her glassy eyes, the smell of something herbal coming off her. The older maid appears and takes her by the arm.

Norville puts his own arm around my shoulders, guiding me off the stage. "No late bedtimes for Somnus, Portia. See that the children are abed at their usual time."

He's enjoying the holiday. Or the wine. "Of course, my lord."

"I want them on schedule tomorrow too." He wags a finger at me. "So I want you back in your room by midnight."

"Yes, my lord."

"Good." He gives me a smile, then turns to the ballroom.

"Lord Norville!" I stutter. I almost lose my nerve as he looks back at me, that wild light flickering in his purple eyes. But then I think of last night's dream. Of the blood running down my front. "About what we discussed…are you still willing to read my future? For the holiday?"

His eyes move between mine, offering no hint of whether I've annoyed him by asking twice. I shrink back.

Then he smiles again, the light catching on the silver hair threading through the brown. "Of course, Portia. We'll discuss it after the party."

I nod, pursing my lips, cringing at myself for asking again so soon. But if Norville won't deliver, tonight is the night to find another purple-eyed

stranger in the crowd.

With as much assurance as I'm going to get, I escort Elva and Ana to the children's table, while Bowan struts alongside.

"Hello," he says, introducing himself to the girl at the head of the table. "I'm Bowan. I look forward to joining our families."

A bit forward, Bowan, I want to say. I know this meeting was arranged because of the prospect of future marriage, but still. They are only nine.

The girl blinks dark eyes at him, copper skin offset by her pearl mask. The streaks of blue in her curly hair are a clear sign she's marithian. "I'm Meeran. This is my governess, Falta." She looks like she's tasted something sour. "You may sit."

Bowan sits stiffly.

"Young love, isn't it sweet?" the governess, Falta, says to me, as I take a seat across from her.

"Ah." To my eye, Meeran looks like she is more interested in her food than Bowan. "Yes."

Divinial and divinial pairings are common enough, but rarely with heirs, and rarely this young. If they marry, their future children will inherit mortal blood from both parents, but only one divine line. Norville is taking the risk that this house will go to grandchildren with power over water and swimming things.

Perhaps he is confident that Bowan's blood is stronger.

Generation is the biggest predictor of strength. A sixth generation divinial will almost always outmatch a seventh, the concentration of mortal and divine blood a simple equation.

But the gods granted their lines many gifts, and individuals can still surpass expectations in one way or another. No one will know the full power of these children until they mature. And even factoring in generation and individual strength, there is no guarantee which bloodline will pass on.

It's an alchemy that worries me.

My quarter-divine blood dictates I should be stronger than any divinial lord I can marry. But when it comes to personal affinity, I have some block on reaching Ignar's power. Seran brought in sophirian priests who confirmed I can bear sun-strong children. My father will perform a ceremony, as he did for my other sisters, to help ensure it.

But still, I worry. What if I'm the first of my sisters who fails to produce ignarian heirs?

I leave Bowan and Meeran to their stiff chatter. I cut up Elva's meat, and coax Ana back to the table after she skips away. By the time I get to my own soup, it's cold. I glance out at the crowd and instantly find silver.

My eye catches on the man just as easily when he isn't staring at me. He's talking to two women, standing still while they bob and sway before him. His dark hair blends into his midnight jacket in the candlelight, the tailored fabric skimming broad shoulders and a lean, **powerful** frame. A glass hangs from his fingers, everything about his posture relaxed and languid. His jaw is sharp under his silver mask.

One of the women stands on tippy toe to say something, and he tilts his head to catch it, a slow, seductive smile pulling at his mouth.

Even with half his face covered, I doubt I've ever seen a more beautiful man.

"Who are you looking at?" Falta asks.

I startle. "No one."

The other governess follows my gaze, and grins. "Ah. Of course."

"I wasn't looking at anyone."

"Then you'd be the only one," she snorts. "He's the talk of the party. You'd expect him at Kalgasari's Somnus party, not this small estate. His attendance wasn't even announced."

"Announced?"

She gives me an incredulous look. "You really don't know who you're staring at? His mask isn't *that* good…that's the Sovereign of Arastos."

Sovereign? Now that is unexpected. Unusual, even, that a sovereign of one of the nine provinces would come to this tiny manor for a high holiday. He must have been in the area on other business.

I sip my water, wracking my mind for his name. I should know it. I've been told it. He took over the title a few years ago, but all I can think of are the names of the previous sovereign, Lord Staburn, and his wife, Lady Filipa.

"The Norvilles must be very honored to host him," I say.

"If they had known he was coming, they would have put every other Somnus party tonight to shame for attendance. I hear he just showed up."

"He does seem to be getting quite a lot of attention." Even as I look on, three more women drift toward him from the crowd, adjusting their masks and smoothing their skirts as they close the distance.

“It’s not only his position that makes him famous.” The governess waits a beat, then leans across the table. “It’s a particular set of…skills.”

“Skills?”

She glances at the children, who are still occupying themselves. “He’s well-practiced in the arts of the night.” Her slow smile is conspiratorial. “Although from all I hear, he’s also happy to practice those skills in the morning…or the afternoon…”

“Alright, alright,” I say, my tone lower. “I understand.”

“No, I don’t think you do.” She raises her eyebrows at me. “The things they say he can do with his tongue and fingers…ladies from all across the land travel to visit him.”

A small circle of women has gathered around him. “They don’t mind sharing?”

“I think they are just happy to be on the ride.” She chuckles now, buttering a piece of bread. “If you catch his eye, I wouldn’t pass up the opportunity. Although I’m sure on a night like this, there’s a line.”

“I won’t catch his eye,” I say, pouring more water for Elva.

“Still might be worth trying,” she says, buttering the edges of the bread and the ends of her fingers as her own gaze lands on the man in the silver mask.

I huff, but I follow her eyes. I have sat through enough court events to know the effect of a strong jaw and a title on women. But I’ve never had my eyes catch on a man quite like this. And with the reputation she spoke of…

I shake myself and stand, smoothing my skirts. “Children, it’s time for bed.”

After a hollow goodbye between the young heir and his future bride, which was somehow still worthy of the other governess’s cooing, I lead the children upstairs. Ana had a few too many sweets and hops around the room a little longer than usual, but I manage to wrangle them into bed just past ten.

I intended to join the party, but from the top of the steps, I reconsider that plan. Even getting back to my room is going to be an ordeal. Bodies pack the corridor. The whole space smells of perfume and candle wax and spilled wine. A man in a stag mask bumps my shoulder. A woman shrieks far too close to my ear. I don’t make it ten steps before I’m looking for an exit.

I slip into the powder room off the main landing and wait for two women adjusting their masks to leave. It's a narrow chamber, with a long mirror, a stone basin, and a small, screened area for sitting or changing in the back. I tuck myself behind the painted partition and unknot my mask, letting the cool air hit my face. My eyes rove the scenes of men and women chasing each other naked across each panel.

This is a rare night of anonymity and freedom, but with so many masked faces, I don't think I can enjoy it. I'll just go back to my room for one more sleepless night. After a few deep breaths, I retie my mask over my face.

My fingers freeze on the bow as the powder room door opens and slams shut. A high giggle and a low chuckle echo in the small space. The voices cut off in the wet sound of a kiss. I press my back flat against the wall and hold still.

Through the gaps in the painted screen, I see a woman in a powder-blue mask with black curls tumbling over bare, sun-warmed shoulders. A man stands behind her, hands at her waist, mouth on her neck. She grips the edge of the basin and arches back against him. He gathers her skirts in one fist.

I should announce myself. Clear my throat, step out, let them scramble apart. That is what a reasonable person would do.

I step to the side so I'm not spying, but I don't make a sound.

The woman moans, low and soft, followed by the slap of skin meeting skin.

My fingers twist in my skirt. The stretched canvas doesn't hide their shifting shadows. It's far too late to say anything. My cheeks burn, my eyes wide, staring at the naked bust of a woman painted on the partition with her head thrown back.

She gasps in short, high-pitched bursts that climb over each other. I have never heard anything like this before, a woman lost in the unguarded sounds of her pleasure. They course through me, landing in a steady pulse between my legs.

Her shadow bows forward over the basin, and the rhythm that follows is frantic. Her yelps quicken, building toward something I have only read about. She lets out a strangled cry, and I press my thighs together, my lips parting. He answers with a guttural groan.

Rustling gives way to the sound of running water and a murmured goodbye. The door opens and shuts.

I wait. The room is totally quiet. I exhale.

"You can come out now," the woman's breathless voice says.

I thought she left.

I don't move for another few seconds, but no one else speaks. She can only be talking to me. I peek around the screen, then shuffle into the main room. My pulse hammers in my ears.

The woman stands alone at the basin, fixing the edge of her lip stain in the mirror. Black curls spill around her powder-blue mask, and when she catches my eyes in the reflection, she smiles, revealing a dimple.

"Sorry about that. Didn't realize you were there when we came in." She studies my face in the glass. "You look like you could use some water."

My cheeks burn, pink showing beneath the edge of my mask. "No. I was just leaving."

"Going back to the party?" she asks, blotting her lip with the pad of her finger.

"To bed."

"Your own?" She tilts her head, studying me in the mirror. "But tonight is the perfect night to find someone else's. Surely there is someone in the crowd who could catch your eye."

She applies powder from a small pot to her nose, unhurried, as if we have known each other for years and I didn't just see a decent part of her leg under her lifted skirts. And hear her…

"I work here. It wouldn't be appropriate."

"Ah." A knowing smile curves her lips, deepening the dimple. "You work for Norville. Well, if that's your reason…"

She reaches up and tugs at the delicate strings of her mask. The moment it comes free, it is as if she has tipped a pitcher of water over her head. Changes cascade and ripple down her body. Her black curls melt into soft golden waves, rich as honey. Her light blue dress transforms into an iridescent plum. The ocean blue of her irises fractures, revealing a violet so intense it seems to pulse in the low light. Delvara's mark. The dimple is still there, but if I had not watched the whole thing happen, I would believe a different woman stood before me.

My mouth falls open. Spelled objects are banned. During the Incarnial Wars, objects imbued with magic gave mortals the ability to fight back against, and even kill, the ageless incarnials. The thanovarians, divinials of

death and decay, were banished for making them. Illio decreed they upset the natural order, granting divine power to those without divine blood.

Spelled objects have been banned ever since, with only a few sanctioned exceptions for practical items.

That mask is not a practical item.

She catches my expression and rolls her eyes. “Oh, hush. The magic only lasts till tomorrow. By the time anyone reported me, it wouldn’t work anymore. Besides, it’s my power.” One corner of her mouth curls up. She wags the mask back and forth. “Though I wouldn’t mind sharing it.”

I blink, taking in what she’s suggesting. “Oh no, I couldn’t…”

“You’d be doing me a favor. I can’t let my husband catch me with this.” She holds the blue mask out to me. “And a beautiful young woman like you should have the fun she deserves. With this, no one in this household will recognize you.”

I hesitate. Accepting it would be a crime, and even with a disguise, I could not possibly pursue the kind of night she is suggesting.

“Hasn’t anyone caught your eye?”

I wait too long before shaking my head, and her smile widens. She steps behind me and pulls the string on my plain black mask before I can object.

“Oh my,” she says softly. “You really are beautiful.”

She presses the new one to my face and cinches the ribbon tight.

A hum spreads from the edges of the mask over my face and scalp. Black curls twist down to my chest, and my eyes turn ocean blue in a single blink. Tingles coat my torso and arms as blue satin replaces black velvet, reforming the neckline, sleeves, and length of my dress.

I lean closer to the mirror. My face is different. I reach up to touch a slightly squarer jaw, my nose a little more lifted at the tip. I don’t *not* look like me…I look like a close cousin. Each feature on its own is similar, but the whole is someone else.

The whole is a lady who belongs at this party, not a governess.

As I examine myself, the blonde woman ties my plain mask around her head. “The magic will wear off by midday tomorrow, so make use of it. Find a bed with some nice company to keep you warm. Promise me you will?”

Her eyes shine, and she clasps my shoulders. I don’t know if she is drunk or always this bold, but it sends warmth through me. Even though we just met, her investment in my evening makes me care more too. “I will.”

She winks as she opens the door. “You never saw me.”

I turn back to the mirror. I raise my fingers to my cheek.

Can I go and do something reckless tonight? Can I find a man and do the kinds of things I listened to from behind the screen? I still feel the faint throb of what those sounds did to me.

Sex was always going to be part of my future. I understood that before I understood most things about the world. My womb is a vessel to carry Ignar’s bloodline into other lands. I will have a husband, and I will join him in bed to produce heirs, in whatever shadoward province my father can arrange.

I know the mechanics. I know which days of my cycle are best for conception, and I have been given dry, clinical instruction on how to motivate a husband so he will put a child in me.

But pleasure? Pleasure was never part of it.

What I’ve learned about desire, I’ve learned in stolen pieces. Whispers between maids who thought I was not listening. Scenes in books where the words made my pulse quicken and my face heat. Dreams that left me aching. The careful exploration of my own fingers in the dark making me writhe.

But I never even considered finding someone to join me. I was young when Rinalda’s lover burned, the blue flames etched into my memory. I found their letters before it happened, hidden in the hollow of her bedpost. I remember being confused why Rinalda would break the rules. I didn’t understand the longing scrawled across those pages.

But now I do. Rinalda wanted love. She wanted passion. She wanted more than the emperor had planned for her. And that ended with her locked away in the Sunrise Palace, her lover ashes.

I had resigned myself to a life without.

But tonight feels different. Tonight *is* different.

Maybe it’s the wild energy of Somnus. Maybe it’s my constant dreams of death making me hungrier to live. Maybe it’s the mask, and the permission it gives me.

My face is not my own, and I’m seeing the woman before me with new eyes.

I run a delicate finger along my bust, pushed up against the square blue neckline. Tingles follow my touch. My pulse is thumping faster, and the

heat between my legs is still there. What would it feel like to be touched there?

I want to know.

Whether I return to the palace, or die, I'll never get this chance again. And if I'm only going to get one night of pleasure, I want it to be with someone who knows what he's doing.

I set off to find the man in the silver mask.

8

I step back into the ballroom and wind my way through cloaks and feathers and clouds of perfume. The crowd offers its own sort of anonymity. I am just another lady in a mask.

I take a cup of something sparkling from a passing tray and bring it to my lips. The bubbles fizz down the back of my throat and I close my mouth around a cough, swallowing hard. I down the rest in defiance, eyes watering, and pick up a cup of something red.

The bubbles buzz through me as I spot him at the edge of the ballroom, the triangle of his lean body immediately recognizable in midnight velvet. My heartbeat climbs with every step. I have no plan. I only have the pull I felt from the stage and the memory of a woman's pleasure echoing off tile. I let them carry me forward.

He is surrounded, so I approach at his back, slipping between shoulders and perfumed hair. He seems even taller now that we are on the same level, his large frame blocking my view of the women crowding to be in his line of sight. His voice carries just enough for me to catch the low timbre of it without the words.

He's the one I want.

Then I take a better look at the women competing for his gaze, and my courage dies.

All around, women in lace and jewels press close, their bodies angled toward him in quiet invitation. Their fans flutter, fingers twirling hair and grazing clavicles. They are gorgeous, every one of them. Bared shoulders

and low necklines and painted lips show these women off to tremendous effect.

One brushes a gloved hand over his sleeve. Another laughs, tipping her chin so the candlelight catches the jewels at her throat. They know how to speak this language. If he turned around and looked me in the eye, I probably wouldn't be able to speak, much less ask for a single thing I want to happen between us.

There is no way I'm going to end up being the one sharing his bed tonight. I'm not sure if I could go through with it anyway, and I shouldn't waste his time. My fingers tighten on my cup. I take a breath and step back.

A hand lands on my shoulder and shoves. Hard. I lurch forward through the gap between two women, my cup flying.

He whirls astonishingly fast and catches my forearm, halting me mid-stumble with a grip that is firm and immediate.

Unfortunately, it is not enough to still the contents of my cup. My wine splashes down the front of his jacket, soaking his chest and silver-embroidered sleeve.

I watch it drip from his velvet cuff.

"I…I'm so sorry." I glance behind me. I spy yellow curls moving through the crowd. The woman in a purple dress and black mask twists, gives me a waggle of her fingers, and disappears between two men in feathered hoods.

The woman from the powder room pushed me.

My attention flicks back to the Sovereign of Arastos. His dark eyes absorb the candlelight, giving nothing back. A strand of hair falls across the edge of the mask, molded to high cheekbones. A stone hangs from his left ear on a thin chain, catching the light as he tilts his head.

Oh no. He's even more beautiful up close. I jerk my arm back and stumble on my magically longer skirts.

"Steady," he says, his deep voice rolling over me. Only his grip on my arm keeps me from toppling the other way, silver rings on his fingers cool against my wrist. His eyes flick behind me, then back to my face. I search them for anger but find nothing I can read. "Finally. I've been looking everywhere for you."

I blink.

"I know I promised you a dance, but did you have to toss your wine at me?"

“What? I’m not…I didn’t…”

“It’s alright.” He leans in, his shapely lips curving in a smirk. “I don’t mind getting close and a little sticky.”

I flush, the innuendo not lost on my innocent ears. Not in that purring voice. The sight of his long fingers encircling my arm is practically indecent.

I am out of my depth. I can’t even respond.

“Now let’s get you a fresh cup, and I believe I need a towel. Excuse us, ladies, I must keep my previous commitments to my companion.”

He tucks my arm into the crook of his elbow and stands straight. Against his shoulder, I feel the true impression of his height.

Several of the masked women scowl at me, while others mutter to the person next to them. I meet their glares with wide eyes. I can only be grateful that my face is not my own. Their ire is directed at the black-haired woman in blue, not me.

Before I can open my mouth to object, we take off. He buoys me through the crowd, heading for the exit. My steps are quick beside him, barely touching the ground, every one made lighter with the power of his arm. We leave the ballroom and wind through the current of partygoers in the hallway. It’s all a blur of silk and candlelight as I try to catch up with this turn of events.

“Now where are the kitchens?” he murmurs.

“Through there,” I answer without thinking. A guest wouldn’t be so quick on the layout of the manor.

“Thank you,” he says, guiding me that way.

“I think you’ve confused me with someone else,” I blurt, finally having found my voice. “We’ve never met before.”

“I’m aware.” His eyes glint as he peers down at me. “Women have tried worse than a glass of wine to get my attention. Though I’d prefer a method that spares the velvet.”

I blink. “I wasn’t trying to get your attention.”

“Oh? You weren’t hovering behind me, working up the courage?”

Heat flares in my cheeks. I shake my hair back, catching black curls in the corner of my vision. Princess Lysandra would accept his accusations and apologize. But I’m not her tonight.

Tonight is going to be a night of firsts, even if I don’t take anyone to bed.

“I’d rather have kept my distance and saved the wine. And for your information, someone pushed me.”

“I know.”

“Then why did you…?” I swallow my frustration. “So you know it was an accident.”

“Was it?” The glimmer in his eye tells me he thinks otherwise. “The woman who pushed you is an acquaintance who tends to get her way. I assume she tossed you to me as a rescue.”

I jerk away, my hand almost coming off his arm. “I wasn’t in need of a rescue!”

He pulls me back. “Not you. Me.”

“With that crowd of women hanging on your every word? You looked like you were suffering terribly.”

“And I was going to keep suffering until I found a polite way to close twenty conversations at once.” He steers us around a couple half-collapsed against a pillar. “Let’s just call it a mutual rescue.”

“What exactly was I rescued from? Maybe I was enjoying the party.”

“Indecision.” He gives me a quick once-over. “And I would call that unlikely.”

“Just because I’ve been kidnapped doesn’t mean I wasn’t enjoying myself,” I mutter.

One side of his mouth ticks up. “Kidnapped?”

I gesture at my hand on his arm. “I don’t recall giving you my hand.”

“If my memory serves, you threw your hand at me, along with your cup. At the expense of my jacket.”

Before I can object further, he steers us into the kitchen.

The kitchen is smoky and loud, crowded with staff I don’t recognize. Norville must have hired temporary help for the event. Every face gets a second look, as I search for the cowl, the mask, the silhouette. Young men in masks carry trays while others haul casks, and a few new faces help the cook.

I am careful not to show my familiarity with the layout, letting my escort lead as he finds his way to an unclaimed towel.

It takes a moment for the room to register him. A boy near the cook looks up, then bats the person next to him. Nudges and whispers pass around the room. By the time the lord sits on the edge of a counter, the entire staff is paying attention.

I don't think anyone expected a sovereign to walk into the kitchen.

He doesn't seem to notice anything is awry as he dabs at the stain on his chest, his own gaze traveling around the room. His eyes linger briefly on each person…or at least, on the women. The unfamiliar woman restocking a tray, the graying maid folding napkins, and the cook each get a glance before he moves on.

"This is never going to come out," he announces, throwing down the towel. I would argue that he hardly tried, but I don't know how to remove a stain from velvet either.

"You can barely see it," I say, rather unhelpfully.

He gives me a look. "Wine only ages well in the bottle."

He catches the attention of a passing attendant, who almost drops his tray. "Where would I find the laundry?"

The man fumbles but recovers the tray and shakes his head. "Sorry, my lord. I was only brought on for tonight."

The lord nods and projects his voice. "Who in this room is permanent staff?"

My hand twitches but I keep it down.

A man near the hearth looks up from a roasting spit. "I am."

"Good. Where is the laundry?"

"Through that corridor, down the stairs, past the stillroom. I can fetch someone to take that for you…"

"I'll take my chances." He stands, offering his arm. "Shall we?"

I look at it. "You want me to come with you to the laundry?"

"It's easier to move through a manor with a lady on my arm. Think of it as repayment for the state of my jacket."

I want to refuse, on principle, but I find my hand reaching for his arm anyway.

We weave through the crowd toward the laundry, down hallways draped with fabric and vines. I glance up and catch his gaze bouncing from guest to guest.

In the kitchen, I thought he was just a lord curious about the workings of a household beneath him, but now I see he is still scanning the people around us. Almost every person we pass gets a look, particularly the women.

We turn off the main corridor and down some service stairs. The smell of lye and soap fills the air.

The laundry is warm and damp. The laundress is elbow deep in a basin of suds, scrubbing. She looks up when we enter, and her hands go still. She straightens so fast she nearly overturns the basin.

"My lord." She wipes her hands on her apron, flustered. "Do you need something? You shouldn't have to be here. I'll fetch someone…"

"No need." He gestures to his jacket with a smile that could charm a flower into blooming. "I ran into some wine. I'm told the laundry is the place for miracles."

He shrugs off his jacket and holds it out to her. She accepts it, staring at him as if she cannot believe he is standing in her laundry.

I'm staring too. Without the jacket, his midnight silk shirt clings to his chest and the flat plane of his stomach. He rolls his sleeves back once, twice. I look at the ceiling. Then the basin. Then the lantern. At least that last one blots out some of my vision.

His earring swings as he leans against the counter. "Are they really keeping you down here by yourself tonight?"

"Oh no, my lord. There's a temporary girl they brought on for the evening."

"I'd like to meet the pair I'm trusting with my finest jacket."

"Of course, my lord. Nella!" she shouts over her shoulder. "But don't worry, I'll handle this personally."

A woman emerges from behind a rack of drying sheets. She isn't what I would call a girl, broad-shouldered and a little gray at the temples, but maybe to the elder laundress she is. She takes one look at him and stops short, her mouth falling open.

"Oh. Oh, my lord, I didn't realize…forgive me. I would have come out right away…"

"Nothing to forgive." He offers the same easy smile he gave the laundress. "I hope you'll both get to enjoy some of the party. It's Somnus. You shouldn't be stuck down here all night."

The laundress lays his jacket out on a board, tugging the edge of the cuffs and sleeves to make sure every rumple is smoothed. "The staff is allowed to join the main party once their duties are done, my lord."

"And do they join? In my experience, staff know where the real party is."

She exchanges a glance with Nella, along with a small, conspiratorial smile. "There's a terrace off the seaward garden where we play a little

music. A bottle or two may have gone missing from the cellar." She catches herself. "Not that I would know anything about that."

"Ah, that does sound like the better party." He laughs. "Your secret is safe with me."

I was not invited to any gathering. But then, the staff has barely spoken to me since I arrived. I guess three weeks isn't enough time for an invite. Although this temporary woman seems to have one.

He offers me his arm and guides me toward the exit. Even in the warmth of the laundry, his skin is cool to the touch.

We are only just back in the corridor when I catch him doing it again. A woman in a black robe passes us, and his gaze follows her face. I remember his eyes fixed on me while Norville gave his speech. At the time, I thought it meant something. Now I think I was just the next face in the rotation.

"You keep doing that," I say.

"Doing what?"

"Staring at every woman who walks past." I am not sure yet whether this newfound boldness is courage or recklessness, but I am getting used to the taste of it. "I don't think you've let a single lady go un-ogled."

I watch his expression, waiting to see if his smile falls or twists.

Instead, it grows.

"Ogled? Rich, considering you've been doing the same thing all night."

"What?"

"Your eyes linger on every masked face we pass. Particularly the men." One brow rises. "It's enough to make any escort jealous."

Caught. I want to defend myself, but I can't tell him that I have a sharp eye out for a man I believe will murder me. I open my mouth to respond…

"My honored guest!" Lord Norville blocks the corridor in front of us, crowding out other partygoers as he swings his arms wide.

I blink and freeze.

My grip tightens on the cool arm under my hand, drawing my escort's gaze. I arrange my face into a smile to hide my nerves. Norville won't recognize me, I remind myself.

Sure enough, he doesn't even glance my way.

"Lord Alaris!" Norville sweeps toward us, his robes rippling. "I was so thrilled to hear you joined us!"

Alaris. That's his name. He's not just some handsome stranger I bumped into at a party, where I wasn't me and nothing mattered for one night. He is

the Sovereign of Arastos. And he doesn't know he's linking arms with both Norville's governess and the emperor's daughter.

"Happy Somnus." Norville claps the taller man's shoulder. "I apologize for not greeting you earlier. I didn't learn of your attendance until far too late!"

"Happy Somnus," Alaris replies smoothly. "I don't believe we've had the pleasure in person. I've heard this is the best hidden gem on the Somnus circuit."

Norville practically levitates. "You honor me, my lord. You honor me. I had no idea you were coming, or I would have—well, I would have done everything exactly the same, but with quite a bit more stress on the servants." He laughs at his own joke, loud and delighted.

"I saw your family on stage earlier. Lovely. I would like to meet them."

"Ah, the little ones are in bed by now, I'm afraid." He gives an absent wave. "And Rodania has retired as well."

"Tomorrow, then. I'm in one of your guest rooms for the night."

"Of course, of course. Tomorrow. We'd be honored." Norville turns to me. "Who do you have on your arm tonight?"

He takes my hand before I offer it. His lips press to my knuckles a beat longer than courtesy requires. His fingers are warm and damp.

I pull my hand away and attempt a smile.

Alaris's arm slides around my waist and pulls me an inch closer. It's good for my cover. It's bad for my heart rate.

"But tonight, come join me at the gambling tables," Norville says to Alaris. "The cards are treating me very well indeed."

"I'm afraid I'm otherwise occupied."

With his arm around me, the implication is clear. Norville's grin widens.

"I see, I see. Well, I am not one to deny a man his pleasure. The table will be open all night, when you're finished." He claps Alaris on the shoulder once more, winks at me, and strides off down the corridor, his goblet sloshing.

I wait until he rounds the corner, then exhale and wipe my hand on my skirt. I fall in step as Alaris guides me away.

I am still processing the heat of Norville's mouth on my knuckles when I realize we're in the guest wing. The laughter and music fade behind us, the rug plusher underfoot. A woman stumbles out of a doorway ahead of us,

adjusting her bodice. A hand reaches out and pulls her back in. She laughs and disappears.

The stairs ahead lead up to the suites where the most important visitors sleep.

My eyes widen. Alaris just told Norville I was his evening plans, and we're on our way to his rooms.

9

Oh my. This is exactly what I approached him for, but I still didn't fully believe it would happen. Between the spilled wine and the laundry, I was lulled into thinking the conversation would continue to oscillate between a little infuriating and a little flirtatious, but all our clothes would stay on.

It seems I was too naïve to read his cues.

He's incredibly attractive. Intimidatingly, undeniably attractive. Even with the minimal contact of my hand resting on his muscled forearm, and the occasional brush of our hips, tingles spread over my side. I glance at his fingers, long and elegant, curled loosely against his stomach. He's so tall. I picture him using those ringed fingers to tip my chin up to his.

We pass the first landing. Laughter leaks through a cracked door, low and tangled with other sounds I recognize from the powder room.

Will it be as desperate and wild as what I witnessed? Will I make sounds like that? This man is supposed to be very skilled. I have to imagine whatever pleasure there is to be coaxed out of me, he knows how. The thought makes my heart hammer, my blood heating.

Still, I'm nervous. As soon as we're alone in his room, this civil energy will change.

We reach the second landing. The hallway of doors stretches ahead.

"Wait." I tug my hand free from his arm and he stops. "I need a moment. Before we…"

"Before we what?"

My mouth opens. Nothing comes out. He waits.

“I just want to discuss expectations,” I manage.

“Expectations.” He says the word back to me, slowly. “For what, exactly?”

“For where you’re taking me.”

“And where do you think I’m taking you?”

I gesture to the rooms down the hall. The obvious conclusion. He follows my hand, and when he looks back at me, the corner of his mouth is doing something I want to slap off his face.

“I wasn’t planning on that tonight.”

I blink. “Then what are we doing here?”

He pauses a second, considering. “I’m looking for someone.”

“Looking for someone?” All those furtive glances. “Is that what you were doing in the kitchen? The laundry? Every woman you stared at?”

“Yes.”

“And what about my night?” The question comes out hotter than I intended. “I had my own plans for this evening.”

“What plans?”

The last thing I want to do is name what I approached him for. “That’s not your concern.”

“You brought it up.”

“I’m saying you’ve taken my time.”

“What were you planning to use that time for?”

I clamp my lips shut. A slow smile spreads across his face.

“If you can’t even say it”—he leans in—“I don’t think you really want it.”

He turns away from me and strides to the window at the end of the corridor, leaving me with my fists curled at my sides and my cheeks on fire.

Annoyance flares, alongside embarrassment. It makes sense that I wouldn’t be his chosen lover, given the crowd of beauties throwing themselves at him. I must have been the most inexperienced among them. But that doesn’t mean I wanted to be dragged around the manor all night while he looked for a better option.

I should just slink away to nurse my injured pride. Instead, I stalk after him. Maybe it’s the way we met, or maybe it’s the mask, but something about tonight is making it harder for me to keep a leash on my reactions.

I stop next to him at the window. Voices and faint music rise from below. I follow his eyes to a terrace and recognize some faces. It’s the staff

party. A footman leans hard into his fiddle.

But I wasn't invited, and I channel every bit of annoyance at my exclusion toward the lord next to me.

"I don't appreciate being used. Even if you didn't want me, you didn't have to lead me around while you looked for another woman to share your bed."

He finally flicks his eyes to me. "Is that what you think?"

"What else would I think? Your reputation…"

"My *reputation* is not an accurate guide to my evening plans." He straightens and his hands go into his pockets. "I was looking for someone, but I didn't find her. It has nothing to do with sex. And I would rather not discuss it further."

I open my mouth to push. Something in his calm expression stops me. It is the first time tonight he has not deflected with charm.

"But I can see that you are…passionate about finding someone who shares your evening plans. Let me make up for the time I've taken." His tone is light. "I'll help you find a suitable lord. And then you can not tell *him* what you want to do on Somnus." He offers his elbow.

I cross my arms.

"Come on." His mouth curves up. He curls two fingers around my hand and guides it to his arm with a featherlight touch. "I'll let you call this one a kidnapping."

I should say no. I should go back to my room, lock the door, and count the hours until my prophecy.

Instead, I let him lead me toward the stairs. We descend to the main floor and rejoin the crowd.

He leans down so I can hear him. "If I'm going to help a woman into someone else's bed, I should at least know her name."

I consider making something up. A common name, something forgettable. But every lie I add is one more thing to keep track of. "It's Somnus, a night of secret identities. So I'll keep my name to myself."

"You know mine."

"You should have worn a better mask."

"Fair enough. I'll remember you fondly as the woman who ruined my jacket and wouldn't apologize."

"I did apologize."

“Barely.” He slows his stride. He points out a broad-shouldered man in a blue mask. “Do you like him?”

“No.”

He gestures to a tall figure with blond hair and a pleasing face, leaning against a column. “Him?”

“No.”

“What about him?”

“No.”

“You didn’t look that time,” he chides.

“I could tell without looking.”

“Such high standards,” he chuckles.

I only want you. I can’t bring myself to say it and face rejection again.

Our route takes us past the gaming room. Shouts and laughter pour from the open doorway. Norville is at the center table, his grin wide.

Alaris slows, then stops. “Ah. Now here is a room of interesting characters. I bet there is a way to get a better view.”

The whole wall is paneled. He runs his hand over one section, then a second, then a third, unhurried, until a corner sinks under his fingers with a click. The panel swings open.

He gestures for me to look inside. A passage threads between the walls, leading to a tight staircase.

“How did you find that?” I ask.

“Gaming rooms often have a spot like this,” he says. “It’s how lords cheat at cards.”

He leads me up the staircase to a narrow room, the air stale and thick with dust. The only light comes through a lattice grate. Alaris peers through it a moment, then steps back and cocks his head toward it. “Have a look.”

I creep closer to him and stand on my toes. Through the slats, I can see the gaming room below. Norville sits at the center, flushed. He slams his cards down on the table. The men around him shout and jostle.

“Anyone down there catch your eye?” His low voice washes over me.

“No.”

“No one at all?”

I squirm. “No.”

All I can think about is my arm tingling with awareness of how close we are in this small space. The air next to him is cool.

“Are you sure you are committed to these plans of yours?” he teases, his voice not unkind. “At this rate, we’ll be at it until morning.”

Fake dating is fun. Real jealousy is where it gets interesting.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google when you're ready for another romance.

Now I’m the one wasting his time. I suck in a breath and step back from the lattice. “I suppose I give up. Tonight was just a rare night of freedom. My only one, maybe.”

His eyebrows go up. “Only? Why?”

“It’s…complicated. I have other responsibilities.”

“Such as?”

I close my mouth, wishing I hadn’t said anything.

“I’m a stranger on Somnus,” he coaxes. “Why hold back?”

I know he’s talking about my truths, but his words thrum in my chest. Why hold back?

I’m alone in the dark, in a very confined space, with the only man I want tonight. The only man I ever remember wanting like this. So what if he rejects me? So what if it doesn’t go the way I imagine? I’ll never get this chance again.

Why hold back?

“Regardless of your reasons, you are making this sound very urgent indeed.” He turns to the lattice. “I insist you look again. Because I am not leaving this night with debts to a woman who won’t even give me her name.”

I step closer to him, noting the difference in our heights. “I don’t think what you said is true.”

“Which part?”

My heart pounds a quick tempo as I inch even closer.

“You said if I can’t say it, I don’t really want it.” My shaking fingers find his collar, drawing his attention to me. “But I do.”

I pull him down and kiss him. His scent hits me. Cloves. Something green and cold beneath it, like stone after rain. And underneath that, something masculine I can't describe that makes me grip his shirt even harder.

His whole body locks, rigid.

I pull back, and our eyes meet. His are wide and black, swallowing all the light in the small space. Is he going to make fun of me? Or step back and reject me?

Then he inhales sharply. He threads his hands through my hair, pulling my face to his. And his mouth collides with mine.

His kiss is totally different than my clumsy first attempt. His lips are cool, but they shoot warmth through me. His mouth moves, hungry and desperate, devouring mine. His tongue slides across the seam of my lips and they open, and he drinks me in deeper.

We weave and part and meet again. I would have thought a man with his reputation would kiss me calmly, but he kisses me like he's dying for it, and it lights me on fire. His hands run over my waist, then my hips, and I grab fistfuls of his shirt because my legs have stopped working. When his teeth graze my bottom lip, I gasp against his mouth, and he swallows the sound.

He lifts me off the ground and whirls me, pinning my back into the passage wall. His hand goes to my jaw, changing the angle of our kiss, giving himself better access. I can't get enough of his tongue on mine, tangling it with my own.

His knee nudges mine apart and slides between them, holding me up. The pressure there blooms into the same sensation I felt in the powder room, and my hips lean into it instinctively.

I cannot think. I can only hold on as his mouth moves to my jaw, my neck. I tip my head back against the wall and make a sound I have never made in my life. I tangle my fingers in his hair, trying to pull him even closer as he licks and bites the sensitive skin below my ear. His knee and the wall behind me are the only reason I am still standing.

His hands find the back of my dress, fingers tracing the lacing down my spine, and I arch into him, wanting more. The ribbon on the back of my head sticks on the lattice, tugs, then pulls.

The mask slides off my face and clatters to the floor.

At the edges of my vision, I note the black curls retracting. I glance down as my opulent blue skirts disappear, the leg between mine now draped in plain black velvet.

But the sensation is no less delightful. I press into it and chase his mouth with mine.

He freezes.

I blink and he's as far away from me as the space will allow, flattened against the opposite wall.

I stumble, trying to recover my balance without him holding me up. I put my hand to my bare face, remembering myself. Of course he's startled. The woman he just tried to undress transformed into someone else.

"Sorry!" I say quickly. I swallow. "Sorry about that."

His chest rises and falls rapidly, his eyes glinting.

Is he disturbed I have a magical object? "The mask isn't mine. It only lasts the night—" I take a step toward him.

"Stop." He puts his hand up, halting me. He runs it through his dark hair once, then again.

"I didn't mean to trick you…"

"No, it's not…it's not that." He rubs his eyes and drags his hand down his face. "Other responsibilities," he mutters to himself. He shakes his head once. When he drops his hand, his jaw is set. "You're the governess of this house. I saw you on the stage, with the children."

"Yes." I guess I was right. He was looking at me.

He takes a slow breath. When he speaks again, his voice is lower and the ease is gone from it entirely. "You aren't safe here."

My skin goes cold. It's like he's read my mind, and the fears of these last few weeks are finally validated. "What?"

"You aren't safe here. There is a history of young women disappearing from this household. As soon as I saw you on that stage, I knew I needed to warn you. I've been looking for you all evening."

I'm the one he was looking for? "What are you talking about?" I let out a laugh, stilted. I search his face for the joke, the angle, the lordly game.

"How long have you been in this manor?"

"A few weeks."

"Haven't you noticed no other young women work here?"

That stalls the next word on my tongue.

“The local families know well enough not to send their daughters here.” He steps forward, the light through the lattice crossing his face. “So you must not be from around here. You came from the road. Or the river.”

It wasn’t a question, and his correct guess chills me.

“You’re not safe here, especially around Somnus. You need to leave.”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“I’ll help you. We can take my carriage.” He offers his hand.

I tense. He expects me to just believe him, and go with him, without a second thought? “Why do you care?”

“Do I need a reason to save a beautiful woman’s life?”

I narrow my eyes. “And if I weren’t beautiful?”

“Beauty isn’t a condition of my help. It’s the reason you’re in danger. If you weren’t beautiful, he wouldn’t have noticed you.”

My skin prickles at the word “he.” I take a second to put together who he might mean. “Lord Norville?”

He nods, his gaze unyielding. All sign of the smiling lord, his every word flirtatious and playful, is gone. This whole situation is too strange. His urgency and determination for me to leave are too strange. His reputation as a womanizer was intriguing under soft candlelight, but pushing me to leave with him in the darkness feels ominous.

And he wants me to believe that Lord Norville, the man who took me in, who gave me work, who promised to read my future, is dangerous? That I should abandon the one thing I came here for and leave in the middle of the night with a man I met only hours ago?

He lowers his hand. “You don’t believe me.”

I draw back against the wall. “I don’t know you.”

“I’m only trying to help.”

“I’ll be going now,” I say firmly, my sense of self-preservation overriding any sense of adventure this lord inspired in me.

“Then be careful.” His dark eyes glint. “And if anything changes, find me. I’ll be in the guest wing until morning.”

I start down the narrow stairs. My hand finds the wall in the dark.

“I didn’t get your name,” he says, from above me.

I don’t look back. “No. You didn’t.”

10

I pace the length of my small quarters, tugging the ends of my hair, considering his words. Have I seen any other young women working here?

I review the faces of the staff, most without names because there were few introductions. There are men and women, although fewer women. And among the women, there is the stout maid, the stern cook, the laundress. But young?

I run through the faces again. No. None who I would call young.

But what does that prove? It isn't like Lord Norville came and found me—I showed up on his doorstep. If he were really hurting women, someone would have intervened. Their families would have raised the alarm. People would know.

So you came from the road. Or the river.

I exhale, kneeling to touch the travel bag I stowed beneath my bed. I can't get up and leave in the night on the word of a known womanizer. Not when I have weeks of evidence of being safe here. Lord Norville has been friendly, but not overly friendly. I've seen very little of him. And he promised to give me my prophecy.

I'm so close. I doubt I'll even have to stay here one more week.

If I do, I'll ask Malda about other young women and examine her reaction. At any sign of hesitation, or defensiveness, or danger, I will be on a ferry by that evening.

I'll wait, try to get my prophecy, and then see.



Malda appears at the playroom door the next morning: “Lord Norville’s guest would like to meet the children. Bring them to the receiving room right after breakfast.”

I get them through the meal with only a little porridge on Elva’s dress and Ana’s shoes somehow on the wrong feet. I wipe them down and steer them through the corridors.

The manor is a mess. Servants haul away garlands and fabric and crates of melted candles. Curtains and glass and bits of paper litter the floor, the elegant and opulent decor of last night reduced to wreckage.

I pass the corridor near the gaming room. The paneling looks ordinary in daylight, the seam where the passage opens invisible. My hand drifts to my lips, then I turn my chin away.

I don’t regret it, even though it ended badly. In the daylight, I feel foolish for worrying about a stranger’s midnight warning. If the mask hadn’t come off, our walk around the manor and one kiss would have been a perfect night of freedom.

Now, I have to face what many do after a night of freedom: an awkward morning after.

I herd the children into the receiving room, where Norville directs how he wants the family arranged.

“Not there. To the left. The children should be standing, not slouched against the furniture.” His voice is clipped.

I straighten Bowan’s collar and pull Elva’s thumb out of her mouth.

In the morning light, Norville looks deflated. His eyes still have that too-bright quality, but the wildness has gone sickly, like he drank too much and slept too little. I feel silly for lying awake afraid of him, as he fusses over where his children should stand.

Rodania is stationed on the settee near the window, her glassy gaze no more lucid than last night.

Malda opens the receiving room door, and Alaris walks in.

Without the mask, Alaris is even more breathtaking. Rich, forest green silk sets off his onyx hair and cool skin. Heavy brows frame his eyes, with a straight nose giving him an aristocratic air. The sculpted silver did not oversell his sharp cheekbones.

Rings glint at his fingers as he clasps Norville's waiting hand. Norville cuffs the much taller man's shoulder. "You survived the night, Lord Alaris. I can't say I fully remember the end of our game, but if I recall correctly, you were winning."

"Barely." Alaris returns Norville's smile. "You throw a dangerous Somnus party, Lord Norville. I'm not sure my reputation will recover."

Norville laughs. They look like old friends.

I scowl. *You kissed me, warned me away from him, then joined him at the gambling table?*

Alaris turns. "You must be the Lady Rodania." He takes her hand and bows over it. "My lady."

Even with her wits dulled on whatever tincture keeps her this placid, Rodania has a faint smile for the charming Sovereign of Arastos.

"And these must be your three little ones." Alaris turns to the children. "Which of you is the eldest?"

Bowan steps forward, chin lifted. "I'm Bowan. I'm nine."

"Nine. A serious age."

Bowan stands straighter. Ana peers up at him, while Elva hides behind my skirts.

"My girls are shy," Norville says. "That's Ana, and Elva is my youngest."

Ana is not shy. She bites. But shy is a fine explanation for her current silence.

Alaris's attention shifts to me. "And who is this?"

"This is Portia," Lord Norville says. "A recent addition to the staff. Our new governess."

"Portia, is it?" Alaris smirks.

He's so pleased with himself now that he's got a name. Good thing it's the wrong one. I curtsy as low as my station demands, because I won't embarrass Norville. But I cannot bring myself to put on my usual polite smile. I glare at him instead.

His smirk grows. "Lovely. I think I'll stay another night, Lord Norville, if you don't mind. The scenery here is so beautiful."

"Of course," Norville says. "We'll plan a day for you. The grounds, the orchards, perhaps a ride on the river."

"If you'll excuse me, the children have their lessons." I guide them toward the exit.

Norville waves us off, and I studiously avoid the dark eyes I can still feel on me.

The rest of the day follows the children's usual routine, or as much of it as possible while the manor wakes up and pieces itself back together. I keep hoping to pass Norville in the hallway, but I never do. It feels overeager to interpret "after Somnus" as the very next day. I'll wait to go to his office tomorrow.

I change into my nightgown and climb into bed but keep the lantern burning. It will make it harder to sleep, but easier to orient myself when the nightmares wake me up. I'm still rehearsing what I'll say to Norville tomorrow when someone knocks. It must be Malda.

I wrap myself in a shawl, unlock the door, and pull it open.

"Lord Norville," I say, surprised.

"Portia!" His cheeks are flushed, and he smells of wine. "I'm sorry to bother you so late. Between the holiday and our guest, I haven't had a moment to find you."

"It's no trouble, my lord," I say, pulling my shawl tighter around me. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to catch up on a few things. The children's progress. Your future here." He leans against the doorframe. "May I come in?"

"Ah, I…" I glance at my small room. "It's quite late. Could I come by your office tomorrow morning?"

"If you prefer." He leans in. "But I believe you also wanted a prophecy."

My pulse picks up. This is it. This is what I've been waiting for. "Yes, yes of course."

"We can't discuss that where other servants might hear, can we?"

"No!" I don't want to live in fear another moment. I back up, opening the door wider. "Come in."

He enters. The room feels so much smaller with him in it. I don't want to sit on the rumpled sheets, so I stay standing.

He settles against the edge of the table, making himself comfortable. "You want a prophecy."

"Yes, my lord."

"You understand what you're asking? A reading of your threads is not a small thing. It's not something I offer to just anyone."

"I understand. I would be so, so grateful."

“Would you?” The corners of his mouth lift.

“Of course,” I say. “What do you need from me?”

“Why don’t we start with…” He claps his hands on his thighs. “What you picture for your future.”

“Well…” I can’t bring myself to say I’m worried about my own death. “I find myself anxious about my future. I think I’ll sleep better at night if I know what’s coming.”

He nods. “You’re so bright. So well-educated for a governess from Trellis. I think your future could look very different from this.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

He gestures around the room. “This is one of our nicer rooms. But I could move you into something better. Closer to the family quarters.”

“Oh…that’s very generous, my lord, but I’m comfortable here.”

“I want you to be more than comfortable.” He stands and takes a few steps toward me. His eyes pulse purple. The effects of the holiday are still playing on his power. “I want you to know how much I appreciate what you’ve brought to this household. My wife, she…she isn’t able to properly care for the children. And then you show up. So intelligent. So vibrant.”

But this isn’t the conversation about my future I imagined. My eyes flick to the door. “I appreciate the position, my lord. I do. I was hoping to learn more about what’s in store, beyond that.”

“And I can give it to you.” He smiles. The wine on his breath reaches me in warm waves. “A little gratitude goes a long way in a house like this.”

I don’t sense he is about to close his eyes and start the process of pulling threads.

“My lord, it’s very late.” I back up to the door and fumble it open. I lean against the wood. “Perhaps we can continue in the morning.”

He studies me, taking his time. Relief loosens my shoulders as he crosses to the doorway. But he stops right in front of me.

“I’m not finished,” he says, his voice taking on an edge. “I’m simply trying to get to know you and let you get to know me. You wanted a prophecy, didn’t you?”

“Yes, of course…I think tomorrow would be better though.”

His eyes drag over my shawl, my bare ankles. “You’re so tense. Sit down on the bed, Portia.”

He reaches for me as if in slow motion. My pulse is loud in my ears.

I dodge his grasp and slip behind the door. I throw my weight against it. It thuds into him and he stumbles over the threshold. I push him out into the corridor.

"Stop," he snarls as I force it shut and throw the lock.

Oh no. What did I just do?

My heart pounds against my ribs.

"I'm so sorry, Lord Norville," I say through the wood. "I don't know what came over me."

Silence.

"I'm very tired. Can we please talk in the morning? I'll come to your office first thing."

I wait. He must be furious.

Then the handle jiggles. It jiggles again. Metal scrapes into the lock, and the bolt slides free. My eyes widen and my chest squeezes. He has a key.

Lord Norville swings open the door and steps back into my room. "Now that wasn't very smart, was it?"

"I'm so sorry, my lord," I say, trying to maintain normalcy even though I'm shaking. "I'll come to your office first thing, if I could just…"

I make a move for the door, and he steps into my path. I duck and try again, but he shifts again, blocking my way.

It might be my imagination, but he's even bigger than before. The room ripples, like chaos magic is spilling out of him. He stalks forward, and I back away, farther than this room should allow. The room wavers and stretches, before snapping into place.

I hit the far wall.

"Where are you going? I just offered you something no servant would ever dream of."

"I should really sleep…"

I try to dart to one side, and he grabs my wrist, yanking me to him.

"I offered you a prophecy. How about you show a little appreciation?"

"No, I will. I just need…" I try to tug free, but he's too strong. My knife is under the bed, out of reach. "I need to get something from the kitchen…"

"I'll give you the prophecy anyway, even if you are ungrateful." His wine-sour breath coats my face as he leans down, the lantern flickering in his violet eyes. "My prophecy is this: you'll be mine."

A spike of panic shoots hot and cold through me. I shove against him, twisting to break loose. His hold doesn't give as I flail and shriek.

“Can we talk about the children?” I hear the plea in my voice, and how pathetic it sounds, pretending there is still a version of this conversation I can steer us back to. If I can’t get him to go back to normal…if I can’t get him to stop…

A *thump* sounds, and his grip slackens. His eyes roll back as he releases my arm and collapses, revealing another figure behind him.

It takes a moment to recognize the tall frame of Alaris. He lowers the hand that must have delivered the blow, his eyes moving from Norville on the floor to me, pressed against the wall in my nightgown.

“Are you alright?” he asks.

I can’t make my mouth work. I watch Norville, braced for him to rise up and come at me again. My wrist throbs where he grabbed it.

But Norville stays crumpled and still. He looks so much smaller than the man who loomed over me.

“Are you alright?” Alaris asks again.

“Hm? Yes.”

His head swivels toward the corridor. He crosses to the door and shuts it. The *thunk* of the wood makes me flinch.

“Some servants were coming,” he says, stepping to one side of the doorframe. “I couldn’t let them see.”

I shake my head. “No, I need to get someone…to tell someone…”

I rush forward and grab the handle.

“Wait,” Alaris says, holding it shut with one hand.

I tug, then brace a foot on the frame and haul with all my strength. The door doesn’t budge. Panic rises. “Let. Me. Out.”

“I will. Just listen. I’m going to let go, but don’t open it yet.” He raises his other hand in an offer of surrender. I stop pulling, and he releases it entirely and steps away. He settles against the far wall.

There is nothing between me and the exit, but I keep my hands on the handle behind my back.

“Think for a moment,” he says. “No one in this manor warned you about him. Do you think others here will side with you if you tell them what the lord came to your room tonight to do?”

“They will. I’ll tell them the truth and…”

“Sadly, they will not. I know because they let you stay here. If they’d told the women before you, maybe there would be one less woman missing.

She's only the latest in the list of young women he claims left of their own accord."

The room darkens around the edges. Isn't that what Malda said? That the last governess left suddenly? The same one that Bowan claimed was never late?

I felt so lucky to find a place here. I thought Norville wanted me for my education. Now I know he just wanted me for…

I suck in a quick breath, then another. Alaris was right. He was right about Norville, and he's right about the staff. I can't expect help from anyone in this house.

Alaris's eyes flick to my chest, to how fast it's rising and falling, then back up. He draws in a slow breath and lets it out, then does it again. I try to match the rhythm, but my own keeps coming much faster.

Cool air wafts over me, and it helps. I let it fill my lungs.

"You need to leave before he wakes up," he says. "Do you have somewhere you can go?"

I shake my head. I can't go back without a prophecy. "I'll have to catch another ferry."

"Norville will catch you if you take a ferry or go on foot. I can help you travel. Do you have somewhere I can take you?"

I open my mouth and close it. "No."

He raises an eyebrow at me. "Nowhere?"

"Is that a problem?"

He studies me. "Most people have somewhere."

"Well, I don't," I snap. Focusing my anger on Alaris feels clearer than anything else happening right now. "Aren't you the Sovereign of Arastos? I may not be able to get help from the people in this manor, but if you want him arrested, you could demand it. Then I wouldn't have to run from him at all."

He leans back and his eyes shutter, no emotion on his face. "His time will come." His voice is low. "Now isn't the right moment for me to get involved in battles with other provinces."

Coward, I think but don't say. He's happy to drink Norville's wine and flirt with his guests and issue private warnings, but not get publicly involved? I like this lord less and less.

He sighs. "If you truly have nowhere, you can travel with me to Arastos."

My eyes widen. Arastos, the land of night, is at the shadoward edge of the continent. Farther from the flame than I ever imagined traveling.

"I can take you anywhere between here and there, but I suggest you decide quickly." His eyes dip down to Norville. "I'm not sure if I can hit him like that again and avoid killing him."

He kicks Norville's foot. To test his consciousness or for sport, I can't be sure.

Without a prophecy, the best thing I can get is distance from my father and the masked man pursuing me. Arastos is the last place anyone would think to look for Princess Lysandra, or a missing governess.

"Fine," I concede. "Arastos it is."

"Then pack. We'll leave immediately."

"Turn around."

When he complies, I pull my uniform over my nightgown as fast as my shaking hands allow. I untie my pouch of jewels from the slats beneath my mattress and grab my knife, shoving both into the bottom of my travel bag next to the seeds and jar of lobellum. Everything else in reach goes on top.

"I'm ready," I say. "Which way to your carriage?"

"Ah." He is quiet for a moment. "We can't take the carriage."

"What?"

"If I wake half the staff to ready my carriage in the middle of the night, Norville will figure out exactly what happened to the back of his head." He pushes off the wall. "I can help you leave. But not in a way that leads back to me."

This sovereign seems far too concerned with his own reputation. "Then how do you propose to get me to Arastos?"

"I have a way we can leave unseen." He hesitates now, his calm façade briefly broken by some silent indecision. He slowly reaches inside his jacket. "I had a feeling I'd need this with me on this trip. Somnus is always a chaotic holiday."

He pulls out a faceted crystal with a point on one end and delicate silver etchings on each flat side.

"What is that for?"

Norville stirs, his arm twitching.

"No time to explain," Alaris mutters. He slashes it down in front of him.

A glowing white line appears where the crystal passed, crackling like lightning. It splits open, revealing darkness, as if he's cut a hole in reality.

The black opening hangs there in midair.

"What is that?" I've never seen anything like it.

Norville groans.

Alaris grabs my hand and pulls me through.

11

I scream as black folds around me, weightless and silent. Alaris's face is inches away, dark eyes fixed on mine, his hair flying up in a wind I can't feel. His grip on my hand is my only anchor. There is nothing around us but endless void—no light, and no ground under my feet.

Then, as suddenly as it swallowed us, the gaping nothingness spits us out.

I stumble forward, my boots hitting solid stone. The room around me is larger than the one we just left, but it's too dark to make out more than shapes.

"What was that?" I snap as soon as I catch my breath.

"Travel through a shadowgate. We're in Arastos now."

I don't believe for a second that we could have traveled to the farthest province on the continent. No divinial, from Arastos or otherwise, has such a power.

"That's not possible."

"Ah, but it is." He waggles the pointed stone. "Family heirloom. And a very well-guarded secret, actually. So you're welcome."

My eyes widen. This is why spelled objects are banned. With the magic mask or the trinkets I've seen confiscated around court, I often thought the ban was overly harsh. But the ability to travel anywhere in seconds…this is my first taste of a spelled object that could have made a difference in the wars.

"A little warning would have been nice," I stutter.

“You said you wanted to go to Arastos.”

“By carriage! My answer might have been different if I had known it was through a portal with a rock!”

“Voidstone.”

“I’m counting this as another kidnapping,” I grumble. “For the record, next time you want my hand, ask.”

“I don’t think we should classify this noble rescue, at great personal risk, as a kidnapping.”

“You’re still holding my hand.”

“You’re leaning,” he says, lifting our joined hands. His forearm flexes with the pressure I’m putting on his grip.

I yank away and stumble over my feet. I can’t tell up from down. I reel.

He catches me around the shoulders. “Easy.” He walks me back until my calves hit something soft. “Sit. Travel with the voidstone can be disorienting. Especially the first time.”

I sink onto the piece of furniture, which feels like a bed, and inhale slowly, willing myself to calm down. I am dizzy. It’s hard to isolate which of tonight’s events is hitting me hardest, but I suppose the travel through a magic portal opened by a stone might be a large part of it.

By the time I raise my eyes to Alaris, he’s by the hearth striking a flint. The sparks catch slowly, and a fire crackles to life. He coaxes it to a gentle blaze with an iron poker. We don’t have hearths in palace bedrooms, the architecture and marble designed to keep things cool, with torches and braziers lit as needed.

This flame isn’t merely for illumination…it’s cold here. I wrap my arms around myself.

The flickering glow reveals a table, a wardrobe, and a door open to an adjoining bathing room. He rises, his beautiful features sharpened in the contrast between golden warmth and deep shadow.

I’ve been more intimate with him than I’ve ever been with anyone, but this man is very much a stranger. And when my mask came off, things changed. The glamorous lady seeking a night of pleasure from a lecherous lord is gone. I’m grubby, helpless, and indebted, in a strange land.

“I’m going back to Delvos,” he says, offering me the distance I want but haven’t yet asked for. “I need to be seen leaving by carriage tomorrow. You’ll be safe here. The bathing room and wardrobe are stocked for guests. Anything else you need before I go?”

This room is grander than the one I left, but I felt safer in a smaller space with no nooks or crannies for someone to hide.

Then again, my cozy little room wasn't safe after all. A locked door didn't keep Norville out.

I glance toward the door.

"Don't worry. No one will come in. It locks and has a chain." It's like he read my thoughts. Or maybe my face is just that easy to interpret. "My only request is that you stay in this room until I return."

The word "stay" makes my jaw tighten.

He tilts his head. "Why do I get the impression that asking you to stay put made you think of running?"

"You said I could go anywhere I wanted."

"No one knows I've brought you here. My staff might be surprised to find an unknown woman wandering the halls."

"Would they?" I cross my arms. "From what I hear, plenty of women wander these halls."

"Not when I'm in Delvos," he says simply. "Why are you so eager to run? You told me yourself you don't have anywhere to go."

A masked man might show up to kill me. The emperor is looking for me. I don't know if you're any different from Norville. "That doesn't give you the right to keep me here."

"Asked. I asked you to stay here." He crosses his arms too. "It's dark. You aren't dressed for the weather. And the wilderness outside these walls is not safe."

"Unsafe how?"

"There are things in the shadoward reaches that don't trouble flameward lands. You don't know this territory."

I glower, committing to nothing.

He sighs. "I promise I will help you travel wherever you want to go tomorrow. Just promise me you won't try to leave in the night. It will be a huge headache."

"Fine. I won't leave tonight."

One side of his mouth ticks up. "Specific." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the voidstone. "I'll come back after I'm seen leaving by carriage in the morning." He taps a ringed finger against the side of the crystal. "I don't think I have to remind you not to reveal the existence of

this to anyone. Even in this castle, very few know about this particular family heirloom."

I nod, biting back more questions.

"Then get some sleep."

He slashes the stone through the air, and a crack forms in the world. He gives me a long look I can't read, then nods, and steps through.

I stare at the spot until my vision blots, as if he's going to reappear. But staying upright takes more effort than it should. That portal must have done something to me after all, because my limbs are heavy. I sag back against the bed and close my eyes.

On the one hand, I've traveled so far in one night even I barely believe it. No one will think to look for me here. Not Norville, not my father's men, not my masked pursuer. The last will catch up to me eventually, but distance should buy me time.

On the other, I've lost my chance at a prophecy. The dreams gave my fears shape, but a prophecy is the only way I can prove the danger is real and get my father's help. Maybe I should ask Alaris to take me back to Delvos tomorrow to try my luck in a different house…

An image of a lock flipping back the other way flashes across my mind, and I flinch.

The memory forces me off the bed to check that this door is both locked and chained. Just in case, I grab a heavy wooden chair from the table and drag it over. I tilt it back and wedge it under the handle.

Better. That should stop the Norvilles of the world.

But Norville is not what I'm really afraid of.

I know I'm as far from the palace as I could possibly get, and no one could guess I'm here, but my fear isn't listening to reason. I fetch my knife from my bag on the way back to my bed. I stash it under the pillow, then kick off my boots and lie down fully clothed.

I don't want to keep running. I want to feel safe. I lift a heavy hand and cover my eyes. My head throbs, my jaw tight.

But exhaustion is stronger than my spinning thoughts, and sleep pulls me under.

For the first night in weeks, I don't dream.

12

I wake to daylight streaming in. There are large windows to my left, with glass doors that lead to a small balcony. It takes a moment to reorient myself. I'm in Arastos, in the room Alaris brought me to last night.

That was the deepest sleep I've had in weeks, and I was spared from the midnight terror of waking up choking on phantom blood.

The back of my neck prickles. Someone else is here.

I thrust my hand under the pillow and grab the knife, swinging it toward the figure. My pointer finger catches on the edge as I scramble to flip it open.

Alaris stands near the table with a tray balanced in one hand and a jug in the other. The chair is still wedged under the door handle, exactly where I left it.

"Good afternoon." His eyes fall on the knife. "I apologize for not knocking, but I can't be seen in the halls. I'm supposed to be in a carriage traveling through Delvos right now."

He sets his offerings on the table while I scramble to fold the knife and hide my sliced finger in my skirts.

"I wanted to let you sleep, but I thought we should speak before the sun starts to go down."

"It's that late?"

"As I said, first travel with the voidstone can be taxing. Especially so far."

He pours water from the jug into a glass and walks over to me with it.

I scramble up and untwist my dress, glad I didn't even think about stripping down to my nightgown. I can only assume my unwashed face is puffy.

Meanwhile, Alaris looks fresh, his dark hair only unruly enough to frame his perfect face. His shirt is a deep plum, open at the throat, sleeves pushed to his elbows. His earring catches the light as he hands me the glass.

I accept the water and greedily gulp it. It's flavored with hints of mint and orange.

"There was quite a riot at Lord Norville's manor this morning. There is a search for a governess who attacked the lord and fled during the night." His sharp eyes stay on me as I wipe my mouth. "What is your name?"

"Ly…" I clamp my lips shut.

"Ly?"

"…ra. Lyra," I finish, landing on the feminine name for a musical instrument. Clearly I am drowsy; I almost gave him my real name.

"That's interesting, because Norville's governess is named Portia." His dark eyes glitter. "Or so I hear."

I flush at having been caught using a fake name. "Then I'll be glad not to share a name with her. Lyra is my name."

He tilts his head. "I think I'll call you Ly, considering how we met. Under the cover of a lie."

I scoff. "You'd call me a liar for hiding my identity on Somnus?"

"You employed a bit more trickery than most," he says with an incredulous look. He gestures at the tray. "You should eat."

His eyes land on the chair holding the door. He frees it, drags it to the table, and sits.

My appetite leading the way, I approach the table too.

I stop as soon as I see what's on it. A small vase of dead flowers adds macabre ambiance to a plate of spoiled food. A roll with spots of mold sits next to cheese so covered in black it looks like it was thrown in the grate of a fireplace. A smaller plate holds slices of rotted persimmon, its skin a wrinkled gray and its soft flesh turned inky purple.

My empty stomach twists. "I'm not sure what this is, but I'll pass."

He raises an eyebrow. "Travel through the gates takes a toll. You should eat to rebuild your strength."

I glare at him, not taking another step toward the ruined food. "Is this your way of showing me my place?"

“Your place?”

I ball my hands in my rumpled skirts. “You thought I was a lady. Now you know I’m a servant.”

“And?”

I raise my chin higher. “Even in Lord Norville’s house, the staff ate fresh food.”

He looks down at the plate and chuckles.

He takes his thumb and runs it over the bread, lifting away a spot of mold. He licks it, his tongue curving around his thumb.

“It’s just black salt. And flour. The food here doesn’t pull enough minerals from the soil. So we add a lot of this.”

I examine the thin slices of cheese and bread again, reinterpreting the coating on both. “Ah.”

“And this”—he picks up a slice of the fruit, the outside gray and wrinkled instead of the orange I’m used to, and the center a purple so deep and shiny it looks like it will fall apart before it makes it to his mouth—“is murkfruit. It’s a bit messy, but this color means it’s perfectly ripe.”

His deep voice rumbles over the sentence, making it sound like the words are indecent. He takes a bite. He wipes some of the juice off the corner of his mouth with his thumb. My eyes stick to his lips.

I remember how those lips felt on mine…how his body caged mine as he held me against the wall, how hard the muscles of his torso were…

I swallow. I really need to stop watching him eat.

He waves the plate in front of me. “Still don’t trust it? I can lick every piece, if you’d like…”

“No!” I snatch the plate and place it in front of me. I try hard to ignore how he smiles at me, clearly satisfied with himself. My hands are shaking with hunger. I look around for utensils, or a napkin to put over my lap.

Why am I trying to impress this man with the manners of a princess? I’m starving. And I don’t care what he thinks of me.

So I do as he did and use my fingers. I put bread and cheese in my mouth together, trying not to moan. The taste of the salt adds the perfect tang to the nutty cheese, and the bread is crisp on the outside and chewy at the center. I wonder why I’ve never had cheese with salt before. I down half the plate before I get to the murkfruit. It’s so soft it’s practically already jam, but sweet and tart like no fruit I’ve ever tasted. I shove two more pieces in my mouth.

He chuckles and moves the glass closer. “Easy now. Don’t choke.”

I chug the water to clear my throat, not even stopping when it dribbles down my chin. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, staring up at him in challenge. I would think he’d be disgusted by my ravenous display, but his eyes are alight.

How strange.

I break the contact and study my lap. My hands are still shaking, my body not yet caught up with the food I just consumed. But my stomach is full enough to pause before eating the last piece of cheese and crust of bread.

“Better?” he asks, as I sit back in my chair, resting my hands on my middle. He cocks his head. “Hmm.”

I follow his eyes to the cut on my pointer finger. I hide it in my palm, ignoring the way bits of salt dig in and sting.

He comes around to my side of the table and puts out his hand. “May I see?”

“What for?” I hesitate, then place it in his. “It’s just a scrape.”

It’s worse than that, now that I see it, but my lobellum will make short work of it.

Alaris reaches over to the vase of shriveled gray blossoms clinging to dried black twigs. He waves his fingers over them and they transform, petals enlivening and unfurling into deep purple blooms, shriveled black stems untwisting as leaves peel free.

“Night-blooming lavender,” he says before I can ask. “I picked these this morning. Good for soothing the mind and flesh. Makes healing easier.”

He plucks off a few of the vibrant flowers and presses them to my cut. I open my mouth to tell him I don’t need it, but as soon as my hand is engulfed in his, I quiet. A soft and pleasant buzz radiates from his touch, the lavender a cool point on the tip of my finger. Whether it’s the lavender or him, I can’t be sure. It washes over my head, quieting all thought and stealing whatever I was going to say next from my lips.

I don’t want to move. I just want to sit here and feel this calm.

All too soon, he lets go, and I’m left with my hand hovering there, tingling.

“Better?” he asks again, softly.

The red cut is barely noticeable. The wound isn’t closed like it would be if I used lobellum, but it seems smaller, paler, the skin soothed. I nod and

rub it gently with my thumb.

I clear my throat. “Now what?”

“That’s up to you.” He crosses his arms. “As I said, you are free to leave. I’ll help you travel wherever you want to go.”

“I want to go back to Delvos.” Now that I know how easy travel is for Alaris, a prophecy still seems like the best way to protect myself.

“I would not recommend that. Norville is Kalgasari’s cousin. And it seemed like he intends to involve him.”

“Ah.” Kalgasari is the Sovereign of Delvos. It would be one thing to evade a minor lord, but with Kalgasari involved, every noble in Delvos could be on alert for a servant matching my description. Unless I can drastically change my appearance again, I shouldn’t go back and try to join another household.

“Based on how incensed he seemed, I would at least give the situation some time to cool down.”

Which means I need a new plan, and somewhere safe to stay until I can come up with it. Being this far from the palace is the safest I can be. I pull myself up straighter, finding it hard to look him in the eye. “Then I need work.”

“Work?”

“Well, as you may recall, up until you knocked out Norville last night, I was employed.” After my sheltered life in the palace, I have no right to scold this lord on the necessity of wages. If he hadn’t intervened, I would have lost more than my job…but right now, I need him to feel every ounce of indebtedness I can conjure in him.

I can’t tell if my strategy is working, his expression smooth and his dark eyes even.

“What kind of work?”

“I was most recently a governess. Do you have children?”

“No.”

That you know of, I want to say. With so many ladies across the land clamoring for his attention, and his reputation for indulging them, it seems likely there are little Lord Alarises running around somewhere.

“I will take any kind of work I can do.”

He pauses for a long moment. I fidget. Should I beg? Otherwise, I will have to go back on the road and keep traveling aimlessly. I survived on the river better than I could have imagined, but I don’t know where we are, or

how far I might have to walk to get to another estate that could feed and house me.

Then he nods. “I can give you work.”

I exhale heavily. It’s something, at least until I come up with a better plan. “Thank you, Lord Alaris.”

“Alaris is fine.”

The familiarity should put me at ease, but instead, I tense.

This man has a reputation. He was a gentleman to me last night, but I know well enough that the way men treat noble ladies does not always match the way they treat servants. Not to mention, we already crossed certain lines. It is easy to imagine he might feel entitled to again.

“Grateful as I am, before I accept, I’d like to clear something up. Do you…” My words stall, but I press on. “Do you envision my job responsibilities extending to your bedroom?”

His dark eyes narrow. “What?”

I may have been too naïve to believe what Norville was capable of, but I am not going to make that mistake again. Better to address this in the daylight, when there is still time to leave if he doesn’t give an answer I like.

“You may have been the one to inform me about Norville’s reputation, but I’ve also heard about yours.”

His scowl is enough to make me want to retreat. I know it’s unfair to compare him to someone who forced his way into my room, someone he saved me from. But I won’t let embarrassment intimidate me out of getting direct confirmation.

I rush through the words. “I just need to know if you’re giving me a job expecting anything like what happened between us the other night to continue.”

I brace myself to lose the job only minutes after I was offered it. Lords like deference, not confrontation.

“I don’t sleep with members of my staff,” he says, low and dangerous. “I promise you, nothing that happened between us the other night will happen again.”

I exhale. “Good. If you try, I’ll happily leave you in worse shape than Lord Norville and disappear just as quickly.”

“As I would deserve. But trust goes both ways. This is the second time you’ve alluded to disappearing. Since I won’t give you any reason to run, I want your promise that you won’t.”

“You can’t keep me here…”

He raises a hand to still my objections. “You are free to quit at any time. Since I’m partly responsible for your present…job loss…I will help you travel where you want to go. But as a member of my staff, you are also my responsibility. The woods outside this castle are dangerous. If you disappear, I’ll have to launch a search party. It will be very inconvenient.”

It’s a fair request. “Alright.”

“Then we have an agreement. Come, I’ll show you to your wards.”

I glance up at him. “I thought you said you don’t have children.”

He smiles. “I don’t.”

13

Alaris reaches into his pocket and pulls out the voidstone. I get a better look at it in the daylight, noting the delicate etchings are silver stars connected into constellations. He slashes it down, and a seam of darkness splits the air.

"Follow me," he says and steps through.

I need this job. I bite my lip and walk straight at the portal with my fists squeezed tight. Darkness closes around me and I get swept up in weightless wind, but it's brief this time. My stomach lurches, and then my boots hit solid ground.

I've landed inside a round stone building. The air is cold and smells of damp wood, animal, and dust.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"Just across the grounds. I can't be seen wandering about."

The space is open, with a round basin in the center, a bench, and an assortment of tools lining the walls. And a ladder. I let my eyes follow it up into the rafters. Tiers of wooden beams climb toward the point of a turret. Light comes through open shutters high above. It takes me a moment to separate the shapes from the shadows.

Hawks. Black ones. More than I can count, their talons clicking and scraping against wood perches.

If not for the light reflecting off their eyes, and the shift of their wings, they would blend in with the shadows entirely. One lets out a sharp cry, and the sound bounces off the stone walls and pierces straight through me.

"These are my messengers," Alaris says. "And my beloved pets."

I blink up at the inky birds. “Are hawks typically used for messages? I’ve only seen doves and ravens.”

He smiles. “These hawks were specially bred by the first lords of night. They are unique.”

I don’t have time to ask my next question before one of them drops from the rafters, swooping so close its wing brushes my cheek. I yelp and jump.

“I realize caring for birds might not be what you had in mind in terms of work.” His light tone is maddening. Of course he knows it’s not what I had in mind. “Not everyone has an appetite for handling predators. I can check with my steward about other open positions—”

“No!” I say quickly. “No, this job will be fine.” I learned on the river how many people need work, compared to the number of houses that have it.

“You’re sure?” he asks, cocking his head. “I wouldn’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

I cross my arms. I am uncomfortable around animals, but until recently I’d never run away, lived on a boat, or taken care of children either. So I lie. “I actually love birds.”

“Do you?” he asks, a smile that unsettles me spreading across his face.

Another bird swoops by, and I swallow my shriek. Another follows, then another, a flurry of dark shapes cutting through the air around me.

This is a test.

My heart pounds at the flash of their curved talons, their sharp beaks. Any movement, and they’ll slice my skin, whether they mean to or not.

But I’m used to tests, from the emperor, my mother, my siblings. I hold myself still. Talons can’t hurt more than fire. And it’s even easier now that I’ve experienced the chill of death creeping up on me. I remember waking up gasping for breath. I remember blood streaming down my front, pain like I’ve never experienced blossoming at the end of a blade, or arrow, or rope…

I know what real fear feels like now. The threat of a talon can’t compare.

I steel myself and lift my chin, staring through the storm of feathers, as hawks dive and ruffle my hair and my clothes. I keep my feet planted, my hands steady at my sides, meeting Alaris’s gaze as it appears and disappears through the wings.

His eyebrows arch.

Then the hawks peel away, the midnight flock dispersing. All at once, they retreat to the rafters, leaving only a few dark feathers floating down.

“Maybe you do like birds. A rare bit of truth from my newest employee. Then you’ll start tomorrow.”

Not a hair on that infuriatingly gorgeous head is out of place. Meanwhile, I feel like I’ve dropped to the ground and rolled through the feathers.

But I bite back any retort. He watches me as I exhale slowly.

“Something to say?”

“Not at all, my lord.” I grit my teeth.

“Are you sure? It looks like you’re hurting your jaw.”

He seems to enjoy needling me. But I just got the job, and I’ve already made myself too difficult. No lord likes a handful. So I smooth my face and fall into myself even further. “Just wondering how I can learn about the details of their care.”

He pauses a second, like he wants to challenge my sudden obedience. But he doesn’t. “Their previous keeper will show you. He’s been splitting his responsibilities. I’ll ask him to meet you tomorrow morning and show you everything.” His eyes travel me briefly. “Come.”

The stone is in his hand again. He swings it, scratching lightning through the air, and beckons me.

I step into gaping darkness. After a moment suspended in the void, I appear back in the bedroom.

The tray is still on the table, murkfruit stains and scattered black salt all that remains from my meal. My bag is on the floor where I dropped it.

I sway. Maybe it’s my third trip through the gate, or maybe it’s just the day catching up to me. My eyelids droop, and I have to lock my knees to stay upright.

He steps out after me. “I must return to my carriage now to maintain appearances. Remember”—he wags the stone once, then puts it in his pocket—“no mention that you’ve seen me. I’ll inform my steward that I invited you by letter.”

I nod and collect my bag off the floor. “Where do the servants stay?”

“Here will be fine. This suite is unoccupied.”

“It’s far too grand for a servant.” My comment is true, but the mismatch between my rank and the room isn’t really the source of my complaint. My

problem is that it's too big. With a balcony, a large bed, a bathing room, a wardrobe, and corners the firelight can't reach, there are too many places for someone unseen to lie in wait.

"I believe the servants' wing is full," he says. "Besides, this room is close to the back of the castle. Much more convenient to get to the hawks."

I consider pushing further, but I don't have the energy. I let out a slow breath. How is it possible I'm still so tired, after sleeping for an entire day and night?

"Alright," I say. "For tonight."

"Good. Someone will knock to wake you tomorrow."

"A nice change of pace," I mumble.

His mouth twitches up. "I won't officially be back for two weeks, but I'll check in and see how you and the hawks are getting on."

"Don't you worry about me and the birds," I say, sleepiness taking the edge off my bravado. My eyes narrow. "Isn't two weeks too fast for a carriage to travel from Delvos to Arastos?"

"I'll leave my carriage behind and ride part of the way. I'm well known to have the fastest horse in all nine provinces. It helps explain my incredible pace of travel." He takes a few steps toward me, peels the bag off my shoulder with gentle fingers, and hangs it on the back of a chair. "Now go to bed. I can see the gate took its toll."

I press my lips together, hating that I'm letting it show. But my eyes feel swollen, like they'll shut without my permission at any second.

I nod.

He slashes the stone through the air and disappears.

Still getting used to that.

Once again, I don't bother taking off my dress before I collapse on the bed. I wonder if the stone is precise enough to let Alaris appear directly in his carriage. He's gone back and forth across the continent twice, and he navigated within the castle grounds just as easily. It's an incredible power.

My eyes fly wide. I sit up.

It's a perfect means of escape.

I didn't get my prophecy. Without proof the masked man is out there or advance knowledge of his attack, my only option is to keep running. Wherever I stay, I'm counting down the hours until he finds me.

But if I had the voidstone, a few seconds of warning would be enough. I could open a portal, step through, and vanish, leaving no trail for him to

follow.

I wouldn't need to know when he's coming or make anyone else believe he's real. I could go home again.

The scandalous Sovereign of Arastos uses his family heirloom to flit about the continent, attending parties. For me, the voidstone would mean survival.

He won't just give it to me.

I'll have to steal it.

I clench my fists. The cut on my finger, half-closed from the lavender, splits open.

I've never stolen anything in my life. But then, a few weeks ago I didn't imagine myself capable of running from the palace either. There was nothing that prepared me for bargaining on the river or lying my way to becoming a governess.

Blood wells in the wound and drips down my knuckle. It stings, but my nightmares scream through me with so much pain—this is nothing. I would usually apply lobellum right away to make sure it doesn't scar, but scars don't matter on a thief.

I will become whoever I need to be to survive.

I put my finger in my mouth to stop the blood from staining the sheets.

A thief it is, then.

14

I wake to a knock at the door. I stumble out of bed, still dizzy from sleep, and pull it open, all lessons about making myself presentable apparently long forgotten.

A thin, stern-looking man with dark braids tied back stands there with a tray in one hand and a folded pile of clothes in the other.

I scramble to open the door all the way as he sweeps into the room. His eyes take in my scattered travel bags and my disheveled appearance. Without a word, he sets the tray on the table and the clothing on a chair beside it.

He straightens his vest with a practiced flick and nudges a pair of fine-rimmed golden glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"I'm Karns. Steward of this house," he says, each syllable clipped. "Your breakfast. Eat it while it's hot. Lunch and dinner can be taken from the kitchen. Dashol will escort you there after he instructs you on the care of the hawks. Your uniform is here. More will be arranged. When you're dressed, meet Dashol outside. Down the hall, down the stairs."

He turns, already halfway to gone, before I think to respond.

"Thank you. And can I ask…"

He pauses. "Yes?"

"What about rooms?" I look down and clear my throat. "Is there space in the servants' quarters?"

"No. You'll be lodging here for the foreseeable future."

The door clicking shut is his only farewell.

Karns is not a man whose time I should waste. Noted.

The porridge is coated with cinnamon, and the scent beckons me. It's a heavier breakfast than the thin slices of melon and meat I'm used to in the capital, and it's exactly what I need. I inhale it, shoveling hot spoonfuls into my mouth until I'm scraping the last bits from the stoneware.

I want to bathe, but I don't want to be late. After one week on the river, it's amazing how quickly I've shed things that used to be necessities. I tie up my hair, and dress in the clothes Karns left on the chair for me. The garments are warmer than what I wore in Delvos. The uniform is a simple, long-sleeve dress cut above the ankles for movement, and a heavy brown leather apron. I work on the ties, cinching them around my waist, noting the thick gloves tucked into a pocket on the front.

Judging by the clothing, this work is not delicate. But I feel invigorated as I hurry down the stairs and step out into the crisp air. It's only the second month of autumn, and it's already far colder than it gets in the dead of winter in the capital. But after another night of rest, the cold feels good in my lungs.

The castle I just exited is rough gray stone, with pointed turrets, carved arches, and dark doors bound in iron. Compared to the Citadel's manicured gardens and symmetrical plazas, this place is a fortress, expansive and barren. In the distance, there is an outer defense wall, and beyond that, the tops of trees.

As I wait, I press the cut on my finger, testing how well the skin is closing. I could apply my lobellum, but not using it feels like its own type of experiment. Healing quickly and hiding pain were important as a princess, but a thief would wear her scars.

Of course, there's nothing here for me to steal. Alaris is still on his trip from Delvos, voidstone in hand. Until he gets back, my only mission is to keep my job as a hawk keeper.

After a few moments, I spy a figure jogging toward me. He lifts a hand as he closes the distance. He's a wall of a man, the intimidation of his solid physique undercut by his open smile and the sandy freckles on his nose. He looks about my age.

He slows to a stop. "Lyra, right? I'm Dashol. You can call me Dash, if you want."

"Hello," I say bashfully, glad he's reminded me of the name I gave Alaris.

“The aviary is just this way.” He leads me across the grounds, our boots crunching on the packed dirt and gravel.

A building that looks like a tower lopped off the main castle stands in the distance. A few dark shapes circle in the clouds overhead.

I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. *I love birds. I love birds because they ensure I can eat and sleep somewhere safe.*

“You’ve come from farther flameward, right?”

“Flameward, yes.” I don’t want to specify more.

“Settling in well enough? The cold takes some getting used to.”

“Everything is lovely. Where are we, by the way?” I realize too late the question is strange for someone who was supposedly summoned by letter and arrived by normal means of travel.

“You mean why isn’t the lord in Erbos?” Dashol takes it in stride. “It’s an unusual seat for a sovereign, this far away from his capital. But Alaris likes his privacy.” He throws an arm wide. “Nothing but trees around this castle.”

So we’re not in Erbos, and there isn’t a city beyond these walls. I’m sure Alaris doesn’t mind being in the wilderness when he can tear a seam in the air and emerge anywhere he likes. What’s a castle at the edge of nowhere to a man like that?

We reach the aviary door. Dashol pulls it open, revealing the stone building Alaris transported me to. The hawks are perched high above, obsidian eyes glinting.

I take a closer look around. I didn’t pay attention to the straw yesterday, but the aviary floor is covered in droppings and feathers and small animal bones. Rust stains mar the edges of the tools hanging from the walls, and a few beams sag ominously overhead.

Dashol follows my eyes. “I’m more of a soldier than a hawk keeper,” he admits. “It’s been some time since the hawks have received the care they deserve.”

“You’re a soldier?”

“Commander of them, actually,” he says, grinning. “But it’s at the expense of the birds. I don’t spend much time here.”

“Right.” Who am I to question the work of someone who does one job, much less two? “It’s hard to believe a commander was ever charged with this task at all.”

Dashol waggles his head, like he's trying to find the right words. "Alaris doesn't trust just anyone with his hawks."

I remember Alaris's little test.

"I was a governess before this." I inject my words with more prim confidence than I feel. "I know how to care for a lord's dependents. I just need a few pointers on the bird bits."

"That's the spirit." Dashol grins. "They don't require much care themselves. They deliver messages directly to the lord and they hunt their own food. It's really the aviary that needs human hands. The most important thing is to make sure the door is always latched. We don't want any predators sneaking in. And sometimes the shutters blow closed and you'll need to open them. We close them on purpose during a storm…"

He leads me beneath the overhang to show me the tools, and the smell of bird droppings hits me harder. My stomach churns. I nod through the nausea as he explains what some of the hooks and poles and brushes are for.

"What else?" I ask, not breathing through my nose.

"Water. The basin is for bathing, and I put in fresh water weekly. There are troughs a little higher for drinking, if you can carry a bucket up the ladder. If not, I can come back and help. What's really been neglected is the cleaning." He examines the straw, his eyebrows pulled together. "I can ask someone to come by…"

"No," I say, holding my breath as much as I can, trying to keep down the porridge. If more people are needed to take care of the hawks, I won't have a job here at all. "Of course I'll do it."

"I'll show you the rest of the grounds then."

Dashol shows me the well, and the kitchens, and introduces me to a few footmen and maids, who I curtsy to shyly. The contrast between these casual introductions and my treatment at Norville's house is striking. Everyone meets my eyes, and there are at least as many women, both young and old, as men.

"Don't let anyone get too nosy with you," Dashol says as he leads me away from a curly-haired maid with bright eyes whose name I've already forgotten. "We don't have many new members of staff joining in the middle of the night, but believe it or not, you wouldn't be the very first. If Alaris hired you, you are the right person for the job."

Comforting words, even if they're absolutely false.

Dashol leaves me outside the aviary, with promises of help anytime. I take a steadying breath of fresh air. First and foremost, I need to keep my job here. And if I'm going to be spending my days in the aviary, I need it clean.

Which means, despite my inexperience, I'll have to be the one to clean it.

After one last breath of fresh air, I charge back in. For the first time, I'm alone with the hawks. They click their beaks and fluff their feathers, eyeing me from their roosts.

"You stay up there, and I'll stay down here, and we won't have any problems," I mutter.

I keep one eye on the birds as I grab the wooden broom, hefting it awkwardly. I start sweeping the floor, trying to push the dirty straw into a pile. But the mess is too wet, and it sticks, caking the bristles.

I'm no expert, but I think the broom is ruined.

Undeterred, I fill a bucket from the basin and splash the water onto the floor, hoping it will flush the grime outside. Instead, it spreads the mess, turning the dirt into a slick, muddy layer.

Thankfully, I only have the hawks as an audience, clicking and chirping overhead.

I consider the tools on the wall more carefully. I almost reach for a rag or a bristle brush, but land on a shovel.

I glance up at the rafters. The hawks are indeed watching, black eyes shining. But none fly down. Whatever swarming behavior they displayed yesterday, today they seem content to roost.

"Only like to embarrass me in front of your lord, eh?" I ask. "Happy to sit up there, out of reach, now that I've got a weapon in my hands?"

Admittedly, the threat falls flat, because I'm not very skilled with the shovel. I have to try a few angles and grips before I figure out how to use it to scoop the mess out the door. After clearing only a tiny section of straw, my arms quiver.

I lean on the handle and stare at the pile blocking my exit. Where is any of this supposed to go? In the palace, filth simply vanished. There has to be a heap somewhere, in some corner of the grounds. I glance up at the sky and wish, uselessly, for rain to wash it all away.

One aching scoop at a time, I move the waste to one side of the aviary, so I won't have to wade through it on my way in tomorrow morning.

Dashol told me that outdoor jobs end with the light, but my strength goes faster. Still, I hold out, pushing the shovel when I can no longer lift it, scraping dirty straw out the door.

When I finally trudge to the kitchen for dinner, my arms are numb, and my back aches in places I didn't know had muscles. I grab a plate of meat and bread and eat on my way to my quarters. I resist the call of sleep only long enough to take a bath, arms trembling as I scrub my hair. Someone left extra uniforms for me, and a basket for used ones. Thank goodness. It won't matter if I can't stand the smell of the aviary if I can't stand the smell of myself.

The light wakes me, but before I get out of bed, there is a sharp knock, and Karns's clipped voice rings out: "Wake up, hawk keeper. Breakfast is in the kitchen."

Nice of him. I return to the aviary, still sore, but also more determined. With my hands raw from the shovel, I switch to the matter of water. I should fetch fresh bucketfuls from the well, but it seems like a waste to pour clean water into a grimy basin. So I use the rusty bucket to empty it, then go at it with the bristle brush. I have to go slow, conserving strength. Scores of obsidian eyes follow me as I work.

It's a battle to get the mildew and droppings off the stone. My shoulder screams and my split finger aches, but I'm winning the war against the grime, one pass of the brush at a time.

A hawk drops from the rafters and clips my shoulder. I flinch, cursing under my breath, and wave it off. It settles on the beam above me and clicks its beak.

"You've been busy," a voice behind me says.

I whip around. Alaris is leaning against the closed door, arms crossed, like he just stepped out of a portrait. His rich velvet cloak drapes over only one shoulder, showing off his white silk shirt. I see myself through his eyes, on my knees in a puddle of gray water with feathers in my hair.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough. Just checking on my newest member of staff." He glances around the aviary. One side of his mouth ticks up. "I'd ask how you're finding the work, but I think the answer is on your apron."

I scowl. It's his aviary. But I swallow my frustration. "It's fine."

"And on your face."

"It's your mess," I snap.

He chuckles. “I can ask around and see if there is a position in the castle…?”

I grip the brush. “No, my lord, this is just fine.”

Maybe it’s the way we met and the attitude I let loose on Somnus, but I’m having trouble controlling my tone around him. I return to scrubbing, taking every ounce of my ire out on a stubborn green patch.

But I can feel his eyes on the back of my neck. I huff. “Do you enjoy watching people work while you lounge around, or is this a special occasion?”

“I wouldn’t call this lounging. Watching you is a bit painful.”

“Heroic of you. How’s the carriage ride going?”

“Uneventful.” He pushes off the door, his ringed fingers dangling a cloth bundle. “I brought you something.”

I stare at it. “What?”

“You and I share a secret. I’ve been to more corners of this continent than most, and I’ve picked up a few indulgences along the way.” He swings the bundle. “I thought my co-conspirator might appreciate the benefits.”

I pull off my filthy gloves carefully by the fingertips, accept the bundle, and unwrap the cloth. Inside is a small jar of something orange, and beside it, a dried piece of fruit dusted in yellow powder.

“From a seaward market in Marithos,” he says. “The paste is ground vigi root, quite the unique flavor. The fruit is dried nola, rolled in lemon sugar.”

I weigh the jar in my palm. “Do you always flit about like this, using your magic rock to visit markets?”

“No. That would be a bit too reckless,” he concedes. “I usually keep the stone tucked away somewhere safe. But it’s with me on the road, for now, and the carriage is ever so dull.”

It’s an obscene risk, using a spelled object to flit around the continent. Even one witness could result in the emperor finding out. Still, I’m curious. I’ve never seen fruit like this before. I bite into one end of the dried nola. Sour puckers my lips, but in a few chews, it’s all sweet. It’s a delightful combination I could imagine getting addicted to.

I set it aside for the vigi root. The jar comes with a tiny spoon. I dip it into the gritty orange paste. The smell is medicinal. The taste is worse. It’s bitter and dries out my tongue. I keep my face controlled as I struggle to swallow without coughing. I force a smile.

“They’re lovely,” I say. “Thank you.”

“And your thoughts?”

I glance at him. “I like them both.”

He cocks his head.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.” He straightens. “I should rejoin my carriage. Enjoy them, Ly.”

He reaches into his cloak. The air beside him splits open, dark and wavering at the edges. He steps through and disappears.

I stare at the space where he stood. I didn’t learn much, but he confirmed he keeps the voidstone somewhere safe when he is not on the road.

I savor the rest of the nola and wipe my hands on my apron.

“Want any?” I ask the hawks, setting the bitter paste on the bench.

15

The cleaning continues the next day. And the next. And the next.

My muscles burn, and I constantly have dirty gloves, hair, and skirts. I curse every step as I haul sloshing buckets of water to and from the well, and I mutter some choice words for Alaris as I sponge down surfaces on my hands and knees. I finally get the floor clean, only to splash more mess down onto it when I climb up the ladder to empty the troughs.

I hate it. But there is no way forward except through.

At least the cut on my finger is healing. Without using my lobellum, I didn't know how long it would take.

When I can't stand another minute up to my elbows in grime, I wander the grounds, searching for somewhere to dump the growing piles of waste collecting outside the aviary walls. I could ask Dashol, but I scurry away the moment I spot him and the other guards crossing swords in a training yard. I don't intend to be here long, and it's better if no one really notices or remembers me.

After a few meandering searches, I find a promising mound of refuse alongside a glass building: a greenhouse, with beads of water clinging to every pane. But I don't want to carry all that muck and straw here until I've checked with someone first.

Warmth rolls over me as I open the door. It's almost as balmy as Illios in here, but the air is heavier with moisture. The lush foliage reminds me of Delvos, the rows of pots and stands overflowing with growth, where the rest of the castle grounds are barren dirt.

“Hello?” I call.

I step farther into the greenhouse, moving between rows of unfamiliar plants. The heat radiates up from the floor, fed by some underground mechanism, rather than relying on the weak sunlight above. I glance around for any sign of its caretaker, but there’s no one here.

I pause when I spy a familiar shape: translucent green flowers with five petals each.

Lobell bushes.

I drift over. There are only a handful of blooms per plant. I’m so used to my own variety with double the buds and clear flowers, these green ones look sickly and sparse in comparison.

Still, they make me think of the marble room I left behind. I raise a hand and cup a peridot blossom.

“Hello,” a voice behind me says.

I whirl, heart thundering.

Not the masked man.

Not even close. A young woman with braids stands before me, dirt smudging one golden-brown cheek. It still takes me a minute to convince my heart that the trowel she holds aloft is not a knife.

She stabs it in the dirt, and I flinch. “You’re new here, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” I fidget. “I’m Lyra, the new hawk keeper.”

“Siro,” she replies. “Gardener.”

Even though I don’t recall meeting her during Dashol’s introductions, there is something familiar in her face. “We haven’t met, have we?”

“No, but you wouldn’t have gotten far in this castle without meeting my brother.”

I place her the moment she says it. She has the same fine features as Karns, pointed and delicate, though her eyes are wide and lined in black where I’ve only seen his narrowed behind his golden frames.

She gestures at the bush in front of me. “Interested in lobell?”

I glance at the translucent green petals. “Yes, I grow them. Grew them.”

“You garden?”

“Definitely not. I don’t know what most of the things in here are.”

“Even still, I wouldn’t mind a few pointers if you have them. These plants are from around the continent, and there is a fair amount of trial and error to get them to take to Arastos’s soil. We’ve had a few funerals.”

It never hurts to know where I might get more lobell if I need it. “Are these the only lobell bushes?”

“Yep. We buy most of our lobellum. Lasts longer if the travel time is only one way.”

I hum my understanding. The healing power gets spent quickly as the ointment made from lobell flowers starts to spoil, but it’s the only known conduit for vernalian magic. Shipping jars to Vernys and back eats up that time. “Vernalians make it from the bloomed flower for volume. But it lasts much longer if you make it from the buds.”

“Really? I’ll have to try that.”

“You’ll get a lot less, but if you cut them here—” I point to the spot on the stem where I’ve snipped so many heads, I couldn’t possibly count. “—more buds will grow.” I blush. “But again, I’m no gardener.”

“If you have a few minutes, you could show me.”

I’m surprised to find myself tempted. It’s so warm in here, compared to the chill in the aviary. And I spent weeks in the Sunrise Palace with little to do but stare at the translucent flowers, learning their tells. Based on the droop in the leaves, these look like they’ve had a bit too much water. Maybe they would do better in sandier soil…

But I don’t need more lobellum, and I’m not employed as a gardener. I shake my head. “Maybe another time.”

“Then if you’re not here to garden, what brought you to the greenhouse? Don’t go searching for anything to eat in here without asking. I have a whole section for poisons.” She smiles, one canine sticking out, sharper than the other. “Want to see?”

“I was looking for a place to bring the muck from the aviary.”

“Is there bone in it?”

I wrinkle my nose. “Yes. And fur. And droppings and feathers.”

“Perfect.” She grins on the word, her canine flashing. “How soon can you bring it?”

I’m startled by her exuberance, but I recover. “Do you have a wagon? I can start tomorrow.”

“Yes! I’ll come and get it myself if you forget.”

I only get one wagonful of waste to the greenhouse on my own before Dashol spies me and helps me get the rest of the job done. Siro stands back with her arms crossed, her sharp tooth showing as we add all the straw and feathers and bones she could possibly want to her pile.

After a week and a half, the sludge in the aviary is reduced to stains. The only smell is fresh straw. The water is clean. I admire the light stone surface of the bench, finally revealed from under a layer of dirt, and the wall of gleaming tools. I'm a mess, shaking and aching, but satisfaction hums through my tired bones.

I take a half bucket of water up the ladder, which is all my quaking arms can manage, and pour it into the trough. I jump as a hawk lands on the rim beside me. I'm getting used to them, but we are rarely this close. Its feathers aren't flat black, but iridescent, shimmering purple and blue and green as they rustle and catch the light.

As Dashol said, the hawks don't seem to need much from me. Sometimes they look like majestic, noble guardians, perched high above, judging the world. Other times they fight over a rat or hack up fur, squawking and flapping like base animals.

"If you don't bite me, I won't bite you," I mutter. I keep my eyes on the bird as I pour.

"I see you're acclimating well," a voice below me calls.

I nearly tip off the ladder, grabbing the trough and splashing myself.

Alaris stands below. "Steady now."

"What happened to knocking?" I mumble.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, my lord." I plaster on a polite smile and climb down the ladder. "What can I do for you?"

His gaze tracks from the polished tools to the swept floor. "Nothing in particular."

My fake smile stiffens. "You have a lot of free time on your hands."

"My hawks are very precious to me."

With the state this aviary was in? I say nothing but raise an eyebrow.

He smirks, like he can see my commentary on my face. He holds out a cloth bundle. "And I made time for this."

I set down the empty bucket, wipe my hands on my skirt, and accept it. I take it to the bench and unwrap it in my lap.

"I went to a market in Nyvos this morning," he says. "The red one is a blood pom. They only grow mountainward in the foothills. The nut is a bolka. And the bread is called a cinnamon wing."

"Thank you. I've never heard of any of them." I would rather try them in private, but it's clear he's not leaving.

I pick up the blood pom first. It's the size of a plum, with red skin that shines like a ruby and pops around my teeth. The juice is slightly salty, with a metallic aftertaste that makes my nostrils flare. I didn't imagine it was called a blood pom because of the flavor. I gain control of my face as I chew and swallow, returning the rest of the fruit to the cloth.

The cinnamon wing looks safe, so I try that next. It flakes as I bite into it, the layers melting into buttery goodness. It's delicious. I want to shove the whole thing into my mouth, but I put down the other half.

The bolka gives me pause. Everything but the cinnamon wing has been a surprise, and the pitted exterior looks questionable. I roll it between my fingers before I take a bite.

It's smoky. And the center is a different texture, soft and creamy. It tastes just like…

"Honey!"

He smiles.

"How unusual. Thank you."

He tilts his head as he watches me chew, the stone at his ear sent swinging with the motion. "You do that a lot."

"Do what?"

"Hide your reactions." He pushes off the doorframe. "You didn't like the blood pom."

Caught. I huff. "It's not polite to insult a gift."

"At times. But you hide it even more when you enjoy something."

I open my mouth. Close it. "I don't."

"You do."

"Perhaps I'm just not very expressive."

"Hm. That's one theory." The teasing edge in his voice doesn't quite match his calm and steady eyes. "And yet, I don't think I'll ever forget how you devoured that murkfruit."

"Well…" I can feel my cheeks getting pink. "If you starve me a little, maybe you'll get the reaction you're after."

"I'm not after anything, Ly. Only what's true." He strides over to me and takes the other half of the blood pom from the cloth on my lap. Light reflects off his rings as he pops it into his mouth. My eyes follow as the red fruit disappears between his lips. "I can also recall an evening you weren't starving that tells me otherwise."

His calm expression doesn't change, his voice almost clinical, but my mind flashes back to being pressed against the wall, his knee between my thighs. His mouth on my neck, me pulling him closer by the collar…

"No one is themselves on Somnus," I manage, my voice rough.

"Ah," he says. The silence stretches. A hawk clicks its beak overhead.

He takes the voidstone out of his cloak, and my greedy gaze fixes on it. I force myself to look away, examining the remaining food in my lap.

"When are you coming back?" I ask, mildly.

"At the end of this week, as promised. I've ridden ahead of my carriage, and my horse is very fast."

"As any horse would be, without a rider."

His lips twitch. "Until later, Ly."

Sure enough, a few days later, I get called to the gates. I join the line of servants assembling to receive the lord. Karns stands at the front, vest immaculate, glasses catching the light, his posture rigid enough to pass a military review. Behind him, the household arranges itself in practiced order: maids and footmen in pressed gray, the kitchen staff still dusting flour from their trousers. The guards stand apart in dark leather, Dashol at their head. I take a place beside the groundskeeper and the stable hands.

The gate opens, revealing Alaris astride a midnight horse. His cloak swings over a burgundy silk shirt that clings to the lines of his shoulders and chest like it was molded to them. His hair flies up as his horse canters inside. He looks far too clean for a man who has been on the road all this time.

Which, of course, he wasn't. He could have popped by a hot spring for a bath, gone across the continent for a change of clothes, and still arrived here at this moment.

A white and red carriage rumbles down the road after him. I frown. Based on the colors, I doubt it's his. Plus, there is no way it could have traveled here from Norville's so fast.

He swings down and turns toward the carriage. When it rolls to a stop, he opens the door and offers his hand. A woman in a bright red dress accepts it and steps out, her dark hair pinned in an elaborate arrangement. He pulls her in close and murmurs in her ear. Whatever he says makes her painted mouth curl up, and she snakes her arms around one of his.

He made it sound like he was rushing back, but he had time to pick up a woman on the way? I purse my lips.

Karns bows. “Welcome home, my lord.”

“Karns.” Alaris inclines his head as he walks the lady forward. “How is the castle?”

“Siro is down with a chill, but otherwise, all is in order.” Karns adjusts his glasses. “I’m pleased to present the hawk keeper you sent us. She’s been getting acclimated to her duties.”

“Very good.” His attention flicks to me, then returns to Karns. “Prepare refreshments and have them sent to my room. Lady Pashri is going to be staying the night.” He turns to her and brushes a curl from her forehead. “Come, my dear.”

He guides her through the main door in a swirl of red fabric.

What was the point of lining us all up for that? I don’t know why I’m surprised. It’s not like my father ever hesitated to waste his servants’ time. Perhaps it just feels different now that I am one.

This is the real Sovereign of Arastos, the one with a reputation that even a marithian governess knows about.

I stay rooted to the spot, even as the line breaks apart. Someone is watching me. I twist to face a maid with curly hair and aqua eyes. I reach for her name…Drina. We stare at each other another second before she turns away and falls into step with the other maids.

I shake off my stupor. Alaris is back now. That means the stone is here. It’s time to search.

16

I've had two weeks to consider where Alaris might keep the voidstone. He wouldn't want Lady Pashri undressing him and finding it in his pocket, so he must have stowed it away the moment he got back. The lock on a vault or safe may be hard to break, but it also announces something inside is worth protecting. The stone's best defense is that no one knows it exists.

Which means he probably stores it somewhere no one would think to look.

I know how royals hide things. We have more secrets and treasures than most, and no privacy to guard them, so the Citadel was designed with concealment in mind. Its architects added escape tunnels, hollowed-out walls, and hidden compartments for the royal family.

And when the architecture wasn't enough, my siblings made their own arrangements. I saw Rinalda unscrew the finial on her bedpost, which is how I found the letters from her lover. Borin kept his liquor under a loose marble tile. Jasper burned me badly enough one afternoon that he dragged me to his room, revealing a green jar of lobellum hidden behind a carving.

Funny that his secret was healing ointment, its existence evidence that he could burn too.

As a sovereign, my bet is Alaris does the same, hiding the stone somewhere in plain sight. It could be tucked into any cranny in this castle. With the aviary clean and the hawks' water fresh, I have plenty of time in my day to search.

The library is the first room I try. It sits off the main corridor, its heavy oak doors ajar, shelves running floor to ceiling. With no one else in sight, I slip inside.

I drift around the edges, fingertips brushing the spines of gilt-embossed tomes. One leatherbound volume looks too pristine among its dusty neighbors, so I open it, finding only paper and ink. I press and knock along the paneling, listening for the difference between solid and hollow. I crouch by the fireplace and run my fingers along the inner edge of the hearth, feeling for a catch or a hinge.

The door creaks, and a maid steps into the room. We both freeze.

"I was admiring the collection." I stutter, wiping my hands on my skirts as I stand. "I'll get out of your way."

She nods, duster aloft. I brush past her and stop short. Karns is standing in the corridor, feet planted, as if he sprouted from the floor.

"Lyra." He adjusts his glasses. "Do you need something?"

"I…I was looking for books on the care of hawks," I say, scrambling. "So I can deepen my knowledge. Of their care."

"Our library is extensive, but I can save you the time of looking at thousands of titles." His face is flat. "We don't have any books on raptors."

I nod and retreat.

The next morning, I finish in the aviary early and head for the windward wing. I peek in open doorways until I find a room that looks promising: a storeroom covered in dust.

I close the door behind me and work through the shelves, pulling out crates and feeling along the wall behind them, searching for loose masonry. I'm leaned over a stack of burlap grain sacks when the door opens.

A flash of glasses tells me whose silhouette it is right away.

"Karns, hi!" I push myself off the grain as I work up an explanation. "The hawks seemed hungry. I was looking for extra feed."

Karns's eyes flit between me and the sacks. "I'll have the kitchen set aside scraps for you tomorrow. Hawks don't eat grain."

I nod and stand, sidling around him to leave.

"Maybe she did need that book," I hear him mumble behind my back.

I try to get a look in the guest rooms, the gallery, the closet under the stairs. But after a few minutes in any room, Karns materializes, and I have to come up with another excuse.

I tell him I'm looking for old feather pillows to replace the dirty straw. That I need a spare lantern. That I'm after a length of cord to tie an axe head that's come loose. He accepts each one with the same tight smile.

I arrive to find an aviary full of fresh straw. A lantern hangs above the bench, filled with oil. A coil of new cord appears on a wall hook. I crinkle it in my hands and curse Karns's unquestionable competence.

My justifications get thinner by the day. Every need I invent, he fulfills.

"I was looking for you!" I claim, when I'm deeper on the third floor than I've ever been, forcing a smile even though his face is granite. "A few of the beams in the aviary are rotting. I was hoping to get your advice on what I could use to brace them."

He offers a curt nod and promises to take care of it.

Only days later, I'm glaring at new beams, the light timber only marred with the strikes of an axe. It's not that I was wrong about the need: the hawks land on them, spreading out farther. But the wood spans the turret like a taunt, as if Karns knows I'm running out of far-fetched explanations for my presence in the castle.

I pace the aviary, considering my next move. My search for the stone is going nowhere. I need a better justification to spend time exploring inside, something consistent and convincing. Having an indoor job would help, but given how carefully Karns manages his domain, it could result in me being even more constrained.

I look up at the birds. "What else do you all need?"

Obsidian eyes stare back, offering no answers.

A hawk swoops in through a window high above and lands on a water trough, a roll of parchment tied neatly to its leg. It starts to drink.

My eyes fly wide.

I've observed the hawks circling the castle, alighting on windowsills to deliver their messages to Alaris. If I took over the delivery and carried the scrolls from the aviary to the lord, I could move about the castle freely. A messenger has a reason to knock on any door.

I clamber up the ladder. "Here, pretty birdy."

The hawk shifts nervously, tracking me as I approach, but it doesn't fly away.

"It's okay," I say, in a singsong voice. "Just come here."

I stretch out a hand, trying to coax it to me, but that only makes it hop back farther. I lean as far as the ladder will let me, before I give up and

retreat to the aviary floor.

I climb back up with the mucky broom in hand, hoping to nudge the hawk down.

The bird screeches angrily, its sharp call echoing, before it takes off in a flurry of feathers. It flies out the window, the message still tied securely to its leg.

I'm not giving up so easily.

I march to the kitchen, the only room outside my chambers I can visit without Karns questioning my presence. The smell of freshly baked bread lingers in the air, and the clatter of pots and pans echoes as the staff cleans up lunch. I beeline to the corner, where an innocuous box awaits.

I noticed these my first week. Even in my father's marble halls, rats dart and sneak and chew. Which tells me they are always about, in any household—if the sun emperor himself can't get rid of them, no one can. The only question is whether they are being managed, and this box is a sure sign of management.

I crouch by the wooden trap and lift the wire latch with careful fingers. The lid creaks open, and the smell hits me first—dank and stale. I reach inside, the leather of my gloves no longer thick enough as I wrap my fingers around a rat's limp body. I hold my breath and pull it loose.

It's still warm.

I hold my arm straight out and walk stiffly out of the kitchen, ignoring a few stares as I return to the aviary.

I keep the prize behind my back and scan the hawks perched in the rafters.

When I spy one with a scroll on its leg, I reveal my offering. I wag the rat's fat body.

"Hey you. Yes you. Come now, if you want a treat."

Many hawks squeal and snap their beaks, but I tuck it close to my body, pointing to the hawk I want.

"Only you," I say, as if they can understand me. I realize I might lose a finger or be flayed in a flurry of beaks and talons, but I steel myself. "This is for you. If you want it."

My target turns its head to one side, then the other, then hops down to the lowest set of beams.

"Arawwwk!" it calls, ruffling its feathers.

"Yes you, pretty bird," I croon. "Come closer and I'll give you this."

Miraculously, the rest of the flock just clicks and shrieks, without descending.

A marriage on paper. A kiss that felt a little too real.

For nights when you want the feelings to sneak up on you, try Lokepub.

It swoops lower, alighting on the edge of the water basin. Its talons curve around the rim, each a sickle-shaped blade. The sharp tips scrape against the stone, making my skin prickle. Those hooked curves were made to sink into flesh. Its black eyes watch me, unblinking.

I swallow. This is nothing. Nothing compared to knives and swords and evil human intentions.

I crouch, holding the rodent out with a gloved hand. The hawk's focus sharpens, its beak snapping toward the prize. It launches itself at the rat, talons sinking in. I don't let go even as it tugs, leaving score marks in the fur.

I wait until it tears in with its beak, then shimmy my other hand out of the thick leather glove and reach for its leg. I think it's distracted, but if it turns on me now…

But it stays focused on its meal. I quickly undo the string and free the scroll. I drop the rat, backing away with a nervous squeal.

"You're a pretty one, aren't you?" I murmur. "Your true sovereign is the one who feeds you, isn't it?"

I almost open the scroll, before remembering the contents aren't my interest. This tiny paper is a ticket, a pass.

I shed the gloves that touched the rat, brush myself off, and stride to the castle with purpose. I want to run and search, but the next step is to establish my role delivering messages.

I stop the first footman I see. "Message for the lord. Do you know where I can find him?"

He notes the scroll in my hand and points. "Down in the wine cellar, miss."

I nod like it's an answer I'm warranted and continue that way.

The wine cellar isn't far from the kitchens—I've seen servants going in and out, fetching bottles. As soon as I open the arched wooden door, a chill wafts up from the depths. Racks of wine line the stairs. Probably the less valuable stock, meant to be accessed quickly for dinners on any given night.

The farther I descend, the colder the air gets, labels fading under layers of dust. I reach the bottom and spy Alaris kneeling with his back to me, the sleeves of his shirt pushed past his elbows. His long torso twists as he moves crates, searching the lowest rack.

"Looking for a wine, Ly?" he asks, without turning. He lifts a bottle. "I only ask that if you sneak one of these, you save it for a special occasion."

Maybe I wasn't as quiet as I thought. "I'm not here for the wine. I'm looking for you, actually."

"And here I thought I'd have to track you down first. I hear you've been keeping busy since we've been apart."

I stiffen. So Karns has reported on my exploration. No use denying it. "Is there a problem with that?"

"If I had a problem with it, I wouldn't have waited for you to find me in the wine cellar. I want you to be comfortable here. Apologies for not checking in since I've been back."

"No need to bother, my lord."

"Alaris. And it's not a bother. I'll have you know my trips to the aviary are the highlight of my schedule."

Does he ever turn the charm off? Something about it feels sour, after seeing him return with a lady on his arm.

"Then your schedule must be very empty. And yet here I am to save you more time." I hold out the scroll, a little wrinkled from my nervous grip. "There's a message for you."

His attention drops to it. He settles to face me, resting a forearm on his folded leg. "My hawks usually handle the message deliveries."

I gesture around the room. "They couldn't very well reach you in the wine cellar."

"Told you that, did they?"

"You aren't near a window. It seemed more efficient to come find you myself."

"The birds come inside if it's urgent."

I didn't know that—I have only seen them circling the castle and alighting on windowsills. I pivot. "And I'm sure the maids don't appreciate the cleanup. I've mucked the aviary floor enough times to know they cause a mess."

"It's better than cleaning up blood from severed fingers," he says, eyes roaming my intact hands, and lingering on the one still holding the message aloft. "Which is what usually happens if someone tries to take a scroll before they reach me."

"Then I guess I'm more likeable than the company they're used to." *Like their lord.* I waggle the fingers of my free hand. "Not a scratch."

Alaris's eyes flash, his lips curling, like he heard the insult I didn't voice. He brushes dust off his silk shirt and puts out his palm. "Alright then."

I stride forward, note held out, victorious. Him accepting this message is implicit agreement for me to hand deliver more.

He stands as he reaches for the note. I'm forced to look up to meet his gaze, our chests only a foot apart. His fingers brush mine on the scroll, and I let go too fast, the memory of being this close to him in the dark surfacing before I can stop it. I hope the dim light is enough to hide the flush I'm sure is on my cheeks. I release the paper and force myself to step back.

His eyes dart between mine, perhaps trying to suss out my reaction.

He tucks the note into his pocket, bends down, and picks up two bottles.

He holds one out to me. "Here, take this. As a gift."

I don't reach for it.

He dangles it. "I won't ask you to try it in front of me. You wouldn't tell me what you thought of the vintage anyway, but I think you'll enjoy it." His eyes glint. "This will be your proof that wine really does age better in the bottle."

"You know that spill was an accident," I grumble. I accept the dusty gift with both hands and turn it over. I've seen bottles with green, purple, and gold labels like this—they only come out for honored guests on high holidays. "I thought you said this was only for celebrations."

"You've apparently won over your sharp-beaked charges." His low voice hums. "That is an accomplishment worth celebrating."

I tuck the bottle close to my chest, and gesture at his own. "And what are you celebrating?"

"Ah. I have a guest."

The phrase is innocuous, but something in his halted delivery is not. I stiffen as I realize what he means: a woman. Another visitor here to share his bed.

"It must be someone special," I say, stepping back farther. "Then I won't keep you. Thank you for the wine."

His mouth opens like he is going to say something else, but I don't want to hear it. I curtsy, smooth and practiced, and rush up the cellar stairs.

I go straight to my room, not eager to be seen in the hallway with such an expensive wine. I set it on my table and eye it. It's a finer vintage than I was ever allowed to sample at the palace, and I should celebrate. I'm a messenger now, with an excuse to wander the castle.

But for some reason, I don't feel like toasting my success.

I climb into bed without dinner, hoping sleep will come quickly, and blur the thoughts I don't want to explore. In some other room, Alaris and a woman are probably clinking glasses. Maybe they are laughing across a candlelit table. Or maybe, they have already moved on to other things…

And I should not care about that at all. All I want from Alaris is that stone. What he does with his evening doesn't matter to me. I only feel sour because our brief encounter was my sole experience. His hands and his face are now the only shape my desire has taken. That was the first time I felt that kind of want. Of course it lingers. Of course I'm jealous of someone else who gets to indulge in it.

There is no doubt he's skilled. I bet all women feel this way with him.

It will pass in time, with new experiences. But I won't get the chance to have them if I don't stay focused and survive.

17

I slip into a new routine. Each morning after breakfast, I check the traps in the storerooms and outside the exterior doors. I have to turn my head and hold my breath every time I pull a rat free, but my need outweighs my disgust.

As soon as I recover a body, I make my way to the aviary.

The hawks quickly come to expect my offerings. They rustle on their perches, gleaming eyes tracking me as soon as I enter. At first, they flap and squawk, hopping nearer cautiously. But it's only a matter of days until each one with a message swoops down wanting a prize, extending a leg without complaint.

Until finally, even when I have no rats, they come to me at all hours. Some even lean into my hands, seeking pets in exchange for their deliveries.

"You prefer me to your lecherous lord, don't you?" I murmur, running my fingers over glossy feathers. If only taming their lord were this easy, I would have the stone already.

With every message, I'm granted a new pass to explore the castle. I wander the halls, pretending I'm simply seeking Alaris as I peek through cracked doors and test handles. No one questions me as I go down this corridor and that. When I pass Karns, I simply hold up my scroll, keeping my expression blank and dutiful. He doesn't need to know I take the long way to wherever I believe Alaris to be.

With every new room, I throw myself into the search, blood thrumming with the hope that today might be the day I open the right box or peek behind the right picture and find what I'm looking for. I press panels, tap walls, check inside vases, and dive under desks. I find dust, cobwebs, and a dead mouse.

The castle gradually reveals its secrets—a loose brick in the den hides a silver key. A window seat in the gallery lifts on a hinge, the boxes beneath it full of old letters. The back of a closet slides aside on a track, exposing a crawlspace.

None of them hold the stone, but a thrill goes through me with every discovery. Each secret I uncover hints at another waiting to be found.

Alaris tries to engage me when I find him, but I keep our interactions as short as possible. I put on my best mask of deference, hand him his message, and curtsy my goodbye in the same breath. I don't need distractions. I don't need buzzing feelings or magnetic pulls or expensive gifts. I need to find the stone and leave.

But the quicker I am with the handoff, the more he seems to try to keep me.

"What do you think of this piece?" he asks when I find him in the gallery. It portrays a dark landscape, with bright stars over endless treetops. "Too on the nose for the land of night?"

"I don't have much of an eye for art, my lord." I curtsy. "If you'll excuse me."

"Would you like to have some dinner, Ly?" he asks, as I pass him a scroll in the dining room.

I note the glass beside him with a lipstick print. I passed its wearer in the hallway, her flushed cheeks and mussed hair a clear sign of their pre-dinner activities.

"Not hungry, my lord." I spin on my heel before he can get another word out.

"The woman he got the wine for can't be that special if he receives this many visitors," I mutter to a hawk perched beside me on the bench. It hasn't brought a message, only company, which I find I'm coming to rely on. "He'd better slow down on the lovers, or he's bound to catch something unpleasant, don't you think?"

I imagine the hawk agrees, but its half-closed eyes probably have more to do with the finger I have working under its chin.

“I don’t need the company of the likes of him, not when I have you,” I croon.

The bird squawks at me, pulling away for a second, but then shoves its head into my palm, closing its eyes. From its soft whistle, I can tell we both feel soothed by the scratches.

Having something I can do is a powerful antidote to the fear. By daylight, I’m able to comfort myself that it will take time for anyone to find me here. Even the most skilled hunter on the continent would have trouble following the impossible trail the voidstone created for me. It’s enough to make me believe I might be safe staying put for weeks, or even months.

But every night, rational thoughts about how the masked man would ever know I’m here melt into the shadows. I’m confronted with nothing but silence and the absolute certainty that he will find me.

At least the violent dreams have stopped. Whatever proximity to delvarian power caused them seems to have dissolved with distance. It’s a blessing that matters little because I don’t sleep much anyway.

I lie awake replaying the shape of him: the featureless mask, the gloves, the hood hiding his brow. I try to picture his eyes, but the dreams were too dark to make out the shape or color. The phantom sensations of his attacks jolt through my body. I clutch my knife and watch the door for hours, sometimes only falling asleep when the light grays.

The purple smudges beneath my eyes grow. I use the coiling tension to throw myself into every search, turning fear into fuel. I dash around each room with quick fingers, diving under desks and beds and lifting urns.

I scour the ballroom, the dining room, the parlor. The den, the library, and the receiving room. I don’t try the servants’ quarters, but I know he’s unlikely to keep something precious where others sleep. He’s more likely to keep it close to him. And that leaves his bedroom and his office.

He’s in and out of his office throughout the day, so while I’ve been inside many times, I’ve never had the privacy to search it. After a failed examination of a linen closet and a statue of Arastor in a hidden alcove, a maid points me to the office to deliver today’s message. I climb to the third floor and knock on the ornately carved door.

I let myself in. Late afternoon sun slants across the room, painting streaks on the patterned rug. Alaris is seated behind the desk, his fingers tangled in front of his mouth. He lifts his head when I enter, and his lips curve into a smile.

My stomach flips.

I should have looked away sooner.

"My lord," I say, voice clipped. I walk forward and place the message in his waiting palm. I curtsy and turn to go.

"Wait. Stay a moment."

I arrange my face into a mask of calm as I swivel back toward him. "Yes, my lord?"

He drums his rings on the desk, the dark metal clicking against the wood. "I'm noticing a pattern."

"A pattern?"

"I see you almost every day. Yet, I think you've stayed in my presence for less than five minutes total in the past week."

I shift. "Is there a question?"

"I think you're avoiding me."

I am. "That's not a question either. But I'm not, my lord."

"Alaris. You left the dining room before I even finished my sentence."

I scowl. "You had company. I didn't want to interrupt."

"Yet, you look like you want to flee at this very moment."

"Just because you're used to women clamoring for your attention doesn't mean—" I cut myself off. "I'm just busy."

He smiles. "Something you'd like to get off your chest, Ly?"

I don't know why he's smiling like that when every other lord I've ever known wouldn't tolerate back talk. I'm tired, and I'm letting myself slip. I school my expression. "No, my lord."

"Alaris."

"No, Alaris."

"Such a liar. But even if it's not me, I still think there is something wrong."

I blink. "Wrong?"

"You've been here for weeks now. I would expect you to become more comfortable, not less. Yet, you look like you are going to jump out of your skin. Something is bothering you."

I grit my teeth. "Everything is fine."

He shakes his head slowly, his earring swinging. He skates a finger along his jaw. "Lies, Ly. Lying to me about whether you like a piece of fruit is one thing." The teasing goes out of his tone. "Hiding something serious is another matter entirely."

His eyes rove over me, like my body will answer his questions even if my mouth won't. And I don't feel totally in control of what it will show him. I have never felt so unable to hide my thoughts. My stomach slants sideways, my heart pounding with something like fear.

I pull myself up straighter, trying to bury whatever it is he thinks he's rooting out. "I appreciate your concern, but there is no need for it," I say in as polite a tone as I can manage. "Aren't you going to open your message?"

"Hmm." I think he's going to object further, but his long fingers unroll the tiny paper. He glances at whatever is written there, then touches the side of his desk. A panel pops open. He drops the note inside and closes it, the seam invisible, perfectly matching the wood grain.

A secret compartment. "Was the message something important?"

"No. Just territorial updates."

Now his face looks suspiciously blank. Perhaps I'm not the only one who is hiding things.

I dig. "Where do you put your important messages?"

His brow arches.

I keep my tone light. "If I need to deliver something urgent, and I can't find you, where should I put it?"

He hums, rubbing his mouth. "If it seems important? Don't leave it anywhere. Keep it with you."

It's not a useful answer, but I nod. "Alright."

He tilts his head, watching me for another moment. "Ly, I'm going to ask you one more time. Is there something bothering you?"

A frown cracks through my mask.

"See? That." He points at the corner of my lip. "Just tell me. I'll help if I can."

I hesitate. If I start babbling about my dreams in Delvos, I'll only lose that focused look in his eyes. But…could I ask him for help? Could I come up with a better story, fill in the gaps that don't make sense, and convince him someone is coming to kill me? He helped me escape Norville. Maybe he would help me again…

A knock rings out. "My lord?" a feminine voice calls. "I'm here for our appointment."

The door cracks open, revealing a beautiful face. The woman enters, her eyes flicking over me only briefly, before fixing on Alaris. Her bronze dress

complements her olive skin, and the tight fit cinches her curves into striking proportions.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," she purrs. "But I'm afraid this can't wait."

"Lady Haleen." He stands, rolling back his powerful shoulders, returning her lilting tone. "I would never make you wait. I'm all yours."

I suppress a scoff. "If you'll excuse me."

"This conversation isn't over, Ly," he says in a low voice I doubt she hears. His serious expression disappears as he smiles magnanimously at the woman behind me. He swoops around the desk and extends an arm, which the lady accepts.

"Dinner first?" he asks. "Or straight to…?"

"Dinner can wait," she says. "I have something else on my mind that simply can't."

I can't stop my eye roll. Luckily, they are absorbed in their romantic mutterings, not noticing me as I trail after them to the office door.

"Hold any further messages for tomorrow," he calls over his shoulder.

"Of course," I say through clenched teeth.

I wait in the office doorway as they walk down the hallway that leads toward Alaris's bedroom.

I wish I could pretend that this bitter taste on my tongue didn't have the flavor of hypocrisy. How can I judge a lady who is here seeking the same thing I did on Somnus? I pursued him when he was a stranger, arguably a more dangerous and wanton act. She's here for a planned appointment with her lover.

Yet my thoughts are all bitter anyway. Isn't it empty, this parade of women? Aren't his words of adoration hollow, when they are whispered to one after the next after the next?

I shake my head. I'm distracted. This interlude is a gift. I can almost never be sure that this office is empty. I wait one minute, then two. When it's clear that the lord and Lady Haleen aren't returning, I slip back inside to search.

I move quickly, my heart drumming as I approach the desk. Even though I know the compartment is there, I can't be sure which groove marks the seam. I run my fingers over the spot I saw him touch. A brass nail presses in, and sure enough, the compartment pops open.

Inside, there are papers, wax for sealing, and ink. These notes may contain secrets, but there is no stone.

Just tell me. I'll help if I can.

I pause as his words float back to me. Searching his office feels like a greater violation than searching public spaces.

And he just offered his help again.

But he can't fix this, and there is no story I could spin that would end with him handing over a powerful family heirloom. This self-indulgent lord uses the stone to visit markets. I need it to survive.

I don't have the luxury of guilt.

I move on. The rest of the desk is full of the usual supplies and ledgers. Another hidden panel slides open along the side, revealing jeweled bottles of what I can only assume is liquor. I check the precious stones, then close the panel.

I run my hands over the bookshelves, the lighting fixtures, and the walls. I haven't searched every inch, but I need to accept this as a first pass and leave before someone discovers me. I listen for squeaky floorboards as I take a circuitous route out of the office. The hallway outside is empty, but I still hold my breath as I snick the door shut.

The lord's bedroom is just around the bend. My gaze sticks that direction. An image of a bronze dress pooled on the floor flashes through my mind, his muscled body bent over hers, her open mouth moaning her pleasure. My skin heats. She's experiencing his touch now, his focus and hunger. It wasn't so long ago that I had the same. I purse my lips and force my legs to move, shaking off the image.

I can't deny my attraction, but I can't work for him, steal from him, and have him. Two of three are essential, and one is just a passing impulse from Somnus that I wish would fade faster.

By the time I step outside, the sun is already sinking below the walls, casting long shadows across the grounds. My visit to Alaris's office took more time than I expected. I break into a brisk walk toward the aviary. I left the bar up, assuming I'd be back before dark.

My heart clenches when I see the aviary door cracked open. Did I leave it that way?

A soft thump comes from within. It's not the flutter of wings or the scrape of talons. My stomach twists. Don't tell me a fox got in because I didn't latch it…

I dart inside and stop short. A chill prickles across my skin. A figure stands in the darkness, barely lit by the twilight.

My mind tumbles over itself, my pulse pounding. It's the masked man. He's stepped out of my nightmares, and he's here to kill me. I freeze to the spot.

But my eyes refuse to agree this is the murderer from my visions. Even though I've only seen him in dreams, my mental picture of him is clear. The silhouette before me is too short, too slight.

Someone is here, but it's not him. I reach for the shovel I leaned against the doorframe. My fingers curl tight around the rough handle. "Who's there?" My voice is low, conveying strength I don't feel.

"Ah!" a high voice yelps. The shadow jumps and whirls. "You scared me!"

The figure comes forward, laughing, and I piece together the uniform and curly hair before I firmly place the face—it's Drina, one of the maids. I know she has aqua eyes and freckles, but all I can see in the dim light is the glint of her teeth.

Relief floods me, and I echo the laugh as I put aside the shovel. "What are you doing here?"

"Sorry, sorry!" She gestures up at the hawks. "I was expecting a letter that didn't arrive. I just thought I'd check."

The short-lived relief is replaced by a prickle of suspicion. No one gets messages but Alaris. Then again, I haven't been here that long. I suppose others might receive them occasionally.

"Sure," I say cautiously. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"I thought I saw it but…I lost sight of it."

"I'll help you get whatever you want tomorrow."

"I'll wait then." Her smile broadens, and she heads for the door. "It's dark. I should get back."

I follow her out, only pausing to drop the wooden bar on the exterior. It isn't enough to keep people out, just animals. If she wasn't allowed access to the hawks, wouldn't there be a key? Her easy step and small smile convey confidence, not guilt.

I'm probably suspicious for nothing…or because I'm so busy sneaking around this castle with bad intentions, I'm assuming everyone else is.

"So, Lyra, where did you work before this castle?"

"I was a governess."

"Oh really? Where?"

She veers toward the front of the grounds, and I slow my steps. “My rooms are actually this way.”

“That’s right…your rooms aren’t with the rest of the servants, are they?”

“No.” I swallow down the urge to defend the arrangement I didn’t want in the first place. At least it gives me a reason to walk the opposite direction and avoid these questions.

“Then I guess we part here.” She gives me a little wave. “Let me know if that message comes for me, will ya?”

“Sure. I’ll see you around.”

I head toward the back entrance of the castle while she splits off to the front.

Something about the whole interaction felt off. I can’t tell if I’m unused to friendly conversations, or Drina was acting strange.

Was she really in the aviary after dark, looking for a letter? Maybe. But Alaris said the hawks took fingers if anyone else tried to get their scrolls besides him.

I’ve heard no broad announcement of a missing princess. But of course, my father must be employing every resource to find me. I am his daughter, his blood, his property. I don’t get to disappear.

I’ve been too complacent, letting myself settle into a routine when I know nothing about what lies beyond these walls. I need a way out, a route like the river, something I can rely on if I have to leave without warning. Voidstone or no voidstone, I need to be ready to run.

18

I pack a light bag with some lunch, water, and my one dull knife. I pull my rough cloak over my shoulders and head for the front gate.

The gate looms tall, huge and banded in black iron. Stone towers rise on either side, though I can't tell if anyone is watching. At home, I couldn't cross a courtyard without passing four guards, but here, I walk straight to the wicket door without meeting any security. I lift the crossbar, swing it open, and step into the world outside.

The lord likes his privacy, indeed.

Beyond the gate, a single road stretches into a forest of dark pines. I've never seen so many trees, scenting the air with resin. The cold bites deeper out here than inside the walls, and the shadowed depths touch something primal in my chest. I am far from the center of this world, on the edges, where the wilderness can swallow me.

This is exactly why I need to get my bearings. There has to be a town or crossroads somewhere ahead, and it would be better to have an exit in mind than to try to find one in the moment of panic. I tighten my hold on my pack and start walking.

I pass no one. After an hour, I've still encountered no signposts, no clearings. If anything, it feels more wild. The road narrows to the width of a carriage, the forest closing in.

I pause at the side of the road and let my pack drop to the ground. I've gotten stronger. I would have been nursing blistered feet and shaking legs if I'd tried to hike this far the day I left the palace. But my upper back burns, a

gnawing ache threading down my spine. These days, it's always there. I can't get my body to relax.

Encountering Drina last night only made it worse.

The forest rustles around me. I roll my shoulders, and push on the knot at the base of my neck, trying to rub the tension away. My thick cloak makes it harder to get the pressure I need. My jaw pulses, my teeth clamped so tight my molars ache. I force them apart, but that's the most I can do. I can't soften it.

A voice cuts through the quiet. "Didn't we have an agreement, you and I?"

I whirl, heart knocking painfully against my sternum. Alaris sits astride a midnight horse, silhouetted against the cloudy sky. When did he get here? I should have heard the hooves approaching.

"I thought I was alone," I stammer.

He tilts his head. "Do you only keep promises when there are no witnesses?"

"What promise?"

"I promised you I wouldn't give you a reason to run. And you promised me you wouldn't disappear."

Oh, right. That. His dark eyes are fixed on me, steady and searching. There is no hint of the smile I'm used to seeing on his lips. Is he angry? "I didn't disappear," I say slowly.

One dark brow lifts. "Oh?"

I search my mind for an excuse. "A hawk with an injured wing flew this way." I flap my hand weakly, a pitiful imitation of a wounded bird.

"Would any human be able to say where you had gone?"

"It would be clear I hadn't disappeared when I returned in a few hours." Something about that eyebrow makes it hard to control my temper. The number of times I've been blameless and bowed my head to criticism is countless, yet here I am, rising to defend myself, when I know he's right. "And who was I to tell? It's not my fault you don't even have guards at your gates."

"You think my security is lax?"

"If you mean to keep track of who is leaving, yes, it is."

"Others know better than to go out wandering off the grounds on foot."

"The hawk—"

“The hawk will be fine.” His deep voice is clipped, his tone definitive. “Out here, you might not be.”

I look back and forth, down the empty stretch of road. “I wasn’t going to get lost.”

He crosses his arms, leaning forward on the pommel. “What kind of hawk keeper spends so much time indoors that she would think the only thing that could happen to her in the woods is losing her way?”

“A hawk keeper who was very recently a governess.” I blush. “What should I worry about then?” I gesture at the forest. “Highwaymen? Thieves? If you have criminals waiting minutes from your castle, perhaps you’re the one spending a little too much time on indoor activities.”

Now he smirks. “You do seem to have a lot to say about my indoor activities.”

His emphasis on the last words makes it clear what type of activities those might be.

I scowl. “And you seem far too concerned with my activities in general.”

His horse shifts its weight restlessly. “I don’t want to see the newest member of my staff, who is also new to the shadoward reaches, dead.”

“Then what is the danger you allow to stalk your lands? Bears? Wolves? They might be better company.”

He swings down from his horse, the movement fluid and quick.

I recoil. I’ve gotten too comfortable arguing and went too far. I bow my head, tensing for the reprimand.

After a few moments of silence, I look up to see an outstretched hand.

“What?” I ask, startled.

His steady, fathomless eyes hold mine. “I can tell you aren’t the type to simply accept my words of warning. So I’ll show you instead.”

Curiosity pulls at me. Before I fully think through the wisdom of the action, I put my hand in his. His long, leather-clad fingers curve around mine.

He smiles. “Can’t say you were kidnapped this time.”

Why do I feel like I’m about to be kidnapped?

Suddenly I’m off my feet and in the saddle. Before I can get out a word of protest, he swings up behind me, and the horse takes off.

I’m thrown back against Alaris. This is not an ordinary horse. Its gait is long and level, but covers three times the ground it should, the trees

blurring by. My legs squeeze as I try to get a grip on the slippery leather, but it's Alaris's arm and his body against my back that holds me in my seat.

The wind stings and makes my eyes water, so I turn away. The arm around my waist shifts and a large hand shields my face. Without sight, I can't brace for what's ahead, but I don't need to. I'm secure. I couldn't move if I wanted to. Which leaves me with nothing to focus on but every point of connection between us. With each hoofbeat, I feel his chest and hips moving against me. I glance down between his fingers; his knees and thighs engulf mine.

I wish I hadn't looked. Even when I close my eyes, the image is still there.

As quickly as the ride began, the horse slows to a stop. I can take a full breath for what feels like the first time in minutes. Alaris dismounts first, then grabs my waist and lifts me off like I weigh nothing. He sets me on my feet, the side of his mouth ticking up when my legs wobble.

"That is not a normal horse," I scowl.

"Fastest in all the land." He flashes a sly smile. "This way."

I take another moment beside the midnight steed, trying to calm my flush. The unsteadiness in my legs is from the speed, and the heat still humming through me is from the adrenaline. Nothing to do with being pressed against him, with the ghost of his hand still over my eyes.

"Stay close, hawk keeper," he calls over his shoulder.

I straighten up and stalk after him. If he is unaffected by sharing a horse, so am I.

I follow him off the trail and into the trees. Their canopy filters the light through deep, cool green needles. Branches snag at my cloak and brush my cheeks. The road disappears behind us. I'm about to ask how much farther when Alaris stops.

I step to one side of him and stare, trying to make sense of what's in front of me.

At the edge of our toes, the forest changes. All the rich colors and rustling needles give way to a brittle landscape the color of bone. The soil transitions from rich loam to light ash. The trees are a lifeless, cracking gray, as if a flameless fire scorched through and dried them to husks.

From this spot onward, there is only silence and death.

I struggle to find my voice as realization dawns. "This is the wither, isn't it?"

The deadly magic of the thanovarians, divinials of death and decay.

"You've heard of it?"

"I've heard it sometimes threatens border settlements."

After the Incarnial Wars, Emperor Illio couldn't kill the thanovarians, so he forced them to the freezing barrens, where only undying things would survive. My father has kept them beyond the borders ever since, with only minor incidents.

This doesn't look like a minor incident.

"It doesn't just impact the borders." Beside me, Alaris surveys the lifeless expanse, his expression unreadable. "These patches appear at random. Anyone caught in them dies."

I swallow, my gaze fixed on the landscape. "Do you lose people to it?"

"More and more every year." He nods grimly. "Beyond a certain point, all the land is like this."

We are squarely in Arastos. There should not be any lords of death working magic here. "Someone should tell the emperor."

His eyes flick to me. "You think he doesn't know?"

I open my mouth. Close it. The emperor isn't one to let even the far reaches of his empire go unmonitored. Of course he must know.

Was this just another way of showing the shadoward provinces they were less than? Was this another punishment for the lack of loyalty of their forebears?

Or is it possible that even the half-divine emperor is afraid to come here and face the thanovarians who killed his incarnial father?

When I finally return my attention to Alaris, I find his eyes are on me. Before I can summon an excuse for my long silence, he exhales and returns his gaze to the destruction.

"I brought you here to make one thing clear," he says, voice steady. "It's not safe to wander outside the walls. If you want to leave, I'll help you, but you must go a safe route. And you must go flameward."

I swallow and nod. I stand in silence a few more moments, before Alaris beckons me to the road.

I stay quiet on the ride back, barely registering the contact between us.

The wither isn't something people speak of in the capital. It is a shadow lurking at the edges of the world, beyond the concerns of those who live in the light of the flame. While I have no doubt my father knows how bold the lords of death have become, I wonder what the soft people of the capital,

living in their eternal summer, would think if they knew they were active to this level. Would they demand action from their emperor, or would they return their attention to brighter things?

Alaris doesn't leave me where he found me. Instead, we slow to a stop in sight of the castle gates, crossing the distance it took me hours to walk in a fraction of the time.

I'm back where I started. I didn't figure out a way to flee the castle. I only learned how dangerous being this far shadoward is. Which means another sleepless night, wondering how long I'll be safe here.

He dismounts first, then helps me down, and hands me my bag. I sling it on and wince, the knots pulsing a reminder that they are still there. The wither distracted me from it, briefly, but the ache is now hot, radiating up my neck and down between my shoulder blades.

I glance up to find Alaris watching me.

"Are you injured?" he asks, his gaze searching mine.

"No, I'm fine," I answer quickly. "Just stiff from the ride."

His attention doesn't waver, his eyes roving over my body. "A ride that short shouldn't cause you pain."

I shrug, which proves to be a mistake, as the burning in my neck flares at the base of my skull. *Ugh*. This is going to turn into a throbbing headache by tonight. "Excuse me."

I move to step around him, but he places a hand at the juncture between my neck and my shoulders. He presses ever so slightly, and I can't help but grit my teeth. He takes my pack off me and whirls me around, examining my back with careful fingers.

Even his gentle prodding makes my breath catch. I can hear the surprise in his voice. "Have you been rebuilding the aviary every night, brick by brick?"

His fingers find the worst spot on my shoulder and press. Agony pulses through me, sharp enough to make me gasp. But as he holds, the tightness that's been coiled there for days starts to give. The relief is so acute it's just as overwhelming as the pain.

I make a soft sound, then catch myself.

"Stop, stop," I gasp, stumbling away from him.

He lets go easily. "Too much?"

I shake my head. "This isn't necessary."

“Such a liar, Ly. You’re in pain. You’ve been holding your shoulders at your ears for weeks.”

I can only imagine he’s experienced at massages because they warm up to other things. A blush creeps up my neck. “It’s not appropriate.”

Understanding dawns in his eyes. “It’s not sexual.” His hands drop to his sides. “I spent a long time caring for someone who couldn’t leave their bed. I studied anatomy to help ease their suffering.”

The words don’t carry any of his usual wicked humor. His expression is almost…sad.

I want to ask what happened to them, but I hold my tongue. “I see.”

“If I thought the healers could do any better, I would send you there,” he says, his hands reaching toward me slowly. “It seemed like pressure helped. Will you let me help?”

My shoulders are screaming. Even one brief touch promised the relief my body is desperate for. “Fine, but…” I glance up at the guard tower. I don’t know if it’s occupied, but I don’t want anyone watching this.

He follows my eyes. “Ah.” He gestures toward the tree line. “If an audience is your concern, I can fix that too.”

I follow him off the path. He puts his back against a large tree and gestures me in front of him. I undo the tie of my cloak, heart pounding in my fingertips as I slide it off and let it fall to the ground. I step into position.

“No one can see us now,” he says. His hands rest gently on my shoulders, tingles radiating from his touch. “Now, may I?”

I’m already glad he can’t see my face. I take in a shuddering breath and nod.

His fingers find the tight muscles at the base of my neck, testing at first, then circling. The contact deepens from gentle to firm, coaxing rather than demanding. Each fingertip works into the heat beneath my skin, drawing out the soreness until it softens into something looser, lighter. My breath stutters, and I clench my jaw to keep from making sounds.

His thumbs knead along the curve of my shoulders, unraveling the knots gathered there. His fingers trail down my spine, seeking out every tense point with unhurried patience. A soft “Ha!” escapes me as they sink into the small of my back, finding tight spots I didn’t even know were there.

“That’s it,” he murmurs, his deep voice humming in my ear. “Breathe.”

He works his way back up. This time the pressure on my shoulders is relentless, the intensity so overwhelming, I stumble. I lean against his chest

for balance, but I'm too entranced to care. I close my eyes, and my awareness of the forest dims. His touch claims all my attention, the quiet heat of his breath stirring the fine hairs on the top of my head.

He puts one large palm on the back of my neck and squeezes, and I'm gone. My weight shifts, melting further into him. His body is steady, solid, anchoring me. As he grips where my skull meets my spine, I am nothing but sensation. It's like a hand has wrapped around my brain and held it still. My thoughts go silent for the first time in longer than I can remember.

His fingers loosen, and I almost beg him to continue, but I lose the words as he strokes my arms down to my wrists, leaving a trail of calming tingles, then lets go. My breathing is slow, my limbs heavy and boneless. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I know I should pull away and find my footing again. But swaying against him, I can't quite remember why.

His deep voice rouses me from my haze as he grunts. "Ly…"

Awareness returns to my body. I am writhing slowly against something hard. My eyes fly open. I should stop. But wicked heat sparks through me, and wicked thoughts come with it. I shift my weight and arch my back, like I'm just stretching out the last knot. One slow, deliberate press…

Yep. He was so composed after our ride, but I'm not the only one who feels something when we're close. I can't stop a satisfied smile from growing on my face.

I don't want to be the only one who's flustered. I want his composure to break. I want to see fire behind his eyes instead of steady calm. If I can just…

He stiffens. Then in a whirl, he flips us both around, so I'm facing the tree and he's behind me. He holds both my wrists in one hand above my head, cupping my cheek to guard it from the rough bark that scrapes my chest through my dress.

His voice is low and dangerous in my ear. "I need you to reconsider whatever you were about to do."

"I wasn't about to do anything," I breathe. I'm practically dangling by my wrists. I instinctively arch to see how far apart we are…

He slides the hand off my cheek and presses it into my lower back, keeping distance between us. "Ah, but you were. I can hear your mind coming up with evil ideas. And if you can't behave, you don't get to move."

"You have a vivid imagination." I test his grip on my wrists. "And based on what I just felt, you are the one with evil ideas."

“What you felt is irrelevant,” he says, though he doesn’t deny it. “I don’t sleep with staff. Ever.”

His mouth is close enough for me to feel his breath on my hair. Tingles spread from the spot.

Heat grows between my legs, making me wriggle without planning to. I was teasing him, but all the lazy warmth he built in me is turning into something else. And even if I don’t know exactly what could happen next, I am certain Alaris does. He knows what to do about this fire. With just as much care and attention. And those fingers…

I curve my back against his restraining hand. I peek at him over my shoulder. “Then why are you holding me against a tree?”

He inhales and tenses.

Then suddenly he is gone. I grab the tree as I fall to flat feet. I was certain he was about to touch me, but he’s already on the road beside his horse. His hands are on the reins, his expression cool and composed.

A different type of heat burns through me then—annoyance. I want to put him on the back foot for once. I want to make it so he’s the one who’s flushed and struggling to find the words to say.

Still, the languid relief he gave my muscles hasn’t faded. I glare at him as best I can through hooded eyes, my bones rubbery.

His gaze flits over me, once. “If your muscles continue like that, pain could become a chronic problem. Return to your rooms now, and take a hot bath.”

My face burns. He returned to practical matters so quickly. “I’m not done with my duties for the day. The hawks—”

“I’ll manage the hawks for tonight. Just go back to your rooms and soak. No less than an hour. That is an order.”

He’s astride the midnight steed before I can object and gallops off toward the gates.

I take a few shaky breaths against the tree, caught between drowsiness, lust, and annoyance. There’s embarrassment too, but I force that down. He’s the one who brought our bodies so close in the first place. He’s the one who became aroused while I swayed against him innocently. And it was innocent…in the beginning, anyway.

I collect my cloak and my bag and trudge back to the castle. The short distance between the tree and the gate feels too far to bear. It’s a good thing

he's seeing to the hawks. I don't think I could make it to the aviary, and if I did, I'd sleep on the bench.

I might sink down and rest right here in the dirt. Only the promise of a warm bath and cozy bed keeps my feet shuffling forward.

I open the door to my room, and my eyes fly wide. A figure is kneeling beside my bed. A maid. She peers up, curly hair bouncing.

Drina.

She springs upright. "You're back!" She runs a hand over the edge of my bedspread, smoothing it. "Just checking if the linens need changing."

Adrenaline chases every trace of relaxation out of my body. Drina has never cleaned my room before. And if she's checking the linens, where is her basket of fresh ones? Why doesn't she have a cart outside?

It looks like she was searching beneath my mattress. I usually keep my knife there, but thankfully, I brought it with me outside the wall.

I do my best to keep my face still, although I can feel the tension creeping back into my shoulders. "I came back early to rest."

"Then I'll get out of your way." She curtsies and heads for the door, all smiles.

I can't even fake one back. I'm frozen as she walks past. She pauses in the doorway, close enough that a chill crawls up my spine. She reaches out toward me, and I flinch as she tugs on a lock of my hair.

"Something in your hair," she says with another smile. "Have a good rest, Lyra. See you later."

Uncomfortable prickles roll over me. I wait until her footsteps fade. Then I close the door, turn the lock, and attach the chain. I rush to the bed and stand on the mattress. I fish for the leather sack hidden in the canopy and feel the weight of my gold jewelry. It's still here. But that doesn't mean she didn't find it.

I slump onto the bed, each of the spots Alaris loosened reknotting as my breathing picks up. Maybe Drina is just a jealous maid, curious about why I seem to be favored with a larger room. Maybe she's looking for something to steal.

Or maybe, she doesn't believe I am who I say I am.

Regardless, if she found my jewels, she would *know* I'm not. No hawk keeper or governess would have that much gold.

If she's suspicious, and word spreads, it might reach the palace. I'm sure they are listening for whispers of where I've gone. And if they catch me,

they'll drag me home, to the one place I'm certain the masked man will come for me right away.

I need to find the voidstone, now.

Which means I have to search the room it's most likely to be hidden. The one room I've been avoiding: Alaris's bedroom.

19

I take a message from a sweet hawk, who melts into my open hand. Murmured words and affection are more than enough to get them to part with their scrolls these days. The castle is back to disposing of its own rats.

"I'll miss you, pretty bird," I croon to the raptor as it nuzzles the side of its beak in my palm.

I wait until mid-morning, when Alaris is almost always in his office with Dashol or Karns, receiving reports about the territory and household updates. I try not to think of his intense eyes on me or the significant improvement in my back as I move through the familiar halls. I clench my jaw as I enter his wing. Even though he infuriates me at times, he's done nothing but help me. And I'm planning to use that access and kindness to steal from him.

But he'll be fine either way. For me, this is a matter of survival.

I walk on light feet past his office, sneaking around the bend and down the corridor that ends in his bedroom. There is no one between me and the double doors ahead, but I hold the message in front of me, like at any moment someone might spring out and demand an explanation for my presence here.

Like every handle I've tried in this castle, the heavy doors aren't locked. I creak one open, revealing an expansive room with an extra-large bed at its center. I step inside and shut the door slowly behind me, sealing myself in with the scent of him: brambles and cloves.

The room is opulent and cluttered, all rich fabrics and deep colors. Gold leaf stars scatter across the ceiling, fine lines connecting them into constellations. Crystals hang from thin chains by the window, throwing light around the room. Candlesticks crowd the hearth, wax pooled at their bases in old layers. Paintings and carvings fill the walls, and a thick rug covers the floor.

I shouldn't be surprised. This is the room of a lord who seems to love his silks and has the power to go anywhere. I assume he's collected these objects from around the continent.

It's beautiful, but searching it could take forever.

I have to move fast.

I start with the desk, sliding around the books and papers. I open every drawer. Nothing. The mantle is crowded with objects: a glass orb, a carved wooden box, a crystal bottle containing sapphire liquid. I skim the spines of books on the shelf, tilting a few, listening for the telltale click of a release mechanism.

Still nothing.

Then to the closet. I flip through soft leather and velvet, and silks so smooth they slip through my fingers. I feel along the walls behind them, pressing at the wood panels. My nails catch on the faintest ridge, but it's only a trick of the grain. The large mirror at the back is attached firmly to the stone. I avoid eye contact with myself in it, not interested in any moment of self-reflection about what I'm doing. I let out a slow breath and move on.

I can't be certain I've searched the closet thoroughly, but I hurry to the bed. It's the most obvious hiding place, and yet, often a favorite. The frame is carved into a scene devoted to the god of night, with trees and mountains on the footboard dwarfed by an elaborate cosmos on the headboard, dotted with comets, planets, and constellations. Several of the gods are in the sky, although it's harder to recognize them without their signature coloring. The craftsmanship is breathtaking, each figure rendered in spectacular detail.

I wiggle the carved posts, just in case one twists off like Rinalda's. I'm enveloped in the scent of cloves as I climb onto the bed, sliding my knees through the silky sheets to check the headboard. One of the carved stars is slightly more raised than the others. Upon closer inspection, it appears to be made up of separate pieces, inlaid so perfectly the lines are barely visible. I press and twist the star, but nothing happens. After a few more seconds of

trying, I give up. If I have time after I search the rest of the room, I'll return to it.

Next, I check the bedside tables. I'm not even sure what I do as I run my hand over the back of one, but a velvet lined drawer pops out. A large pear diamond sparkles within, set in silver. I reach out to touch it but remember myself and close my fist. It's easier to leave it be than to return it to exactly how it was. I slide the compartment closed.

This proves I was right. He keeps precious things close to him, in this room.

Which means I need to keep moving.

I knock on panel after panel, trying to quiet my own heartbeat enough to listen for an echo. The tenth one I try sounds different. I pull away and examine it carefully, noting one small knot in the wood. Rinalda had a section of her jewelry box she could only unlatch with a hairpin. I run to the desk and take a pen, pressing its point into the dark center.

It clicks.

The panel swings outward, revealing a compartment cluttered with documents.

Yes.

I rifle through the papers. I peek inside a large scroll to check if something is hidden in the center. It's a map of the provinces, nothing more than ink and paper. I reach to the back of the compartment, feeling for the pointed stone…

I still. Footsteps.

I jerk my arm back, heart pounding.

A voice, deep and familiar, murmurs from the hallway. I click the compartment closed and scurry to the bed, diving underneath just as the door opens. I stare, wide-eyed, at the two pairs of shoes at the entrance. One set is unmistakably the lord's, while the other is a woman's satin heels, only appearing briefly beneath a rustle of yellow skirts.

Her position between his legs makes it clear what sort of visit this is. I squeeze my eyes shut tight.

Shit, shit, shit.

She moans, then giggles.

"What will the servants think?" he chuckles, voice low, her laughter chasing his as they stumble into the room.

“That you are every bit as debauched as the rumors say,” she singsongs back. “And that I can’t wait to enjoy a taste.”

They shuffle into the room, and the wooden door slams closed. I flatten myself against the floor, pressing my hand over my mouth to quiet my breath. The heeled shoes clack closer and closer, and the bed creaks as the woman sits on it, kicking her dangling feet.

They are going to climb onto this bed and do things to each other right above me. Best case scenario, I’m a miserable witness to the whole thing, undiscovered. My mind goes straight back to the powder room on Somnus. I squeeze my knees together, not ready to hear those kinds of sounds.

“The parties in Torren are dull as ever,” the woman says, her voice melodic. “But Lord Grattle is as big a talker as ever too.” She pauses. I hold my breath through the gap. “Are you waiting for me to take the lead? I know these bedsheets aren’t going to tangle themselves.”

“I’m so sorry, Rialla,” Alaris says, his tone light, but clipped. “I know you traveled far. But I’m going to have to cut our visit short. I have something urgent I need to attend to.”

Her feet and skirts still. “That’s not like you. Are you sure you don’t just have an urgent need of me?”

His boots stay fixed across the room. “Of course I do. But another matter just came up.”

The bed creaks as the lady stands. “But I traveled so far, just for you.”

“And I don’t want you to go far. As soon as this is resolved, I want you back here.” He opens the door. “The kitchen is preparing a fine meal. You enjoy, and I’ll join you after.”

The door shuts. Then, silence.

I relax slightly, returning my attention to the slats above me. As soon as I’ve given them enough time to clear the hallway, I’m going to check inside that big compartment one more time. Then I’m out of here.

This was too close a call. I’m not coming back to this room unless I’m sure Alaris is out of the castle entirely. I listen, straining my ears, seeking the tiniest hint he might return after walking the lady out.

Something grabs my ankle.

I don’t have a moment to scream before I’m dragged out of my hiding place, blinking against the light from the window. I take in that handsome, smirking face, the crystal dangling at his jaw. Somehow, impossibly, Alaris got to the other side of the bed and is now staring down at me.

“I thought you left,” I say pathetically.

Amusement flickers in his dark gaze. “That’s all you have to say for yourself?”

“No.” I push myself up onto my elbows, scrambling to grab the scroll out of my pocket. “I have a message.”

He snorts and yanks my ankle, sliding me closer. I yelp as I fall back. He’s crouched between my knees now, my skirts bunched around his legs. He takes the paper from my hand, and his onyx hair falls into his eyes as he bends over me.

“How convincing. Try again. I’m usually in my office at this hour, as you well know. What are you up to?”

My mind scrambles for a way out, a convincing story. But on the ground, lying beneath him is…distracting.

The situation sparks a new idea.

“Fine. You’re right. I had a different reason.”

“I’m waiting.”

I keep eye contact and put my chin up, even though my heart is hammering. “I’m here to seduce you.”

He stills, but his surprise passes quickly. “No, you’re not.”

“I am. You accused me of evil thoughts yesterday. And you were right.”

The best lies have some truth. Ever since yesterday, I’ve felt the ghost of his hands on my shoulders. Trying to fall asleep last night, I squirmed at the memory of the way he unwound the knots in my muscles with quiet, unrelenting care.

And Somnus…I have to fight not to remember Somnus every time I glance at his lips.

“I think you’ll say whatever gets you out of this room.”

That smirk. That steady, certain expression. He’s so sure of himself. He thinks he has me cornered, that I’ll stammer and blush and hand him another excuse to dissect.

I walk myself all the way up on my hands until we’re face to face. “Why would I want to get out of a situation I purposely put myself in?”

He gives me a look that says he doesn’t believe a word. “Ly.”

“Alaris.” I echo his incredulous tone.

“I know you’re lying.”

“I’m not.” It started as an excuse. But now it’s a mission. I want him to acknowledge that he feels this attraction between us too.

He tips his head to one side, his crystal earring glinting. “Really?” He grazes a light touch along my ankle. Even through my leggings, it shoots tingles up my leg. “You want this?”

“Ye…yep.”

He traces up my calf, teasing the edge of my skirt. His eyes stay on my face, steady and certain. “This is really what you came here for? Sex?”

The word makes me flush. I swallow. “Mm-hm.”

He draws a slow circle on the inside of my leg. Every nerve sparks where his finger moves. “You can tell me you wandered into the wrong room,” he says, eyes lazy. “One word, and we both forget this ever happened. So?”

“No…right room.”

Heat blooms through my blood as his hand disappears under my skirt, circling higher and higher. My breath hitches as he grazes my inner thigh, before dipping back down.

“Such a liar.” He’s still smiling. He thinks I’ll stop him. He thinks I’ll lose my nerve and bolt.

My pulse is thundering, but I hold his stare. Slowly, intentionally, I let my knee fall open.

His eyes widen.

“What’s the matter?” My voice comes breathless. It started as a lie, but every pass of his fingers is stoking it into truth. “Afraid I might be telling the truth?”

The lazy confidence settles back over his face. “Not in the slightest.”

I want to wipe that smirk off his face, because he did this on Somnus too. He walked me around that whole manor on his arm, charming and unbothered, and never once meant to take me to bed. I’ve watched a parade of women go up to these rooms since the day I got here. Why all of them, and not me?

He can reject me because I work for him, or because he’s not interested. But he doesn’t get to reject me just because he believes I’m not serious.

…and I think he *is* interested.

Even though the lids are heavy, I see the heat in his eyes as they flick to my lips.

“Then let me show you.” I lay my palm flat on his chest and his breath stops under it. I drag it down, appreciating all the hard muscle under the silk. I slide my hand lower, lower…

He inhales sharply.

He snatches my hand and pins it to the ground behind me, his mouth hovering close to mine. “No you don’t. With me, it’s always ladies first.”

The circles continue, each loop rising a little higher than the last. I shudder as his slow touch skates along my inner thigh again, and again.

“You want me to touch you? To kiss you? To stroke between your legs?”

It’s getting harder to listen to his words, all my attention claimed by the distance between his fingertips and the center of my thighs. “Ye…yes.”

“Which? You’ll have to be clearer.” He tilts his head, and his hand slides higher, higher. “I don’t like missed expectations.”

The ache builds with every inch he advances. My hips cant toward him before I can stop them. My lips part.

He has to see his effect on me, but his smirk tells me he still thinks this is a game he’s winning.

His fingers graze a few inches away from where I need them, and all of me strains after the pressure I’m craving. My thighs open wider to give him access.

But he stops.

He’s waiting. He’s holding the door open one more time, certain I’ll exit.

But he’s wrong. My blood is heated, the spot between my legs thrumming. I know he could unravel me and make me feel things I’ve never felt. I’ve wanted it since Somnus, some reckless impulse in me brought to life ever since I ran from death.

He smirks, sliding away. “We’ll just call this a misunderstanding.”

I grab his wrist and pull him back. His hand lands on my thigh. He goes completely, unnervingly still, every trace of a smile gone.

I let go of his wrist and set my hand back on the floor. He doesn’t close the distance, but he doesn’t pull away either. His fingers flex on my thigh, once, every muscle gone tight. His eyes bore into me, carved from obsidian.

“Careful,” he says, his voice full of gravel.

“You be careful.” I lift my chin toward his. There is a breath between our lips. Energy rolls off him, zeroed in on me. *Got him.* “You can say you don’t want this. But you can’t say I don’t.”

“Ly—”

“You told me if I really wanted it, I would say it. So I’m saying it.” I rock my hips toward him once. “I want it.”

So slowly, I feel every heartbeat, his fingers close the distance. They press flat where I’ve needed it most.

I contract and gasp, the sensation exquisite.

His forehead drops to mine, his breathing harsh.

He drags one slow circle that empties my head, and I make a sound.

I need him to do that again. I roll my hips, trying to get his fingers under the leggings, onto bare, slick skin. I fist the front of his shirt.

A hard edge digs into my palm through the silk. I adjust my grip and recognize the shape. I freeze.

Oh no.

In a second, he’s out from between my thighs. I fall back on my hands. The place he touched throbs against the seam of my leggings, and my arms quiver.

He stands and walks toward his desk. I force my breath to even out, keeping my face as controlled as I can as I curl my legs under me.

His shirt pulls taut across his shoulders. For a moment I’m worried he’s angry, but when he turns toward me, that smirk is back, his gaze just a little cloudy. “Just a misunderstanding then, my evil-minded Ly?”

I nod at the floorboards, trying to slow my breathing. “Wouldn’t want to keep you from your appointment. I believe Lady Rialla is waiting.”

He exhales, voice flat. “I suppose she is. I wouldn’t want to keep her.”

My teeth clamp. This was nothing to him, when he enjoys so much more with the women who visit weekly. “Wouldn’t want that.”

I need to get out of here. I use the bed to help me stand.

He starts forward, his eyes narrowing. “You didn’t take that bath I told you to, did you?”

I pause. He draws my attention to the dull ache, dampened since yesterday, but still there in my shoulders. Caught again.

“I always do as you command,” I lie. The one thing I can’t stand to think about right now is his irritating attentiveness. “Excuse me.”

I curtsy and stride for the door. I wrench it open and dash as fast as my shaking legs will carry me back to my rooms.

I’m wrecked. I’m rocked. This isn’t how it was supposed to go.

Down the corridor I race, passing room after room I’ve searched and scoured. But now I know it was all pointless. I don’t have to go into any

other rooms and hunt. I don't have to risk sneaking back to his room again either.

I'll never find the stone in any corner of this house. He doesn't hide it in a vault or a hidden compartment.

It's always with him. He keeps it around his neck, hanging just below his heart.

20

The hawks are restless today, feathers ruffled, eyes and feet shifting. I'm not sure if it's because of my mood, the storm in my mind brewing over what I'm going to do next, or an actual storm about to roll over the horizon.

It's been too long. If the masked man knows where I am, no matter what edge of the continent he rode from, he could have reached me by now. I no longer have the assurance that I traveled too far, too fast, in the night. And the voidstone isn't going to fall into my hands.

Weeks of searching, and I'm facing hopelessness like I never even started. All my dreams of opening the right compartment and seeing the black quartz glimmering, the anticipation that at any moment I might grasp freedom in my hand and this weight might lift, are dashed. The muscles around my shoulder coil. I can't exactly overpower Alaris and steal the stone right from under his shirt.

I need a new plan.

Whether the hawks' agitation is due to me, or something in the air, I still do my best to soothe them, cooing soft words and handing out extra strokes to whichever ones I can reach. Before long, I'm on the sheltered bench with twenty birds around me, feathers puffed, heads and wings brushing my lap. I run gentle fingers over delicate feathers and sharp beaks, unsure who is calming whom.

I lift my head to a knock at the aviary door.

"Come in," I call morosely.

It opens, revealing bright black-lined eyes. “Long time no see,” Siro says as she steps inside, her open expression the friendly mirror of Karns’s closed one. She glances around the aviary. “Have you been holding out on me?”

“What?” I didn’t expect to see her unless I returned to the greenhouse, my mind so distant I can’t imagine what she’s referring to.

She gestures to the straw. “Bones. I’ll always take more, when your hawks drop them.”

Her beautiful features would be the envy of ladies at court, but I’ve never seen such a feral expression on a lady, as her gaze travels the floor seeking rat skulls.

“Oh…they’ve taken to dropping them outside the aviary these days. There’s a pile out back. And I’ll bring you the old straw soon, if I’m still here.”

“You’re going somewhere?” Her lined eyes flick to me. “And why do you look like you’ve been kicked?”

I sigh. “Just a…a recent disappointment.”

“Does this disappointment have a name? Because I’ll remind you, I’ve got a few trays of options in the greenhouse that could make anyone cry for their mother.”

I choke on nothing. “Poison won’t fix this.”

She grins, sharp-toothed. “Think a little harder and you might find it could. Go on. Use your imagination.”

“Alright,” I concede. “Poison *could* fix it. But I don’t think I’m willing to go that route.”

She shrugs. “Just keep in mind, a lot of what I grow goes into meals, so say the word. The inside staff gets really snooty sometimes—I blame my brother. We outside staff have to stick together. I have a running card game with the groundskeeper, if you want in.”

I laugh in spite of myself. She wouldn’t say that if she knew who was giving me trouble.

She kicks the straw, perhaps still checking for bones. “But are you really leaving?”

“Yes…eventually.”

One way or another, I’ll have to. I either have to get the stone off Alaris’s neck or figure out a different path to safety. Maybe things with

Norville have died down enough that I can go back to Delvos. Maybe there is some other way I can change my hair…

"That's too bad. It looks like you and the hawks have become quite cozy."

I nod. "They're really sweet."

"I'm not sure that's their reputation, but I'm glad you think so." She raises an eyebrow. "Maybe you have a special touch with both birds and flowers because, ta-da!" She produces two small glass jars from her apron. "I tried the trick you mentioned with the buds. I don't even have to send these to Vernys to know which one would last longer. I came to show you."

One of the jars is half full, the ointment inside gone gray and brown. The other is only a quarter full, but it's a fresh, pale green. I can tell from the lack of pearlescence that neither has been imbued with vernalian healing magic, but the colors make it clear which would have held better.

Siro followed my advice and used the buds.

I share her smile. "Glad to hear it. I know the buds are a lot smaller—"

"Hey, who cares if you have jars of this stuff if it doesn't last? No wonder vernalians use the flowers. They can charge by weight and still sell you more a few weeks later. Next time we send some out to Vernys, I'll use the buds. It's not enough for the household, but it's something."

My mind goes to the seeds at the bottom of my travel bag. The variety I cultivated produces double the buds, and bigger ones at that. The bushes require more tending as they grow, and I can't stay here long enough to help her care for them, but maybe I can leave her with some instructions and a few seeds.

"I have some—"

Distant shouts echo off the aviary walls. Siro and I lock wide eyes. I can tell by her expression this isn't normal. I stand, the hawks around me shifting and squawking.

Siro is already at the door. We leave the aviary together and start toward the commotion, walking, then jogging, as the din of voices grows and a child's wail cuts through it. The noise is near the front, and it's picking up, not quieting down.

The gates are wide open, the grounds filled with bodies. People stream in, clutching bags and bundles. Some stagger, leaning on each other. Guards shout orders to bring in supplies, to move the injured ahead, their voices

competing with people calling names and grabbing arms, searching for someone they've lost.

Siro takes in the scene. "I've got to go." She breaks away across the yard, and I lose sight of her in the crowd. I'm left with no idea where to turn.

A line of carts stretches down the road, the cries of the injured and distressed echoing through the forest. Through the press of bodies, I catch sight of Alaris. He has a man slung across his shoulders, his white shirt smeared with red. He lowers the man onto a cart and heads back toward the gates.

Seeing him covered in blood sends a spike of panic through me.

Someone bumps my shoulder, shaking me into motion. I spot a familiar light brown head near the gate—Dashol. He's barking orders to manage the crowd. I weave toward him, dodging people pushing to get inside the walls.

I catch his eye. "Dashol! What's going on?"

His mouth is a grim line. "The wither swept through Culdridge last night. These people only barely escaped. You should go back to the aviary. It's going to be crowded everywhere else for a while."

Perhaps I should. I need to figure out my next move. But every staff member I see is running. I won't be able to sit in the quiet and ignore what's happening outside.

I pull myself up. "What can I do to help?"

He delivers a command to another guard, then turns his attention back to me. "It's fine, Lyra, the hawks need—"

"Dashol, please. They don't need anything." I meet his gaze, my tone firm. "I want to help."

He pauses, long enough to give me a chance to note the gray-blue of his eyes. After another second, he sighs. "The medical tent is being set up over there. They need fresh water. And people to bind wounds, and other things. They'll be able to tell you."

"Thank you." I turn on my heel, hike up my skirts, and run through the crowd in the direction he indicated.

The makeshift infirmary is already in use even though it's still being assembled. I stand at the threshold of the tent a moment, watching the maids and footmen scramble to wash blood from wounds and tie bandages as others set up cots.

About half the cots are full, and yet more people stream in. Family members cluster at bedsides, whispering and crying. Some of the beds house children so small, it takes me a moment to realize they are even occupied. I scan for someone in charge.

A maid slows just long enough for me to catch her eye.

"What can I do?" I ask.

"We're running out of bedding. There's more in the guest rooms, if you can fetch it."

I don't wait to be told twice. I run for the castle, straight to the hall of free rooms that, not so long ago, I searched. I'm glad for the extra strength I've built up as I yank blankets from beds and closets and toss them into the hall, dashing room to room until every bed is stripped to the mattress.

"Are you going outside?" I ask some empty-handed maids coming down the hallway. I point them to my piles, and between the three of us, and with a few footmen who join in, we port the linens back to the infirmary.

I dump my armload beside a row of bare cots and copy the made ones: a sheet on the bottom, a sheet on top, and a blanket for each. There is a clear line where the household's plain linens ran out, leaving patients bleeding on fine burgundy and gold brocade.

I haven't tucked the edges on the last cot before two men set a woman down on it. She's young, with three quarters of her arm covered in cracked skin, the flesh brittle and white.

"She tried to grab her brother out," a voice nearby mutters. "She may not live for it. Certainly will lose the arm."

I stare at the decimated skin, blood and pus oozing through. I've seen burns my whole life, as my family members singed the flesh off each other, courtiers, and servants who displeased them. I've stood on the balcony above the Crimson Square as criminals were put to death. But I've never been in the thick of suffering like this. My eyes dart from bed to bed, from tear-streaked faces and wailing loved ones to the blood splattered blue robes on the healers.

Nearby, a man's breaths rattle and slow. I whirl away. I don't want to see him take his last one. And I don't want to watch the faces of the woman and children alongside his bed if he does. I clench my fists for a moment, the sounds of those suffering around me filling my ears.

The woman nearest to me moans, reclaiming my attention. Her head rolls, her undamaged hand reaching out toward nothing. I step forward and do the only thing I can think of: I take it.

"You're somewhere safe now," I whisper.

Her wild eyes fix on me, gleaming with pain and fear. I start to pull away, afraid of hurting or upsetting her, but her fingers twitch, gripping back.

So I squeeze.

"It's going to be alright," I say more confidently. The contact steadies me, and I can only imagine it's the same for her. For a second, it feels like we're the only people in the room.

Then healers come over, bringing her water and bandages. I step back to let them work.

I lift my eyes and they land on Alaris. He stands in the center of the tent, taller than everyone else, white shirt still smeared with red. Even as people rush around him, maids shout for supplies, and a child screams, he stays completely still, attention on the ground.

Then he closes his eyes.

A hum builds in the air, pressing against my skin. A green scent fills my nostrils and coats my throat. Under the cot in front of me, something stirs. Thin stems push through the packed dirt. Leaves unfurl. Buds swell and open into deep purple petals.

The screaming child quiets. Across the rows, the moaning drops to murmurs.

I look down the aisle. Under every cot, stalks climb and flowers blossom in the shadows. It is night-blooming lavender, growing fast in broad daylight. The scent reaches me, thick and sweet.

Alaris's face is a mask of serenity. His lips part slightly. Then the buzzing energy dissipates, and his eyes open. They find mine.

While the room picks up into a new, less frantic rhythm, he walks straight toward me.

"That was…" Static still coats my skin. I'm used to divinials using their power for violence, or occasional flashy displays. But I can't recall a time it's made me feel as tongue-tied as his simple act of growing flowers.

"You don't need to be here for this," he says, his dark eyes serious.

I take a moment to blink away my wonder. "I want to. I'm here to help."

"Today won't be a happy day, Ly. Leave this to the staff."

Now I scowl, the spell broken. “I am staff.”

“I mean the house staff.” His voice is firm. “Things are going to be chaotic for a while, and they know the emergency protocols. Go back to the aviary.”

The implication that I’m no help lands hard, because maybe it’s true.

I bite back the sting. He’s not wrong about my experience level, but it’s also obvious there aren’t enough hands to go around. Patients lie unattended on beds, staff and healers scurrying from one to the next, trying to help the children and elderly and those with the worst wounds. All around me, people are tying bandages and passing out supplies.

I saw how even holding the woman’s hand made a difference to her. I may not be able to grow bushels of magic lavender, but I can do something.

I look past Alaris and spot Karns coming our way, his elegant walk clipped to efficiency as he moves down the rows of cots, pointing and offering quick orders.

I step around Alaris and address Karns. “How can I help?”

Alaris crosses his arms, perhaps realizing I’m ignoring him. Which I’ve decided I am.

Karns pauses, his brown eyes bouncing from me to the glowering lord next to me. “We have no need for a hawk keeper’s skills here.”

I deflate. The last thing I should do is waste Karns’s time. Maybe I can go help Siro. A blue-robed healer comes up to Karns, standing on tiptoes to speak into his ear. I don’t hear her words, but I hear his answer.

“You’ll need to take the hand. We only have a few fresh jars of lobellum to go around.”

“I have lobellum,” I blurt.

Karns twists to me, a rare expression of surprise on his face. “You do?”

I nod. “And it’s fresh.”

“Fetch it. Now.”

I don’t look at Alaris as I turn on my heel, uninterested in whatever comment he has on the matter.

The castle halls have fallen eerily silent in comparison to the chaos outside. My legs burn as I take the stairs two at a time, racing toward my room. I dig for the bag stowed at the bottom of my wardrobe, retrieving the large jar tucked safely inside.

I unscrew the lid. The thick salve is clear and opalescent, with only a small fingerful missing from the end of summer party. I don’t know how

well it will work against the effects of the wither, but I can't imagine a better antidote to thanovarian death magic than Vernalia's life-giving power.

I clutch the glass to my chest, slam the wardrobe shut, and run.

Back in the tent, the stench of sweat and blood almost gags me, but I push through it, running straight to Karns.

This jar is the most precious thing I have, too precious even to sell for food on the river. But I hold it out to him.

"That doesn't look like lobellum," a healer nearby says, surely expecting the typical fresh green color.

"It's different from the normal type," I admit. "But it works." I don't want to say I made it myself, or that I know it works because my own smooth skin is the evidence. Not only is my lobell base longer lasting, but this jar was imbued by some high-ranking vernalian at court. I can't imagine an early-generation vernalian laying hands on the ointment in an average healer's bag.

This is the closest thing to bringing a powerful vernalian into this tent.

"You're familiar with its application?" Karns asks.

"Very." I know exactly how much to use to heal blistered skin or burns that singed to the bone.

He eyes the jar and gestures to the woman with the damaged arm. "Demonstrate."

The healer offers me thin, supple gloves, a paddle to scoop the lobellum, and some advice. "You have to start from the top to save as much of the arm as possible. You won't save the hand if you can't restore blood flow."

I nod, uncap the jar, and dip the paddle in. The white, cracked skin looks like it will crumble if I touch it, but the alternative is there in another healer's hands—a saw to take the limb.

As gently as I can, I spread the lobellum over the upper arm and elbow, gulping down terror as bits of flesh flake free.

I swallow my gag. "Can you help me reach all around?"

The healer lifts the woman's arm. I spread more on the underside, then coat the lower arm and the wrist. Finally, I dab the ointment gently onto her hand. It soaks in, a sure sign it's reaching damage beneath the skin. I add a little more where it absorbs too fast.

I watch, breath held, as the balm permeates the brittle tissue. At first, nothing changes. Then the dull gray starts to lift. The surface loses its powdery texture, growing smoother and more supple. A faint flush returns, uneven at first, spreading from the elbow to the wrist, and finally the fingertips. The woman's harsh panting slows.

The healer pushes forward to get a closer look. "That is not ordinary lobellum."

Karns's eyes are almost as round as his lenses. "Where did you get that?"

"A gift, from a previous employer," I come up with. "Did it work?"

The healer examines the hand, prodding the skin gently. The woman whimpers. But he looks at Karns and nods. "Blood is flowing. It shouldn't turn necrotic."

"Lyra, advise the others on the use of this lobellum." Karns directs his next order to the blue-robed group crowding near. "Candin and Hollis, accompany her and observe. Rata, spread the word: bring Lyra over for the most critical torso and head wounds. Go."

I follow the healer who I think is Candin, the jar cradled in my hands.

The next few hours pass in a haze of motion. The salve vanishes under my fingertips as I show the healers how much of my lobellum to use to coax cracked and raw flesh into something less dire.

Eventually, the healers take over. They work quickly, stretching my lobellum with their own skill. I switch to following behind and binding the freshly treated wounds, ensuring no progress bought by the magic is lost to abrasive blankets or dirt.

I catch sight of Alaris across the infirmary, bracing a man upright while a healer wraps his chest. And later, just outside it, sending guards off in pairs to raise tents for housing. I turn my eyes away quickly and keep working.

The scent of blood clings to the air, thick and metallic. My arms shake from exertion, my legs unsteady beneath me, but still, I press forward. I lift. I carry. I fetch water. And I watch with relief as there are fewer and fewer pain-wracked faces. Flesh begins to look more like flesh. Weeping stops. Families around beds quiet, reconciling what they have with what they've lost.

Evening falls, and the staff lights fires to counter the chill. Most people have received treatment and are either resting in cots or huddled with their

families. Which turns the problem to one of housing.

I wander the aisles one last time, checking on the patients. I straighten up as Karns approaches, trying to look attentive and ready for his instruction, despite my heavy eyelids.

He holds my jar out between us, a half an inch of ointment remaining in the bottom. I blink at it.

"But don't you want to—"

"Take it, Lyra. We've used all we need to. What's left is a matter of time. Bodies know how to heal." He extends his hand, looking down his nose sternly at me until I fold and accept the glass.

"Okay. Thank you."

He arches one brow. "It's these people who owe you gratitude. This has been the difference for twenty lives today, and more to retain their ability to walk or use both hands."

His tone is just as frank and clipped as ever, but his sharp assessment hits me deeper than any flowery compliment. He is stating the facts as he sees them. My contribution made a difference.

Karns bows his head to someone behind me.

"You should go back to your rooms for the night," a familiar deep voice says.

I startle and stumble back. Hands curl around my shoulders, steadying me. Alaris.

I want to sag into his touch. But I resist the urge to lean into it. My legs and feet ache, but I force myself to pull back, standing on my own to face him.

"Not yet." Maids and footmen have begun setting up tents, filling the courtyard. "The work isn't done."

He narrows his eyes at me. "Am I no longer the lord of this house? I swear I told you to return to the aviary when I saw you hours ago…and yet here you stand. Openly defying me. Again."

I purse my lips, unable to deny that I intentionally ignored Alaris's orders when I saw him earlier. In trying to act more like a servant, capable of pulling my own weight, I've ended up acting less like one.

He reaches toward me, and I still. One ringed finger alights on the jar in my grasp. "Yet, the families of Culdridge will forever be grateful that you did. Thank you for this."

"It was nothing." I hold it out. "Here, take the rest."

He shakes his head, using that finger to press the glass gently to my stomach. “Keep it for your use.” I think he is going to say something else, perhaps ask more about how I came by such powerful healing magic. But he drops his hand. “Now go to sleep.”

I open my mouth again to argue, but a single head tilt and that look in his eyes has me closing it.

Servants don’t argue with nobility. Right.

I resolve to save the rest of the ointment, in case anyone else needs it.

Now that I’ve accepted the idea of resting, it’s like I can’t stand another minute. I sag into a wobbling curtsy. “My lord.”

I rise out of the curtsy, but it’s painful. Alaris’s brows lower and his hand twitches toward me. Before he can see even more evidence of my exhaustion, I spin and hobble away.

The night air is icy. Families are being ushered into tents as fast as the staff can raise them, the rest waiting in the chill, huddled in blankets. The courtyard is a sea of weary faces.

My eyes bounce off them, seeking the familiar silhouette of the stranger I fear, seeking his mask and hood. I’ve been focused all day on helping, adrenaline spiked by the crises before me, instead of thinking about all the strangers who just entered the castle. I skirt the edges so I don’t get too close to anyone.

But no mask surfaces in the crowd. All I see are strained faces and curled shoulders. Nearby, a woman presses her lips to the forehead of a sleeping boy, her fingers shaking as she tucks his jacket tighter around him.

It’s too cold out here to be without shelter.

I spot a footman who seems to be counting heads, a pad of paper on a board in his hands. “Are there any rooms left inside?”

“The serviceable sleeping quarters are full. We’ve got three families to a chamber as it is.”

“What about the hallways?”

He shakes his head. “Only if the temperature drops further. We need to keep the halls clear to move food and supplies. We have to house these people for a few days, at least.”

I glance one more time at the woman and the boy. “I’ll be back.”

I go to my room, rinse my hands and face, and change out of my dirty, bloodied clothes. I repack the travel bag I came with, tucking the lightened

jar of ointment and my jewelry in the bottom. With my cloak on and one of the blankets from my bed in hand, I march back outside to the footman.

"I've cleared my room," I tell him as soon as his head comes up from his board. "It's the third room down, on the second floor. There is a bed with linens, plus plenty of floor space."

"I know the one." He pauses, taking in the bag and blanket in my hand. "It will be a while before you get a tent."

I shrug my bag higher on my shoulder. "I don't need one. I have somewhere else I can stay."

He quickly rights himself, scanning his list and then the crowd. "Tardiff family and Scall family? I have a room for you."

Two groups shuffle forward: a bearded man and a woman clutching a bundle to her chest, and a wizened woman holding the hand of a small child with a gangly boy who can't be more than sixteen trailing after.

I watch them follow the footman, my heart swelling that a few more people are escaping the cold.

It takes the last of my strength to trudge to the aviary. The scent of hay and feathers washes over me, a familiar relief after a day filled with the smell of blood and sweat and fear. The hawks rustle on their perches as I make my way to the bench under the overhang.

I'm a little more worried about the masked man tonight, given all the strangers on the grounds. But at least no one would think to find me sleeping here in this stone turret. Plus, I always feel a little safer under the watchful eyes of the hawks.

Maybe I should sleep here more often.

But it's not comfortable. The aviary walls block the wind but provide little insulation, and the bench is hard and cold. I pull my cloak tight around me, and wrap myself in the blanket, jaw clacking.

But I will have to shiver through it. I barely muster the energy to tuck the pack under my head as a pillow before I fall asleep.

21

I wake to a tickling on my cheek. My eyes crack open. Black feathers hover inches away. A hawk is perched by my head, its wing draped over the side of my face. I stir and it hops back.

I glance down my body and find hawks nestled on top of me, and on either side of me on the bench, their wings spread over me like a feathered blanket. They adjust as I shift, ruffling and resettling. Their warm bodies make a clear difference, cold morning air creeping through wherever they lift away.

My chapped lips split into a smile. “Are you keeping me warm? Or am I a comfortable place to sleep? Either way, thank you.”

Feathers rustle in response, as if the hawks are content to stay as long as I lie here. But I have to get to work.

I groan as I move to sit up, my joints flaring with pain. Squawks answer me, a few hawks hopping off the bench to the ground while the ones on my legs flap up to the rafters.

“Sorry,” I say, breathing through clenched teeth as I force myself up on shaking arms. “It’s just…ugh.”

This is the worst my body has ever felt. Every joint I unwind out of my sleeping position throbs. Usually, it’s just my back and jaw, but now pain radiates from my feet, my arms, the hip and shoulder I slept on. The full day in motion, followed by a night on cold stone, was a poor combination. For a moment, I’m afraid I can’t turn my head at all. But after I rub my neck, I can twist it into a painful stretch.

One of the hawks on the bench hops closer and nudges my hand with its beak. I run my fingers over its head, and it leans into the touch.

"It's fine," I murmur. "I'm just a mess."

I don't bother to change out of the clothes I slept in. They are still clean, and I'm not sure I could get my arms over my head anyway. I untie my cloak and fumble with my shoes, my numb fingers tripping over the finer movements. Everything is hard, but there is something satisfying in this agony. It's not from a night spent huddled in bed, muscles tensed in fear. It's from a day of necessary work, helping people who needed it. It's from a night giving up a bed to someone who lost their home.

I fold the blanket and turn to find a dozen hawks blocking my path to the door. I take a step forward, but they don't move an inch.

"Was I that comfortable?" I chuckle. I take another step only to stumble back to avoid flapping wings. "Shoo!" I tell them gently. "I have to go."

I limp forward without stopping. They hop aside just in time to clear my way. I smile. *Stubborn beasts.*

When I exit the aviary and hobble to the front of the grounds, the energy has changed. Instead of frantic cries and chaos at the gates, wagons are lined up outside, with guards in black leathers unloading supplies. It takes me no time to spot Alaris among them, lifting a massive canvas roll over one shoulder and walking it toward the tents in the courtyard.

I slow my steps so we don't cross paths, suddenly nervous. I can deal with playful, lecherous Alaris. But this doesn't look like the same man who spends most of his time receiving women in silks.

Once I'm sure there is enough distance between us, I trail after him to the courtyard.

Clusters of townspeople huddle together around fires, speaking in hushed tones. Cries of pain have turned into subtle whimpers and grimaces hidden in the crooks of elbows. I can't believe these people are bearing what happened so quietly. But then, I'm not sure what the appropriate reaction is the day after horror.

Karns directs me to the medical tent to replace bandages. I crouch beside the nearest cot and unwrap the dressing on a woman's forearm. The wound underneath is pink but the stitches are holding. I apply fresh cloth, tucking the ends the way I learned from the healers yesterday. She winces, but nods when I'm done.

I move to the next bed. And the next. My fingers are slowly learning the right tension for bindings.

I overhear my first accounts of the wither. About how it appeared in one corner of town like a drip, then a puddle, then it spread like a flood. How every living thing it touched froze, grayed, and began to crumble. How people caught in it had only seconds to react, how the screams that chased the survivors out of town cut off moments after they started, how anyone who turned back to see or try to save someone didn't make it out.

I switch to the courtyard, organizing supplies, helping wherever I can. I'm more comfortable than I was yesterday. I take cues from those around me and ask what to do when I find my hands still. My mind is better prepared too. Even though my heart aches at every child's blank stare, I don't freeze up. In fact, I settle into an almost meditative rhythm.

Recently, I've spent my days jumping from one calculation to the next: which room to search, how to avoid getting caught, what to say if I am. And I've spent my nights going over the same visions again and again until they blur together. Even though I was alone most of the last decade in the Sunrise Palace, I've never felt this stuck in my own head before.

Helping these people makes me feel awake. It's like my eyes are open wider than usual, taking in that I'm here now. These people have already faced death. These people have already lost. And I'm still here, using my hands to retie their bandages and fold clean linens and carry buckets of water.

I'm here alive today, not dying in some bloody future.

The day blurs by and evening comes quickly. I carry stew to cots and collect the bowls when they are done.

After the townspeople are served, I get my bowl. Across a fire circle, Alaris is crouched beside a woman and her two children. The smaller one has his arm in a sling. Alaris says something to the boy, and the boy reaches out of the sling and wiggles his fingers, grinning.

I pick a different fire to eat by, letting the flames account for my flush.

Karns dismisses me with a group of staff. Others are still working, but I don't argue this time. The emergency is over. And now that it's dark, I'm happy to get away from the crowd. It saves me the energy of having to examine every face in the shadows.

I enter the stone tower and trudge through the dark, not waiting for my eyes to adjust to follow the familiar path to the bench.

“Sorry I’ve neglected you,” I mumble through numb lips to the hawks. “I’ll refill your water tomorrow.”

I shuffle forward and stumble when my foot hits something soft. A large dark shape covers the ground in front of me. I reach down and my hands meet fur. I lift one heavy skin and find another spread beneath.

It’s a pallet bed, lined with fur blankets. Only one person could have arranged for this.

I’m filled with instant, irrational annoyance. I didn’t give up my room just to create more work for someone.

But my traitor fingers are deep in the fur. And defiance won’t help anything at this point. I quickly shed my outer dress, and slide between the layers, shuddering as softness envelops me. I’m instantly warmer, and they smell delicious—like cloves.

My heart squeezes, and the corners of my mouth turn up, then down, with emotions I don’t want to name. I don’t want to think about this caring act in the midst of all this chaos. I can’t let my mind linger on the idea that I’ve been singled out, when there are so many reasons to know better.

He’s caring for his people. Now that I’m on his staff, I just happen to be one of them.

I sink into the fur, somehow both heavy and weightless. Sleep takes me in seconds.



When I crack my eyes again, the light streaming in through the shutters above tells me it’s midday. I sit up, slowed by the weight of the fur sliding off me and the rare grogginess of oversleep.

I wasn’t given a formal shift, but I feel late.

I hobble to the camp, still wiggling my feet properly into my shoes. I step straight in to help serve stew—lunch, I assume.

Even after a cozier night, my muscles still protest. I do my best to roll pain out of my shoulders as I spoon meat into bowls. It’s a hopeless attempt, the stretches barely tugging at the ache sunk into every part of me.

Across the bright courtyard, I find Alaris. I don’t know why embarrassment flames my cheeks, just because he sent me something to

sleep on. It was wasteful of him to spend precious resources on a hawk keeper.

I commit myself to holding it against him. It's further proof that he's impulsive. Impractical.

But again, today, I see him laboring. I catch him hammering tent stakes into the packed earth. Handing a stack of blankets to a woman and waiting while she counts them for her family. Talking with Karns over a list. Through all of it, he has that same steady intensity in his eyes.

I resist the urge to look when I feel that tug on my attention. I know now it comes from him, somewhere in my peripheral vision. It's just because he's tall, I reason, focusing on the task in front of me. Or maybe it's because I can't quite make sense of him, these scenes conflicting with my image of him as a pleasure-seeking lecher.

I redouble my commitment to my work throughout the day, trying to make up for the morning hours I missed. I wait until the last scoop of dinner is served before I get my bowl. I take it and find a spot on the ground in front of a firepit, too tired to care that my legs might not get me back up.

I drain the cold stew in minutes, and shake out my limbs, pressing the pads of my fingers into the tight spots on my shoulders. My eyelids are heavy, but I slept through the morning. I should stay and find out if the late shift needs assistance.

I glance up to find Alaris just across the circle, his elbows resting on his knees, eyes glinting. They are on me. There is no way I missed him sitting there when I chose this place to eat. I straighten, then duck away.

I don't know why, but I feel guilty.

Perhaps it was easier to face him when I viewed him as careless. Someone born into power and languishing in its perks. With that version of Alaris, I could meet him as an equal or even look down on him. My life in the palace was a life of plenty, but also, restriction. I could judge him for what he did with the freedom I never had.

Seeing him as frivolous made it easier for me to steal from him, to dismiss him, to push down other thoughts.

Now, he's gone and made everything more complicated.

Unfortunately, breaking eye contact doesn't break his focus. He stands and stalks around the blaze. My feet root into the ground and my mind blanks, nerves, pride, and shame jostling for space. Only when he's squarely in front of me do I raise my eyes.

The flames highlight the impossibly sharp lines of his face. He is just as gorgeous, probably more so, for the grime and sweat. He doesn't seem bothered by the cold in nothing but a white shirt, dirtied from his day of work.

His lips press into a tight line. "It's time for you to rest."

"I am resting. I'm having dinner."

A low sigh rolls out of him. "And after dinner?"

I raise my chin. "I'll help with the dishes."

"You'll be no help to anyone if you need a healer to lift your arms." His voice comes out firm and low. "Come with me. Now."

22

He turns and starts walking, not waiting for an argument this time. My guard against him is eroding, and it makes me want to run the other way and disappear into the dark. I'm worried if he looks too long at my face, he'll see something I don't want him to.

But I can't make an excuse to his retreating back.

I follow him into the castle, hurrying my steps to catch up. He turns down hallway after hallway, until it becomes clear where we're headed.

Until there are only two rooms we could end up in.

"Hey!" I rush to get closer, wincing from the effort. "Are you taking me to your office for something?"

"Nope." He pauses, looking back, his eyes twinkling with something less than innocent as he watches me grapple with the only other place we could be going.

I plant my feet, my heart rate picking up. "Then what exactly could you want with me in your bedroom?"

"I would have told you, if you had kept up on the way."

"Your legs are far too long," I say irritably. "And I'm asking now."

"You need a bath."

I jerk back, suddenly conscious of how long it has been since I even looked in a mirror. "I'm not that dirty!"

"You absolutely are. You have dirt all over your cheeks."

"We've been in an emergency situation!" I raise an arm to brush it off.

He grabs my wrist. "There is blood on that sleeve."

“Fine. Then I’ll change my clothes. And I’ll take a bath. I have a bath in my…” Room, I almost finish. The room I ceded to people who needed it far more than I. “I’ll take a shower then. In the servants’ wing.”

He sighs. “You seem to be picking up a habit of ignoring your lord’s very reasonable orders.”

I scowl. “I said I would shower.”

“No. I said you need a bath.” He steps closer, into my space. I crane my neck back to keep eye contact. He doesn’t drop my arm, as if he expects me to smear blood over my face just to defy him. “I’ve been exceedingly patient as you’ve continued to make choices that cause needless pain. But I have my limits, Ly. So are you going to get in the bath, or am I going to throw you in?”

I flap my mouth, some half-word coming out. “Excuse me if I find it a bit surprising to be told to bathe in the chamber of my employer.”

“It’s just an available room. As you said, it’s an emergency situation. And I’ll be far from it.” His eyes are intent as they explore my face. It feels like a physical caress, sending shivers over my skin. “I’m not insisting because you are dirty, Ly, although you very much are. I’m insisting because you are in pain.” He tilts his head, the crystal at his ear swinging. “Any other objections?”

“And why can’t I just shower?” I blurt, unable to stop myself.

He sighs. “Proud Ly. *Difficult* Ly. Because I doubt you will be able to walk tomorrow morning if you don’t do as I say. Now choose: walk or throw.”

He releases my arm and steps out of my space, striding toward his room. I take my first deep breath in minutes.

But I believe his warning, so I hold my chin as high as I can and choose *walk*.

By the time I step into his bedroom, he’s already passed through it, the open door across the room marking his path. The last time I saw his bed, he was kneeling between my legs on the floor beside it. I force the memory away and hurry through.

I pass the closet and enter a tiled chamber with a sink and shower, but no bath. Yet another door stands open, revealing a staircase.

When I reach the top, warm air hits me. Stairs descend into a stone room. Candles flicker in niches carved into the walls. Arched windows

without glass let in starlight and cool night air. At the center lies a sunken bath, the steam off it so thick I can barely see the water.

Alaris kneels at its edge, one sleeve pushed up to reveal his muscled forearm. He trails his hand through the water, then reaches into the basket beside him and gathers a handful of night-blooming lavender. In the starlight, the blossoms are lush and full. He scatters them, and they float on the surface in rich purple bunches.

I descend slowly, taking a deep breath of the delicious steam. And I frown.

"Something else to say, Ly? Don't hold back. You're going in the water either way."

This man. "I shouldn't be the one to receive this."

"I am responsible for my staff's wellbeing. This is what you require to continue to do your job." He shakes off his hand, rings glinting, and stands. "So, I am providing it."

Other members of his staff don't need this. They can do their jobs without special treatment. And I don't like what this special treatment is doing to my heart.

He gestures for me to come closer, but I don't move my feet. "I'm fine."

His expression softens, slightly. "Until recently, you were a governess in the flameward lands. Winter is close, and it's getting colder. It's understandable you need time to adapt to this life." He eyes me steadily. "It was bad enough a few days ago, but your choice to sleep outside has made this a matter of medical necessity."

As if it's my fault I ache? I bristle. "And what about the families sleeping in the dirt?"

"They are in tents with sleeping pads and plenty of wool. Not a stone aviary designed to house birds."

"How do you know I wasn't comfortable? Maybe I like sleeping in the aviary."

His sardonic expression says he isn't even slightly convinced. He crosses his arms. "Regardless, you're going to take a bath, and you're not getting out until you've forgotten what cold feels like. You can argue with me after and tell me I was wrong and you didn't need it. I might even pretend to believe you."

He stalks toward me, his dangerous gaze making his words echo: *walk or throw*. He brushes past me and loops around, herding me the rest of the

way down the steps. I move my feet to ensure he doesn't make good on his promise but keep my chin lifted. I shiver with pleasure as the steam engulfs me, cutting through the chill lodged deep beneath my skin.

He is quiet a moment, that intense gaze pulling me in. "I'll wait in the bedchamber for a bit, just to make sure you don't drown."

"Don't you dare come in," I say, weariness taking all the fight out of my voice. "I'd rather drown."

"Just go slowly," he says, with a chuckle. "Take as long as you like." And then he closes the door between us, sealing me in with the steam.

I wait a few moments to make sure he's really gone, then I turn toward the bath. It beckons with unreal beauty, the lavender and mist making it look like a dream.

With no witness but the starlight, I strip off my layers, peeling away the grime of the past days. I approach the curved edge, wiggling my toes. Then I step into the water.

It's hot. Really hot. I suck in a quick breath. I have to put my foot in and out a few times before I can keep it submerged. But once I do, I moan. It feels exquisite. I'm glad Alaris isn't here to see my reaction, but truly, it's so good I think my pride would fold even if he was watching every second.

I sink in inch by inch, letting the water climb my calves, my thighs, my breasts, until it settles at my collarbone, wetting the ends of my hair. The lip of the bath is perfectly sloped to let me rest my head. My body floats, every limb suspended without effort. Lavender drifts by, and with each draw of the scented mist, I relax a little more.

The warmth is almost unbearable in its pleasure, the heat melting muscles and thoughts, my tension unraveling into each curl of steam. And although I can't imagine admitting it, Alaris was completely right. For the first time since I left the palace, I don't feel even a dull echo of pain.

I tried to reject this bath on principle. But now that I'm in it, and the set of my jaw is no longer so brutal, Alaris's words about needing some time to adapt ring truer than he knows. Before my twenty-first birthday, if someone had told me I would leave the palace on my own, I wouldn't have believed them. Princesses only ever left to join their husbands in marriage. I went from a life wrapped in silk to a life on the run. I've had to adjust. I'm still adjusting.

Even if I wasn't as quick or as able as the rest of the staff, I still helped. Even if I could only carry one bucket of water while others shouldered two,

I still reduced the load. The bandages I wrapped might have been clumsy at first, but I replaced them today without instruction. And the lobellum I cultivated to soothe my own skin, burned too often for a princess of the flame, helped save lives.

It matters, at least a little, that I am here. My efforts aren't for nothing.

I'm judging myself against those who've lived their entire lives a different way, when I've already made it further on my own than I ever thought I could. I've been so busy trying to survive, I hadn't really taken stock of that.

And going to the aviary every morning feels like coming home. The hawks are happy to see me, and perhaps I am just discovering how unfamiliar that is. I thought peace was returning to my silent room at the Sunrise Palace.

If I wasn't afraid of impending doom, I think I'd like this life better.

Strange.

Time slips away. It helps me relax knowing Alaris is near. Even though I'm chased by a phantom, one I have bone-deep sureness no ordinary lock or guard can protect me from, there is something about Alaris's presence that makes me feel safe.

Unfortunately, that admission doesn't just pass through my head. It pangs in my chest.

My mind conjures images of Alaris over the last few days. Since I arrived, I've underestimated him. I saw his cavalier humor and charisma and assumed he was careless. That he was a less violent leader than my father, and better tempered, but more interested in luxury and flirting than anything else.

Since the townspeople arrived, I feel like I've glimpsed his true face. As people bled and scrambled and struggled around him, he's been a calm point of gravity.

And it looked just as natural on him as the velvet and the revelry and the women. Even though this new view of him intimidates me, I want more.

In the few moments we've collided, I have received his full attention. I have been the beneficiary of his foresight, when he saved me from Norville, and even now, as my muscles loosen in this bath.

I want his focus on me.

I ordered him not to come in, but I suddenly wish he would. My traitorous mind imagines him reentering the chamber, seeing me floating

here, naked except for the mist and lavender. I want to watch his eyes heat and his jaw tighten, while he pretends he doesn't desire me. I want to see that control break. All kinds of things could happen in this room, slippery and naked. It sends a shiver down my spine, and one hand skating over my stomach.

But then a yellow dress and a high-pitched laugh flash through my head.

He has undoubtedly been in this bath with a string of other women. My mouth twists.

No. I am not feeling this.

I dip my head beneath the water, letting it rush over me, muffling the world.

Both things can be true of the man—he can pursue pleasure and be a good leader, worthy of respect. But he can't focus on multiple women and keep his eyes on me. Which is why every thought about this lord needs to be scrubbed from my brain.

When I emerge, I start washing away the last few days. I scour my skin with soap, dragging it through the sweat, the blood, the dirt. The gentle current in the bath carries it all away.

I'll need to charcoal my hair again soon. This soap stripped more of the pigment, leaving the wet strands a muted gray.

Alaris said I could stay as long as I liked, but if I did that, I might truly never leave. So I force myself to stand and exit the water. A stack of towels is waiting on the bench, alongside a pile of clean clothes. The cotton calf-length dress with laces at the top, leggings, and loose buttoned overdress can only be meant for me. With clean fabric on clean skin, I feel reborn.

I pad out of the bathing room, down the hallway, and knock on the bedroom door. When there is no answer, I let myself in. Disappointment flickers through me when I find the room empty.

It isn't that I was looking forward to seeing him, I tell myself. It's just that I wanted to thank him.

At least his absence saves me from having to admit he was right about the bath. Totally and completely right. The lavender and hot water worked miracles.

I pause in front of the door. A note that says "Ly" at the top in curling script is pinned to the wood.

Assume your regular duties in the aviary in the morning, and return to your own room tomorrow night. The townspeople will all be transported and rehoused by the afternoon, so there will be no need for your assistance.

"I'll be the judge of that," I mutter. If everything is operating smoothly tomorrow, I will tend to the hawks. But I'm not going to hide in the aviary all day if the staff needs more help.

The corner of my mouth lifts, as I imagine his expression if I said that to his face.

I really shouldn't take so much joy in defying my employer.

I'm renewed as I walk back to the aviary, carrying my sullied clothes to be washed later. Night has fallen, but I don't bother with a lantern, the walk familiar enough to handle in the dark. The chill air nips at my skin, but it doesn't sink in. The lingering heat from the bath warms my blood, and the clothing Alaris left for me is surprisingly cozy. I'll be curled between the furs in the aviary soon enough.

A lantern rattles somewhere ahead, although I don't see a light. I squint and spy a figure dashing across the grounds.

I probably wouldn't recognize the outline of her curls if I hadn't already desperately scanned her silhouette in my bedroom and the aviary. It's Drina.

Maybe I'm being paranoid. The entire castle has been in disarray, schedules broken to accommodate the crisis. But all the townspeople are housed near the front gates and in the main courtyard—there's no reason for Drina to be running in the opposite direction.

I drop my dirty clothes on the ground to retrieve later and trail after her.

She heads straight for the boundary wall. With a muffled groan of metal, a door I've never noticed swings open. Drina slips through and pulls it shut behind her.

I follow. The crossbar is already lifted, so the door gives easily under my hand. On the other side, Drina's lantern is lit now, bobbing between the trees.

A chill creeps over my skin. Alaris's warning about going off the grounds carries new weight after seeing the impact of the wither firsthand. I've heard many grief-strained voices report how quickly it appears and spreads. But Drina has lived here longer. She surely knows the risks.

Yet she's headed into the woods anyway. There must be a reason.

I hurry after her.

She winds through the trees until she reaches a river, then follows its bank to a bridge. She crosses over and so do I, my steps muffled by the rush of the current below. The pines are denser on this side, their needles blocking most of the starlight. Roots catch at my feet and branches scrape my arms. Without her lantern, I would lose her in seconds.

My pulse is hammering by the time the distance between us shrinks. She's stopped. I pause behind a trunk and hold my breath as a second light flickers into view.

Someone else is here.

I creep closer, trying not to crunch the brittle needles beneath my boots. Drina's back is to me, but her hands and shoulders are moving. The other figure is much taller, and he steps in.

The lantern's glow falls across his face, and the blood drains from mine.

Even under a hood, I know that face. It's a soldier I've seen at the palace. It's one of Orso's men.

I can't catch their words from this distance, but their body language is enough. She's talking, and he's listening.

He is receiving a report.

Drina's reporting on me. Reporting that the seventh princess has run away to hide in the realm of night.

23

A surge of panic rises in my throat, choking me.

Now that Orso's man knows I'm here, it's probably a matter of hours before soldiers show up to take me. I'll be dragged back and trapped in marble, to await my death at the hands of a specter no one will believe is coming.

If I don't act now, it will be too late.

I run. Back through the trees, across the bridge, through the door in the wall. My breath comes fast and ragged, my heart pounding so loud it drowns out the sound of my boots.

I skid into the kitchen and grab a pair of shears. My hands shake so badly it takes a few tries to tuck them into my pocket. I barely register the steps to his bedroom door. I knock, knuckles stinging from how hard I strike the wood.

"Come in."

I swing the door wide. Alaris sits in a worn leather armchair, a book in his hands. His hair falls across his forehead, his shirt open at the top.

He raises his head. The moment his dark eyes lock on mine, he goes still.

"What is it?" He closes the book. "What's wrong?"

I can't speak. If I speak, I'll start to explain, and if I start, I'll unravel everything. The stone is under his shirt. There is only one way I can think of to get close enough to take it.

I drag in a deep breath and try to smooth my face into something that resembles composure.

"Nothing." My voice is too high and thin. I step into the room and close the door behind me.

He starts to rise. I cross the space between us and put my hand on his shoulder, easing him back into the seat. His brow creases.

"Ly…"

"I couldn't sleep." I walk around the chair, transferring the shears from my pocket into the gap between the cushion and the frame. I end my circle in front of him.

"You're shaking." His voice is concerned.

I am. I lean forward, squeezing the leather armrests to steady my hands. "It's cold in the aviary."

He studies my face, but I need him unfocused. Distracted. I graze my fingers along his collar. His whole body goes rigid. I follow the edge of his shirt, my fingertips tracing the V of it down his chest, and I feel it. A cord is there, under the silk.

"What are you doing?" he asks in a low tone.

As an answer, I press my mouth to his.

His whole body locks. I feel his breath catch as his book slides to the floor with a soft thud. His lips are soft, but he is stone.

I pull back. My heart is hammering so hard I'm sure he can hear it.

His dark eyes glimmer. "What are you doing, Ly?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" I try for boldness, but my voice still doesn't sound right.

He reaches up and closes his hand over my fist, gently loosening my grip on his collar. He doesn't push me away, holding my shaking fingers between us.

"You look like something chased you in here." His thumb traces over my white knuckles. "Tell me what's wrong."

I can't tell him what's wrong. Alaris can't stop the palace guards from coming for me. I need the stone. I need to get my hands inside his clothes, and the only way he'll let me is if he believes I want to be there.

"Nothing is wrong." I maneuver into the space between his knees. For once, he has to look up at me. "I couldn't sleep. I can't stop thinking about what happened before. Between us."

It’s true. The memory of his touch surfaces at the worst possible moments. But I’m wielding the truth like a blade right now, and the admission tastes sour.

“You’ve avoided my company for weeks. You barely looked at me these last two days.” He says it simply, laying a fact on the table between us.

My jaw grits. He pays too close attention.

“People change their minds.”

“Such a liar, Ly.” He tilts his head. Patient, even though I’m between his legs. “Something happened.”

I want to grab him and shake him until that maddening composure crumbles. But I know I can break him. I’ve done it before.

“Maybe I’m tired of fighting this,” I whisper. He is stunning in a way that makes my stomach drop. The lines of his face, the breadth of his shoulders, it makes it easy to want to touch him. Irresistible, even.

But I don’t touch him. I want him to touch me.

I unbutton my overdress and shrug it off my shoulders, letting it fall to the floor.

My fingers find the laces at my bodice and pull free the knot. His throat works as he swallows, the first crack I’ve seen in that perfect calm. It sends a flush of heat through me.

I draw the first crossed section of lace free from the eyelets. His eyes follow the movement, as if nothing in the world could tear them away.

“Ly.” My name comes out low, from deep in his chest.

I pull the second section free. His hands rise to my hips, hovering. As if he’s deciding whether to stop me or draw me closer.

I move on to the third section.

His gaze tracks every inch of the lace as I tug it loose, his focus lighting my skin on fire.

I reach for the last section. His hand closes over mine, stopping me. His eyes are pitch, and we are both breathing harder. “Why do I still feel like you’re lying?”

Because I am. My pulse beats against his cool palm. I say the truest thing I can: “I want you to touch me.”

I pull the last inches of the lace free, and the top of the dress opens, revealing the curve of my breasts, the cotton only loosely covering my nipples. I have never been this bare in front of anyone. I want to cover myself and I want him to keep looking.

I sense the moment he breaks, just before he moves.

His hands close around the back of my thighs, and in one smooth motion he pulls me into his lap. My knees settle on either side of his legs in the chair.

"I should torture you for last time," he murmurs. "But I am having trouble denying you anything you want."

He leans forward and presses his mouth to the center of my chest. Then his lips trail to one side, my breath quickening with every gentle kiss.

He nibbles my skin as his cool fingertips ease the dress off my shoulders. He skates one thumb over my nipple. Heat drops straight through me and my hands close hard on his shoulders.

Then he replaces his thumb with his tongue.

I let out a breathy moan.

"S…sorry," I say, embarrassed.

He pulls back. The cool air on wet skin makes me shiver. "You should be sorry. That sound is going to haunt me." His voice is low and rough.

He circles his tongue over the peak, his hand pressing flat against the small of my back to hold me steady. I cover my mouth as more small sounds leak out. Each pass of his tongue sends a pulse straight between my legs, building an ache there.

My hips rock against him, and I can feel how hard he is.

Then his mouth moves to the other side. One flick and I fold with a whimper, gripping the back of the chair.

He peels my hand away from my mouth and I raise my head, bleary-eyed. My lips find his, the press of them as essential in this moment as breathing. His tongue slides against mine and my mind goes white. His cool hands stroke down my bare back, everywhere they touch trailing heat.

I grind against him, unsure how to get what I want, but desperate for more. I need to get his hands lower, to touch me where I'm burning. I need to get out of these leggings…

The stone. I'm here for the stone.

I gasp for air. I'm losing myself. I have to act now, while I have him in the right position and half my wits.

I lift myself on my knees, putting an inch of space between us. The air hits where I am wet and aching, and I almost sink right back down.

I keep kissing him and let my hands wander. My palms run over his shirt, feeling the hard lines of him beneath the silk. My fingers brush the

cord through the cloth. I map it up to his collarbone, and around the back of his neck.

I reach one hand behind his shoulder, fumbling to find the shears, while the other twines in his hair. I tug down through his curls until I grasp the cord just below his collar.

His thumb finds my nipple while he kisses me, and I gasp against his mouth, my concentration fracturing. He is making this very difficult.

I press myself against him as I tangle my tongue with his, and he answers with his whole body, pulling me closer. I lift the cord just above his collar and cut.

The cord parts clean. I drop the shears behind the cushion.

I run my fingers along his waistband as I untuck his shirt, and he hisses in a breath, muscles tensing. I kiss his jaw, his neck, then return to his mouth. My movements are clumsy, motivated less by heat now and more by desperation. But something about them feels true as well—with every kiss, I'm saying *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry.*

I slide my hands under his shirt and sweep them over his chest. I need him distracted, hoping my tongue is enough. I keep my touch moving over his skin, until one hand finds and closes around the loose stone.

I kiss him with everything I have then, pouring every ounce of need and panic and unspoken want into it. He gathers me up, lifting me higher. I breathe him in as I draw out the stone and slip it into my pocket.

I take his face in shaking hands, and press one last, slow kiss to his lips.

Goodbye.

I pull away from his mouth, panting.

He is breathing hard too, watching me, ever responsive to my unexplained moods. If I let him stare too long, he will figure me out.

When I shift away, he releases me, and I ease myself off his lap. My legs barely hold. I turn my back as I pull my dress over my shoulders and fumble with the laces, looping it just enough to keep it from falling open.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"For what?"

I glance at him, his hair and shirt mussed from my hands. Every part of me wants to climb back into that chair and forget I ever came here for any other reason.

"Goodnight, Alaris."

I flee the room before he can read my face.

24

The aviary door groans shut behind me. The hawks stir on their perches.

I hold the stone up to the moonlight filtering through the high windows. The black facets flash, the silver stars gleaming faintly. It's smaller than I remember. The pointed end is sharp against my fingertip.

With this as an exit strategy, the safest place for me is back at the Sunrise Palace. I don't want to face my father, but it's better than spending the rest of my life running from his reach. I'll return to the palace, take my punishment, and keep this at the ready for when the masked man arrives.

I purse my lips and copy the motion Alaris made in Delvos, swinging it through the air.

Nothing happens.

I imagine my destination, picturing the lace and marble of my bedroom, and slash it again. I throw it in a wider arc, willing the air to split open, willing a gate to appear. I try again, slower. Faster. Facing a different direction.

Come on. Come on.

Nothing.

I shake the stone as if brute force will coax the magic from it. The hawks rustle and click overhead. He made it look simple. The mask I borrowed on Somnus was simple. So why won't this work?

The cord is still attached…when he used it, it was loose. It's too dark in here to figure out how to detach it. And there might be some other trick, something with the pattern of the stars, or a special way I'm supposed to

hold it. I'll have to experiment later. For now, I need to leave. I might not have long until Alaris notices it's gone.

The stone itself would have been my fastest exit, but my next best option is a horse. I put on my cloak, shoulder my bag, and dash for the stables.

Horses shift and snort as I ease the stable door open. They're packed two to a stall, with more tethered in the central corridor. I don't want to take a horse from any of the townspeople, but I know Alaris will ensure they're all taken care of.

I shove thoughts of him out of my mind.

I pad toward a small mare near the door. She huffs as I approach, but she doesn't try to kick or nip.

"Easy girl," I murmur.

I don't know how to saddle my own horse, but I've seen it done. A saddle hangs next to her on a beam. It's surprisingly heavy, but I manage to hoist it onto her back. My fingers fumble the buckles in the dark, reaching under her. I'm too full of adrenaline to be as cautious as I usually would be getting this close to her legs.

I put one foot in the stirrup and try to mount, only to have the saddle slide sideways. "Oof," I exclaim as I land on one leg, my ankle stinging.

"Easy girl," a voice says from behind me.

I trip sideways, foot still tangled in the stirrup, and barely catch myself on a post. Splinters bite into my palms and I wince.

"Going somewhere?" Alaris stands in the stable doorway, arms crossed. The lantern flickering above him throws half his face into shadow.

I'm caught. "I'm sorry." It's the only thing I can think to say.

"Sorry for what exactly?" he asks, tone flat. "Stealing from me? Lying to me? Or breaking the only promise I ever asked you to make? Because this is disappearing."

My jaw locks. There is nothing I can say to defend myself. "I'm sorry, Alaris. I really am. But unless you stop me, I'm still leaving. Right now."

I pull my stinging hands off the post and turn my back on him. I begin tightening the too-loose straps on the saddle.

"A horse thief too, I see." His voice is a dangerous purr.

I don't turn around. I thread buckles and tug leather with fingers that won't stop shaking. I'm not going to stop until he stops me. My panic gives me no other choice but to keep moving.

“Why?”

His quiet question hangs unanswered. I would almost rather he scream at me and call for guards. A buckle catches and I wiggle it back into place, then test the tension.

“Ly.” He’s closer now. I can feel him at my back. “Why?”

“What does it matter why?” My eyes are burning. “I’m a thief. I’m a liar.”

I put my foot in the stirrup and swing my leg over the saddle.

His hands close around my waist before I can settle my weight. “Hey!” I shout, but his grip is too firm to fight. He lifts me off the horse and lowers me to the floor. As soon as my boots hit straw, I spin, shoving at his chest. “Let me go.”

He doesn’t budge an inch.

“Let me go.” My plea is high and thin. I pull against his hold. “Please.”

“Why?”

“She knows.”

“Who knows?”

“Drina,” I blurt. “She’s not just a servant. She’s a spy for the palace, and…” My words die in my throat as I realize how much I’ve already said.

Something cold flickers behind his eyes. “What would a spy from the palace want with you?”

I bite down hard on the truth. “It doesn’t matter. I just have to leave.”

His jaw sets. “And where exactly will you go?”

“Anywhere that isn’t here.”

“You can’t ride off into the dark, Ly. You don’t even know how to saddle a horse.”

“Keep your horse too, then. I’ll walk.”

“You have no provisions, no map, and your cloak isn’t warm enough.”

“Look, just…” Every moment I spend arguing gives my father’s soldiers more time to close the distance. I dig into the pouch at my belt, fingers closing around the crystal I spent all these weeks searching for. I hold the voidstone between us. “Here. Have it back. Just let me go.”

He doesn’t reach for it.

“Take it.” I shove it against his chest, pressing it to the spot I pulled it from under his shirt earlier.

His hands don’t lift off my ribs, not even twitching to accept it.

“You’ll never see me again,” I beg. “Letting me walk away will be easier than keeping me prisoner.”

“You’re right.” His words are slow. “It would be easier.”

My heart pangs once at his cold reply. What we shared earlier is gone. I ruined it, and I don’t know what to expect from the Alaris who now sees me as a thief.

“Then let me go,” I say.

After another excruciating pause, he nods. “You can leave.” His hold doesn’t loosen. “After I correct some misconceptions. Starting with the voidstone. Although your efforts to get it were…memorable…I’m afraid they were wasted.”

The air behind him splits open, bright at the edges, black at its center. Before I can make a sound, he pulls me against him and steps backward into the gate. Void swallows us.

I grip the front of his shirt because there’s nothing else to hold.

My feet hit solid ground. The gate crackles shut. We’re in his candlelit bedroom.

I wrench free and stumble away until I hit the doorframe. I clutch the stone tight in my fist despite the splinters digging farther into my palm.

He isn’t trying to take it from me. He doesn’t seem at all worried about me holding it.

And he just opened a gate.

My suspicion grows. I dangle the voidstone out to one side, but his eyes stay on mine. I let it drop to the ground. It rolls.

He doesn’t even glance at it.

Realization sinks into my chest. “That doesn’t do anything, does it?”

He shakes his head slowly. “If I was ever forced to use my power in front of others, a spelled object is easier to explain.”

My breath shudders out. The stone is just a cover. A ruse to help a lord hide his true power. An astounding power. I have never heard of arastorians wielding such a gift. The whole line must have committed to keeping it a secret.

No wonder he’s not angrier that I stole from him. It’s a betrayal, but I didn’t take something that mattered to him.

He steps closer. My hand fumbles for the door handle. My pulse is hammering in my throat.

I can’t outrun him.

It won't stop me from trying.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Ly." His voice is low and steady. "As I said, you can leave, after I clear up a few more misconceptions."

"Misconceptions or lies?"

"I don't think you are the one to lecture me about lies." He enunciates every word as he closes the distance slowly. His fingers find my forearm, light, deliberate, and slide down to my wrist. My skin prickles in the wake of his touch. He eases my hand off the door handle and examines it.

"You can leave after you listen," he says, his eyes on my palm. "Will you listen?"

I nod. Even though my heart is pounding, I don't think he'll hurt me. Plus, I don't really have another choice.

"Then wait here."

A black, crackling line appears, and in a single breath, he disappears into it. I stumble forward, not realizing I was leaning into him. I press back against the wood, exhaling hard. He's even faster at opening gates when he's not pretending to use the stone.

I look at the crystal on the ground. Black facets, silver stars, the pointed tip that was going to cut a portal in the air and carry me to safety. It's just a rock now. I grimace.

I barely have time to compose myself before he reappears.

He lifts my hand again and produces a pair of silver tweezers. I tug away when I realize what he's doing.

"Don't fight me on this, Ly. I'm not in the mood." His tone is controlled. I almost wish he would yell at me. His quiet attention and care are far more painful than the hot splinters in my palm.

But my survival instincts kick in for once around him, and I stay completely still.

He angles the tweezers carefully and pulls the first splinter free. I hiss through my teeth. It comes out with a drop of blood, and its length makes me queasy. His eyes search mine briefly before he goes for the next one, his fingers sure, his grip firm enough that I can't pull away.

It's easier if I don't watch, so I study his face. His eyes are heavy lidded, and intent on my palm. His earring sways as he angles his head.

"Second misconception," he says without even looking up at me. "Drina is not here for you."

"What?" I startle at the sudden shift in conversation.

“You were right. She is a spy from the palace,” he says simply. “But she’s not here for you.”

“But you don’t…how could you possibly know that?”

“Because she’s here for me. So if she’s the reason you’re leaving”—his eyes meet mine, then drop to my lips, then return to my hand—“you might reconsider.”

I blink at him. I don’t even feel the next few splinters he pulls.

Could Alaris be right? Was Drina in the woods reporting on…him? But why?

He doesn’t elaborate. Instead, he gives my raised palm one final inspection before he returns it to my side and picks up the other. “And finally, if you still want to go, you must go flameward.”

“I know, you told me. The wither—”

He shakes his head, pressing his thumbs around a splinter I refuse to look at. “I’m not just talking about the shadoward roads on your journey away from the castle. You must go flameward, as far as you can. Straight to the center. Stay there. Build your life there.”

My back prickles. Close to the center means close to Illios, and close to my father. The last place I want to be. “Why?”

He releases my hand, and I flex it. Both palms sting, dotted with tiny red spots. The splinters are gone.

He produces a sprig of lavender, holding it out toward me. He waits until I take it, then enfolds both my hands in his, pressing them together around the flowers. The sting cools and fades.

“Keep that there.” He turns away. “I’ll show you.”

He walks to his desk, takes the letter opener from the drawer, and fits it into the knot in a wall panel. The hidden compartment I found a few days ago pops open.

He pulls out a roll of paper and carries it to the sitting area, spreading it across the low table. It’s a map of the provinces, but even from here, I can tell the edges are…different. Ink crowds the coastlines and edges of the continent, little circles in gray and red and yellow overlapping so densely they look like scribbles. Some are no bigger than a pinprick, others the width of my thumb.

Alaris places his finger on a small sketch of a castle. He drags it to a red circle in the nearby woods. “This is the patch of forest we rode to. It’s the farthest flameward point the wither has reached this year.” He moves his

finger up and to the right, landing on a larger red circle. “And this is the most recent, where Culdridge stood.”

This is a map of the wither. The lords of death have no province, but according to this map, they have claimed the most land of any divinial house with their destructive magic.

Death surrounds us completely.

“This is…so much land, gone.” I step closer despite myself. Colors of ink are swatched and labeled in a key in the top corner. Gray from fifteen years ago. Yellow from ten. Red from the last five. The red is the thickest.

“If you leave,” he says again softly, “go flameward.”

“They can’t get much closer to the flame. The emperor’s power will prevent it.”

The central expanse of untouched land is proof enough of that.

“No, Ly, it won’t. The wither isn’t what you think.” He stares at me for a long moment. “The emperor wants people to believe it’s the cursed power of the gods of death. But it’s not Thanovar’s power.” He points to the heart of the map, where Illios gleams in gold ink. “It’s Ignar’s.”

I stare at him, searching for some hint I’ve misunderstood. But his face is locked in the stoic expression I’ve seen more and more often since the townspeople arrived. “That doesn’t make any sense. The forest wasn’t burned.”

“The emperor has kept his eternal summer going for millennia. The wither is the cost.”

“There is already a cost,” I sputter. “The shadoward lands are colder. Your mild summers. Your harsh winters. In exchange for the capital’s warmth.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not enough. The emperor pulls more than the sun can give, and the energy has to come from somewhere.” He traces his finger along the edge of the map. “It drains from here. From the living things the sun once fed.”

When I think of the limits on Ignar’s power, I imagine things freezing. Heat, flame, and sun giving way to barren cold. But this?

It was easy to believe what I saw in the forest was death magic, because everything was dead. But it wasn’t decay. It was desiccation. Could that be what it looks like when what came from the sun gets ripped back?

He taps the edge of the map. “Why would the lords of Thanovar spend their strength on barren mountains? On seaweed and fish? Why would

divinials of death waste their power killing things no one will ever mourn?”

My eyes rove over the lines again. The marks don’t cluster around cities. They sprawl across uninhabited mountain ranges, empty waters, stretches of forest where no road runs.

“Many in the shadoward lands ask these questions. That’s why the emperor watches us.” He meets my eyes. “That’s why Drina is in my house. To see if I’ve figured out the thanovarians are not to blame, and whether I plan to do anything about it.”

I was so certain there was no other reason Orso’s soldier would be here but me. But maybe the soldier was just receiving Drina’s regular report to the palace on the comings and goings of a shadoward sovereign. She still might be suspicious of me, given that she snooped in my room, but that doesn’t mean she’s figured out who I am.

And it’s more likely she was in the aviary to intercept Alaris’s messages than for anything to do with me.

If everything Alaris has said is true, even having this map is treason. “You are planning to do something about it, aren’t you?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he rolls up the paper and slides it back into the compartment. “I’m only telling you this because things are going to get worse, and soon. If you go, go flameward.”

He should hate me. I stole from him, lied to him, and used my mouth to get my hands around his throat, yet he’s still trying to warn me.

But without the stone, I’ve stayed in one place far too long.

I grit my teeth. “Then I guess you’ve cleared up my misconceptions,” I say coldly. “Does that mean I’m free to leave?”

He nods, the expression on his face unreadable. “As promised.”

“I’ll go at first light.”

25

With nowhere else to go tonight, I trudge back to the aviary on numb legs.

The hawks rustle when I push through the door. The scent of clean hay is comforting as always, but it's far from enough. I betrayed Alaris's trust for nothing. For a rock. A prop. And now I know the truth…

My father's eternal summer is killing people.

I collapse onto the fur pallet and pull the blanket to my chin. The hawks watch from their perches, dark eyes catching starlight from the windows high above. One drops down and settles beside me, warm weight against my shoulder.

I press my face into the fur. It smells like cloves. I let tears leak into the bedding, hoping this ache heals by morning.

It doesn't.

I wake stiff and hurting with my eyes half swollen shut. I want last night to have been a dream, but it's not. Guilt pangs through my chest all over again.

The pretense is over. The hope of instant escape is over. I'm leaving this castle today, and I'm never coming back.

I pack up my bag, returning every belonging I came with to its place.

I hesitate on the pouch of lobell seeds. I never got to share these with Siro. After how well my lobellum worked on the people of Culdridge, I thought I might have a chance to give her a few and show her how to care for this finicky variety.

But Karns's sister is smart. She'll figure it out, even if a few bushes die in the process. I leave a dozen seeds on the bench in the center of a cloth so someone will notice them.

The hawks track me from perch to perch, heads swiveling. As I tie on my cloak, a few of them drop to the bench and the basin, whistling.

My throat tightens. I run my hand over the closest one's wing, feeling its rapid heartbeat under sleek feathers.

"I have to go," I whisper. "You'll be fine without me."

Their small cries follow me as I sling the pack over my shoulder and push through the door.

Outside, the morning air is bright and cold, so I squint and blink a moment before fully comprehending the figure waiting for me. Dashol is standing just outside the aviary, holding the reins of a mare. He lifts one hand in greeting, his usual smile a little slow.

"I heard you'll be leaving us today," he says. "I was told to prepare a mount and some supplies for you."

The horse beside him is saddled and ready. Full bags bulge at her sides. A quick peek reveals food, water, a map, a leather pouch with assorted metal tools, a bedroll…everything I will need on the road, and more.

"Ah, and your wages." He hands me a bag of coins. "If there is anything you are missing, he said you could provide a list."

I don't have to ask who "he" is.

I accept the clinking bag, feeling the weight of coins I earned with my own hands. With supplies and a better means of travel, I can focus on surviving the shadow that hunts me. Now my eyes are leaking again.

I don't deserve any of this after what I've done, but I'll accept it to get away from here.

I swing astride the mare. My riding lessons were so many years ago that even with my growing strength, the motion is awkward. But after a bit of wobbling, I settle into the saddle. Dashol passes me a pair of riding gloves. I slide them on, grateful for the extra warmth. "Thank you."

He nods. "I'll walk you to the front gate."

The mare's gait is smooth, making it easy for even an inexperienced rider like me. Dashol gives me directions to the main road flameward, and to the nearest inn. The creak of overloaded carts and low voices fill the air. Many of the townspeople crowd the area, readying their own horses.

The gate stands open. Beyond it, the road winds into morning mist.

Men and women work together to lash down crates. A man separates from the crowd, dragged by a dog trying to run toward another family. Near the wall, an old woman grips a young man's face in both hands. She turns away, her shoulders shaking.

"Where will they all go?" I ask.

"They've all been assigned to houses with space or structures that could be fitted for the winter."

Dashol guides the mare, threading through the carts. The dark treetops loom over the walls, hinting at miles of unfamiliar wilderness.

As much as the townspeople have lost, I can't help but feel the slightest twist of something bitter…jealousy? They are all facing this horrible situation together, while I am facing the dark forest alone.

It's ugly, and I do my best to shake it away. I grip the reins and grit my teeth, straightening my back. I've done this before without provisions or a map or a horse. I wasn't sure I could survive on my own the night I left the palace, but now I know I can. I will find my way outside these castle walls.

Dashol stops at the edge of the gate. "Are you okay to ride from here?"

"Oh…yes." I drink in a breath of the cold air. "Just fine."

He nods, his big hand falling from the reins. "Then this is goodbye, Lyra. Sorry to see you go. Come back and visit us sometime, alright?"

I had no business being here in the first place, but Dashol never made me feel that way. My eyes sting, and it's not from the cold. "Thank you again. For everything."

I kick the mare into motion. I bounce badly in the saddle at first, but gradually I find the rhythm of her gait. The castle walls shrink behind me. The road ahead cuts through the pines, the dirt marked by the carts that left before me.

The morning passes in silence. Just as I remember, the road is long and straight. I reach the point where the road narrows and pass what I explored on foot, but there isn't much new to see. With no turns to choose, the mare plods along without interference, picking her way around frosty patches and fallen branches while I focus on keeping my seat. I eat one of the rolls from the saddlebag without stopping.

By midday, I finally reach a fork. The cold has settled into my hands and my thighs ache from the hard saddle. I slow to a stop and swing off as carefully as I can. Dashol told me to take my first right to get to the inn, but

I want to make sure this is the right crossroads. I guide the mare to the side of the road, offering her a handful of oats from the saddlebag.

I tug out the map and unfurl it. The sketch is detailed, with distances marked between towns and inns, and water sources circled in blue ink. One branch of the road curves flameward. The other, crossed through with an "X," leads deeper into the shadoward reaches.

If you go, go flameward.

I trace the route I want to take with one finger. I'll go to the inn for tonight, and in the morning, I'll pick another province to travel to. Sophys is flameward, but still far enough from the capital to give me comfort. Maybe the divinials of truth will help me breathe easier. Maybe the air there will clear my mind of phantom shadows and unanswerable questions.

Absently, my eyes search for Culdridge. I find the looping name. There are at least three towns in between here and there.

Are they next?

Alaris is sending the people of Culdridge to settle in other areas, but how long will they be safe there? From what I saw on the map, the wither has only overtaken small towns and border villages and remote islands that nobody in the capital has ever heard of. But the lines are creeping inward. How long until a city falls? What lies would my father tell then?

I lower the paper.

I don't know what Alaris is up to, but I'm certain he's planning something to stop the wither.

Maybe I can help.

I shake the thought off and fold up the map. I ignore the twinge in my hip as I remount and guide the mare down the road toward the inn. But in only a few steps, I slow her to another stop.

This doesn't feel right.

Everything I've done since I left the palace, I can justify. The lies, the theft, the masks. I've done what I had to. Desperation made it easy. Survival excused every audacious act. I'm sure I can find another town, come up with another name, and I will survive there too. Even if I have to steal again, even if I have to lie, I won't feel bad about it because it's what's necessary.

But riding off while my father's power eats the world feels different. It feels like I've stumbled upon something bigger than me and my survival,

bigger than the minor inconveniences and lies I leave strewn upon my path as I run from my shadow.

This feels like running away from something important.

I'm not a governess from Delvos or a hawk keeper from Arastos. I'm not whoever I'll have to pretend to be at the inn tonight. I'm a princess of the blood, and I grew up at the center of the eternal summer that is sapping the life from the edges. I know my father, the palace, the court. Even with my flamelessness, I know things about being ignarian no one outside those walls could.

I don't believe I can do much with that knowledge on my own. But if Alaris already has a plan, maybe I can help. He didn't get the chance to evaluate that before he let me leave.

Still, staying in one place terrifies me. Even if Drina wasn't reporting on me this time, she certainly would if she found out who I am. Without the voidstone, I don't have any solution but an endless race toward the horizon to escape from my murderer.

If I'm going to stay and help him, maybe I can get his help too. As Alaris said, trust goes both ways.

Maybe *trust* is too much to hope for at this point, but *mutual benefit* is still possible. He has the power I wanted to steal, after all.

He might reject me. The horse and the road might not have been optional. But all it will cost me to find out is one more day and a very uncomfortable conversation.

Should I just choose the inn? The thought of facing him makes it tempting.

The mare stamps, waiting for direction. I turn her back to the castle.

The ride takes the rest of the afternoon. My legs are trembling by the time the castle walls come into view. I can barely feel my fingers on the reins.

I ride through the gate, still open, though the people of Culdridge appear to have long departed. I steer the mare to the stable.

Dashol is crossing the courtyard with an armful of firewood. He stops when he sees me. The wood shifts in his grip. "You're back!"

"Yes. I'm not leaving today." I dismount. My legs almost buckle, but I grab the saddle and hold myself upright. I sling my bag around me, leaving the rest of the supplies. "Can you find a better use for this mare?"

I catch the hint of a smile. I turn away before it can spread.

I have a message to deliver.

26

I stride to Alaris's office before I can talk myself out of it.

The hallway is quiet. My legs ache from the saddle and my hands are still stiff from the cold. There's no scroll tucked in my fist. I have no excuse for being here but my own choices, and I feel every swallow, every heartbeat.

I knock.

"Enter."

Alaris sits at his desk, a pen in his hand. He looks up and the pen stills.

"Ly." He sets the pen down. "Dashol said you left this morning."

"I did."

He slides back in his chair and lifts his chin, keeping his eyes on me. "What happened to 'I'll leave and you'll never see me again'?"

"I came back to clear up a…misconception…of my own." I take a deep breath. "But first, I owe you an apology. I lied to you. I tried to steal from you—"

"Don't sell yourself short." He gives me a humorless smile. "You did steal from me."

"I…did. And I'm sorry." I keep my face controlled, even though my toes are curling against the leather in my boots. "I thought it was a matter of life and death. But now I see there is a bigger matter of life and death, and I want to help with that."

He waits, not filling the silence for me.

I suck in more air. “I came back because I think I can help with whatever you’re planning. With the wither.”

I can see it now: the difference between even the barest movements of his breath and expression, and these moments when he goes unnaturally still. His face is completely blank, but that’s his tell when he’s trying to hide something.

“And who says I’m planning anything?”

“You have a map of it in a secret compartment in your bedroom.” I raise my eyebrows. “Do you expect me to believe you’re just tracking it as a hobby?”

“Maybe I am.”

“Your hobby is treason?”

He says nothing.

“You said the wither is caused by the emperor. Then I’m in a unique position to help.”

“Really? I have no use for a thief.”

“I’m not a thief!” I stutter. I steady my voice. “I’d never stolen anything before the voidstone.”

“Even if that’s true”—his gaze drops to my mouth for a beat—“theft isn’t the only way you broke the terms of your employment.”

My cheeks burn as I flash to myself in his lap, unlacing my dress. “I’m sorry, that was…” I can’t call it a mistake when it wasn’t. I raise my chin. “I crossed the line. If you want, I’ll go.”

He holds my gaze a long moment, then sighs. “The hawks have been insufferable for a single day without you. If you want to stay, we can consider it a temporary hiatus in your employment. Everything that happened in that room was between me and a thief. Not a lord and his hawk keeper.” He stands and walks to the window, crossing his hands behind his back. “But you don’t need to get involved in anything else. Let me handle what needs to be handled.”

He’s being generous, but I’m not risking staying put for the safety and comfort of the aviary. “I didn’t ride back for the hawks, Alaris.”

“Then why did you ride back?”

If I’m going to earn trust, I’m going to have to offer it.

“As I said, I think I’m in a unique position to help.” I steady my voice. “I didn’t grow up in Delvos. I grew up in Illios. In the Citadel, actually…”

He raises his eyebrows in a rare expression of surprise.

Three knocks ring through the office. Before either of us says another word, the door swings open.

"My lord?" a lady's voice calls out. A head piled with coiled curls sticks through the doorway. Her skin is rouged, matching the magenta shade of her dress. "Am I interrupting?"

She lets herself in, taffeta crinkling with every step. Her gaze darts from Alaris to me. Her eyes squint above a tight smile. "I believe you're expecting me, my lord. If you are done with your maid—"

"Hawk keeper," I say, before I can stop myself.

"Current hawk keeper, ex thief," Alaris mutters. He walks toward her, arms spread. "Mirvol, of course, I'm sorry for not receiving you. I was distracted."

I tap my foot. It's clear what she's here for. I was just working up to revealing the truth, and now I won't get the chance.

And maybe I'm annoyed at the reminder that what we shared last night wasn't unique in the slightest for Alaris.

He's a good leader, as I've seen with the people of Culdridge. But he is also a pleasure seeker, who spends a decent amount of time with revolving lovers.

It doesn't mean I can't respect him or help him. But I can't deny the bitter twinge in my stomach.

I have to work not to scowl as Mirvol crosses the room to his side, putting one gloved hand on his chest.

"I'll go then," I say tightly.

"Wait." Alaris's eyes shift between me and her, a curious gleam behind them.

What is that look?

"Ly, would you accompany us for a moment?"

"Where?"

He smiles, slow and mischievous. "To the bedroom."

My jaw falls open. Surely he knows we won't be continuing what I started last night, and certainly not with another person in the room. My eyes dart to Mirvol, and I note her similarly shocked expression. She looks me up and down, her eyes narrowing.

I am about to refuse, but her obvious dislike of the idea stalls the rejection in my mouth. His lover isn't keen on the idea either, and that

sparks my curiosity. What could he possibly think we will both want in his bedroom at the same time?

Curiosity wins. “Lead the way.”

The lord, still smiling, offers Mirvol an arm before sweeping toward the door. Getting left to follow sparks my ire again, but Mirvol looks back and gives me one final scowl, which propels me forward.

I trail behind his broad shoulders and her swishing taffeta, heartbeat thumping. Aren’t they about to have sex? Does he really think the three of us should look at something together before he boots me out and gets to it?

I can’t stop myself from picturing his large, well-muscled body bent over her, biting her shoulder as he pushes into her from behind. My cheeks flame. The idea of those long fingers curling around her hips as he thrusts… I can see it. From everything I’ve experienced, and felt, I know he is an attentive and skillful lover. I lick my lips.

But I don’t want to think about them together.

I shouldn’t think about him like that at all.

We pass a maid who bows her head, no doubt accustomed to seeing the lord returning to his bedroom with a well-dressed woman on his arm. But her eyes widen as she sees me tagging along. I wonder if she notes the confusion on my face, mirroring hers.

“We’ll require privacy in my wing,” he says to her.

She dips into a quick curtsy and leaves.

It’s jarring to see him back in this role of the cavalier seducer. It’s as if all the serious things that have passed between us didn’t happen at all.

My steps slow. What if he really is imagining he can coax us into a tangle of three? I have no experience with that, and no desire to share. But if she wasn’t here, and he offered, was there a world where I would accompany him back to his bedroom for more than a bath…?

We’re at the door before I mix myself up further in unhelpful thoughts.

He opens the door for Mirvol and keeps it open until I follow. I scowl at his gleeful expression. He’s got me on the back foot, and he’s enjoying it.

All traces of Mirvol’s smile are gone as she crosses her arms and waits. Alaris closes the door behind him, smirking. I stand as far away from both of them, and the bed, as I can, placing myself next to the couches in the sitting area.

Mirvol doesn’t keep her distance. She walks straight up to him and threads her arm through his.

“Well?” Mirvol speaks first. “What is going on here? I didn’t travel all this way to share.”

“Why would I share what I don’t even want to begin with?” I say, rankled. It’s probably not the most flattering way to speak about my employer, but Alaris is the one creating misconceptions. I’m simply clearing them up.

I glance at him and see a smirk, his eyes moving over my face slowly. They taunt me, like he knows the desire I showed last night wasn’t an act.

My cheeks flush. “If you don’t want me here, I will happily remove myself—”

“Stay,” Alaris says. “Mirvol has something to show us.” He looks expectantly at her.

Mirvol tilts her head, her smile stiff. “What do you mean?”

Alaris pats the arm she’s looped through his. “There is no need to pretend.” His voice is smooth, but firm. “Show me what you’ve brought for me.”

Mirvol stiffens and gives me one more glance. “You’re sure?”

He nods.

“This is something good, Alaris. If you aren’t sure…if she breathes a word…”

“I’m sure. She’s a recent recruit.”

Mirvol straightens, dropping her grip on Alaris. She stalks over to join me in the sitting area. I stumble back a few steps, still unsure what is going on. She slides a hand beneath her dress, exposing most of one leg. She roots around near her thigh.

“What are you…?”

She pulls out a tightly wound piece of parchment. She straightens her skirts and begins opening it on the table. I sink to the couch as Alaris comes over. He watches as she smooths out the paper, holding the ends down with weights.

I’m still catching up to the fact that she’s not removing her dress to seduce me.

“I’ve learned of another tunnel,” Mirvol says, tapping the edge. “It runs beneath the outer and inner walls and opens in this courtyard.”

I skate my eyes over the sketch before me. The shapes are familiar. It takes a minute to recognize that it’s an aerial view of a section of the

Citadel. I tense, understanding jolting through me. This woman, dressed like a flower, rouged and scented to smell like one, isn't here for sex.

She's here with information.

Mirvol is here to help with the wither.

"And the nearest guards?" Alaris asks.

"Posted here and here." Her fingertip stops at two points along the wall. I've never seen the grounds from above, and the light pencil sketch makes it hard to tell which part of the complex I'm looking at. "But they don't watch the entrances. It's sealed, but only by a wall of bricks."

They talk over my head. Guard rotations. Tower windows. Mirvol's voice becomes clipped and professional, and Alaris leans over the table beside her. It's becoming clearer by the second that this is so much bigger than one lord with a secret compartment and a map.

Is Mirvol a trained soldier, scaling walls and spying on guards in the night? I examine her outfit again, noting the rubies dangling from her ears, and the large opalescent jewel on one finger. She looks like any lady who ever visited the court, not a soldier in a costume.

How many women in taffeta and perfume have sat in this room and pulled secrets from beneath their dresses?

I refocus on the map. There is a distinct sun shape in the middle of the courtyard; that's the base of the Solvarian monument, depicting the moment when Emperor Illio first appeared in the world.

I know which courtyard this is now. I press my lips together, thinking.

Alaris glances at me, then returns his focus to the map. "Any trees? What's the terrain?"

"I'll mark them for you…"

"If you're trying to get into the Citadel, that tunnel won't work," I interrupt. Both of them turn toward me. I swallow. "It isn't passable."

"It's only sealed," Mirvol insists. "That's the advantage. Few know it's there, and no one guards the entrance. Some chisels and a few strong blows…"

Alaris watches me carefully, his face stone.

This isn't how I wanted to reveal who I am.

I take in a deep breath. "It might have been, until late summer," I say, unable to meet his eyes. "But a section of the inner wall collapsed. Workers filled the tunnel with broken stone and debris to reinforce it."

Carriages had to go around the rubble for weeks. I saw the laborers hauling the stones, rivulets of sweat cutting through the dust coating their skin in summer's final blaze.

"Alaris, how would she know?" Mirvol protests. "My source in Illios assured me—"

"When did you last talk to your source, Mirvol?" Alaris asks, his voice even.

She scowls, planting a fist on the table. "Embrus. At the solstice celebration."

I tense. I was at the celebration too, trying not to get singed off the stage with all my siblings burning hotter. But there is no recognition in Mirvol's eyes.

"Then if the cave-in happened in late summer, your source wouldn't have known at Embrus," Alaris says simply.

"I suppose." Mirvol's mouth tightens. She pulls the map closer as if to take it. "That's disappointing."

"Thank you for your efforts, Mirvol," he says, taking the map from her hands. "You've still brought the most detailed map of this area we've gotten. I've got another task for you."

He escorts her to the door. I don't catch whatever next assignment he mutters to her in a low voice.

Mirvol threads her fingers through her styled hair and gives it a shake, mussing it so much a few pins pop out. She pulls at her dress, twisting it until it looks like it went on in a hurry. "Do you need help with the bed?" she asks.

He shakes his head. "I'll drop a little perfume on it for the laundry."

"Won't the servants find it odd I'm leaving so quickly?"

"My pride will survive it. Barely." He opens the door for her.

As soon as he does, she lets out a pealing laugh. "I'm sorry I have to leave so soon, but I'll be back to visit again. You know I can't stay away." Her sing-songy voice is back.

"And I eagerly await your next visit, Lady Mirvol." I watch the shift in his body language, his movements fluid and theatrical as he bends to kiss her hand.

It's a performance.

After a few more sweet nothings exchanged back and forth, Mirvol leaves.

He shuts the door and turns toward me, the smile dropping off his face. He doesn't look angry, just intent, his hooded eyes calm and steady.

The quiet between us stretches. I stay on the couch, arms crossed, my heart drumming.

"So Mirvol," I say, unable to endure the silence any longer. "She's not your lover."

"No," he says. "She's an informant."

I think of every woman I've watched come and go from this house, every knowing look from the staff when the carriages arrive and depart.

"What about all the other women? Are they…"

"Also informants." He tucks his hands into his pockets. "Most are members of powerful families in the shadoward lands. Smart enough to see the danger, but invisible to everyone around them."

Could it be true? The scandalous lord who entertains a parade of women is a ruse? With his looks, and the attention he gets, it must be a mix of both. I'm sure plenty of women enter this room with maps up their skirts, then stay for more.

I narrow my eyes. "Really? None of them?"

"None," he says, tone flat. "I didn't invent my rule about mixing sex and business just for you. My informants and I have a professional relationship and common goals. The cover story gives them a reason to travel and gives the staff something to whisper about. The emperor doesn't expect any kind of threat from a lord consumed with revelry and passion."

It isn't hard to imagine, because I'd assumed the same. From the beginning, I believed his pursuit of women couldn't overlap with any kind of serious motivation.

When the people from Culdridge arrived, I thought I was learning about a second side to this man. The charming lord and the serious one were two versions I was only just beginning to reconcile. Before my eyes, the two Alarises are resolving into one. The true one. The charming womanizer is a fabrication, a lie for listening servants. An extra layer of protection against the emperor's scrutiny.

My heart rate picks up and my next thought stalls. Something about this version of him makes me nervous. Yet again, he's stripped away the defenses I had against a frivolous lord. I'm out of my depth facing only the serious Alaris. The rebel who is plotting against the empire.

“I’ve answered enough questions,” he says, stepping closer. “Now it’s your turn. How did a governess living in Delvos know about recent construction on a wall of the Citadel?”

There’s no way around it now. I don’t know why the words stick on my tongue, when I already planned to reveal the truth.

“I was about to tell you before Mirvol interrupted,” I admit quietly. “I think I can help with the wither, because up until very recently, I lived in the Citadel.”

Alaris watches me, unmoving. He’s not going to free me from this moment until I speak.

“My name isn’t Lyra. And it isn’t Portia.” I curl my hands into fists at my sides, nails biting into my palms. “It’s Lysandra. Lysandra Ignaros.”

My name feels strange to say out loud after months burying the truth inside.

The silence that follows is only punctuated by my heartbeat. It pulses in my ears, my wrists, the base of my throat.

“Ignaros.” He repeats the name carried by the emperor and his descendants. His gaze searches mine, more intent than I’ve ever felt it. “You’re Lysandra.”

The low way he says my name makes my skin prickle. I force myself to hold his gaze, my throat tight. “Yes.”

“The emperor’s youngest daughter.” It isn’t a question. He knows the names of the royal family.

I wince, my shoulders pulling in. “I’m not going to warn him about your plans. I really came back to help.”

“I didn’t ask if you were.” His voice is low. “What I do want to know is: why are you here, Princess Lysandra?”

“Just Ly is fine,” I say, swallowing.

“Then, Ly, why are you here?”

“I…thought my life was in danger,” I simplify. “So I ran away.”

His brows draw together. I hear how it sounds: I got scared and fled my life of leisure.

“I didn’t mean to trick you,” I stutter. He’s so still I’m not sure he’s breathing. “That’s why I thought Drina was reporting on me…”

“From what?”

“What?”

“What did you run from? What was the danger?”

The question twists something in my chest. I want to tell him. I want to tell him about the fear that struck me at midnight, the certainty that chased me down the river, the dreams that gave my fears form. But the dreams never resolved my biggest questions.

"When you learned Lord Norville's house was no longer safe, you could have asked me to take you back to the palace," he presses. "Clearly, you were worried enough to stay away."

How do I explain a threat that I can't prove is real? How do I make him understand what I barely do myself?

"There is a…man."

"A man."

"I thought a man was trying to kill me." I shake my head again. More details will only lead to lies. "If you have a problem with me being here, I'll leave. But I'm not going back."

For a moment, I think he'll insist on answers. But instead, he curls his hands into fists, and tucks them behind his back, exhaling through his teeth.

"Alright. I'll leave that, for now," he says. "But you don't understand what you are asking to help with. What I'm planning will not sit well with the emperor's daughter."

"I already told you I'm not going to warn him…"

"You can still stay here, Ly." His tone softens. "The hawks adore you. Nothing else has to change."

"I'm not going to hide in the aviary!" I bristle. This feels just like the afternoon the townspeople arrived, when he tried to send me away. "I saw the people of Culdridge—"

"I'm going to kill him, Ly."

I go quiet.

"I'm going to kill the emperor. That's the only way to stop the wither."

I blink. Now I'm the one who can't find my words, and when I do, the only word is, "No."

"Ly…"

"You can't," I ramble on. "He's the emperor, Alaris. He is the most powerful divinial alive."

"I know what he is."

"Then you should know you can't win." My voice is climbing and I force it down. I've seen my father char men to ash without rising from his seat. The rumors are that in the wars, he and Emperor Illio boiled fields of

mortal combatants, armor offering no defense against flame. “It’s impossible.”

“Then I’m going to do the impossible.” His face is unmoved, the conviction in his tone absolute. “Still want to help?”

No matter how strong Alaris is, he’s no match for the half-divine emperor, his allies, and his armies. If my father learns a whisper of Alaris’s intentions, he’ll be burned alive in the Crimson Square, along with every member of the arastorian line, and anyone who has ever seen that map.

I need to involve myself, if only to talk him out of this.

“Yes,” I say, meeting his eyes. “I still want to help. I just…want to ask one thing of you first.”

He waits.

I clear my throat. “Day or night, anytime, if I ask you to open a shadowgate and take me far away, you’ll do it.”

He studies me. “Why?”

“No questions, please. Just promise me.” I’m going against my instincts to stay in place, but Alaris’s promise of help is the next best thing to having the stone in my pocket. If everything falls apart, if the masked man closes the distance, he can be my way out.

He looks like he wants to ask more, but he restrains himself. “Alright. If you ask, I will.”

“Okay then.” My hands unclench and my shoulders ease. “Let my first act of help be to tell you this is a terrible idea.”

He smiles. “Your counsel is much appreciated, Princess.”

“Ly. Before I help you kill my father, or more realistically, die in the process, how can you be sure that’s the only way to stop the wither?”

“A fair enough question, Lysandra Ignaros.” He turns toward the door to his dressing room. “Come with me.”

27

He leads me to the large, gilded mirror at the back of his closet. When I was searching his room, I tried to pry it off the wall, but I don't mention my snooping. I want to build some trust between us.

"We'll only have to do this once. May I?" He puts his hand out for mine.

I give it to him, confused as to where this is leading. He steps behind me.

His reflection towers over me, and his hand dwarfs mine as he presses my palm flat against the glass. He bends over to hover his face above my ear.

"So it knows you," he says, his low tone reverberating.

Cool air washes off him, prickling my bare arms. His hair makes my own charcoaled locks look pale, his eyes so deep they could swallow me.

The mirror shudders, snapping my attention off him.

I try to yank back, but he holds me firm.

The reflection warps, then the whole surface erupts into ripples. He lets go and steps around me, passing through the glass like it's water.

I stare at my distorted reflection, wide-eyed. I hesitate only a moment longer before I move to follow. The glass offers no resistance. My skin tingles, the world blurs, then I'm through.

The air on the other side is cooler, heavier. I'm at the top of a stone staircase. Faint lights flicker along the walls, casting dancing shadows.

Passing through the mirror was nothing like the dizzying experience with the voidstone, so I assume we are just on the other side of the wall. It's yet another magical object in Alaris's possession. Then again, the voidstone doesn't open the shadowgates, so this is actually the first.

"Quite a trick," I say, my voice low.

Alaris glances back. "A friend made it. She has a talent for hiding things in plain sight." He starts down the stairs. "I believe you may have met her at the Somnus celebration in Delvos."

I stiffen, only one face coming to mind: the blonde who gave me the mask. I hadn't thought much about her since Somnus.

"Another of your 'lovers'?" I ask, unable to keep a slight bite out of my tone.

"Not even as a pretense," he chuckles. "We're old friends. Her name is Vesper."

She's a powerful friend, having made the mask I borrowed and this mirror. A reflection of Delvos's chaos magic, versus the more commonly talked about prophetic readings.

I follow Alaris down the stairs to a large stone chamber. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, but once they do, they widen.

Maps cover the walls. Scrolls lie stacked in neat piles. Racks hold weapons—long swords and spears and bows. Dark armor covered in elegant filigree stands against the far wall.

It's a war room.

He puts the new map Mirvol delivered on a table and crosses to a chest in the corner. It's dark wood, bound in brass, with a symbol burned into the lid: an eye pierced with three lines.

One of the symbols of Sophiri, goddess of wisdom, clarity, and memory.

Alaris kneels and opens it. Inside, nestled in velvet, are layers of thin opalescent rings, no larger than a bracelet. Some glow softly, humming with power, while others lie cracked and lifeless. There must be over a dozen—though the majority are already faded, their light burned out.

"When it became clear to me the wither was a serious threat, this is what I invested in." His voice is quiet. "Do you know what these are?"

I crouch beside him, staring at the rings. "They look familiar," I admit.

"Oraculi," he says. "Scrying tools. They can show the truth, but the more hidden, unknown, or guarded, the more power it takes."

The word stirs something in me. “Oraculi,” I murmur. Then it clicks. “I’ve seen one before. My father had one. Given to him as a gift.”

A gift. I don’t know why I chose that word. It wasn’t a gift—it was a trophy. Proof from Captain Orso that he had captured the traitors who’d held it. He delivered the oraculi alongside their heads.

“Ah.” Alaris smirks. “And did it work?”

“No. How did you know that?” My father tried to use it in front of the court to rewatch the traitors’ deaths, but it fizzled out when he looked through it, and he smashed it on the marble.

“Quite a few factions ensure these break before they ever reach the emperor. If he raised one to his eye and asked who wished him ill, he would see more faces than mine.” He picks up one of the broken rings, turning it in his fingers. “I’ve burned most of them out asking the same question, over and over.”

“And what was the question?”

“The cause of the wither.” He tosses the cracked ring back into the pile. “The answer was always the same: the endless summer at the center.” His dark eyes find mine. “The only way to stop it is for the emperor to stop using his power.”

And my father won’t stop. Alaris doesn’t have to tell me that.

My fingers hover over the oraculi. Each one of these is worth a public execution. Yet they’re stacked in the chest like cheap bangles. The lifeless outnumber the glowing by three to one.

I suck air in through my teeth.

“Which means if you really want to stop this,” Alaris says gently, “you’ll have to help me kill him. Are you sure that’s something you can live with?”

Can I really help kill my father?

I stand and turn my back. I walk away from the chest, pretending to examine a map on the wall.

I’ve never even thought about the emperor dying. He’s ancient. He’ll outlive all of us. He’s more a force than a man, more a stranger than a father, and an absolutely ruthless leader. But ruthless or not…can I do it? Can I help end my own blood?

Right or wrong, only two things rise up in me at the thought of his death: fear of getting caught and put to the pyre, and fear for my siblings

and their children. If ignarian power is to blame, killing the emperor could easily turn into wiping out the whole line.

We're not close, but I don't want my family members to die. Even if I hope I never see Jasper again, and I wouldn't mind if he suffered a little, I don't want him dead.

"I can live with it," I say, clearing my throat. "But if overuse of the flame is the problem…my family…"

"Only your father needs to die," Alaris says. "However, his fall will cause turmoil. I can't guarantee their safety."

I look over my shoulder. "Sounds like no matter what you do, no one's safety is guaranteed."

"No. It's not." He observes me another moment, perhaps waiting to see if I'll change my mind.

I always thought of that look in his eye as calm, but now I realize there is weight in those shadowed depths. He's carrying an impossible plot to save a continent.

And it does sound impossible.

I drift to the table where he left Mirvol's papers. "My father has ruled for three thousand years. Armies have marched on the Citadel. Assassins have snuck in." I drag a finger along the map. "It always ends the same way, in the Crimson Square. What makes you think you'll be the exception?"

"I can kill him." His voice is sure. "That's the smaller problem."

I scoff. "Really?"

"Really. The oraculi didn't just show me the emperor."

He rises and joins me at the table. He shuffles through layers of papers, until his fingers land on a sketch. He hands it to me.

It's a black and white drawing of a man standing before a massive chalice of fire, the flames rising three times his height.

"The Eternal Flame." Ignar's power given form, the way my father keeps the land warm and the summer endless without wielding magic constantly. It burns in a chamber deep beneath the throne room. I've never seen it, but I was brought before it in my mother's belly for a blessing to become a sun-strong child.

Alaris nods. "Even after your father's death, it will continue burning. It will drive the wither on. To truly end this, we have to kill the emperor and extinguish the Flame."

“Impossible.” I already used that word, but now it feels like I used it too soon. “It’s in the most protected part of the palace, behind a door that only my father can open.”

“I know.”

I squeeze the paper and start pacing back and forth. “And even if you could get to it…the Flame is like a sun. It’s so hot, my father doesn’t use his power to keep it burning. He uses his power to contain it, so it doesn’t incinerate the palace.”

At least it’s a fact that divinials, even first generation, can die. But the Flame? I’m not sure that it can be put out.

“So you don’t think a sprinkle of rain will do the trick?”

I give him a look.

“Ly, I’ve been planning this for a long time. Have a little faith.” He eases the drawing from my grip. “The issue is getting close enough. I have spies working on ways in, but I must admit, a princess stepping into our midst could prove incredibly useful.”

His pause is an unspoken question. As if he still thinks I might run.

I let one corner of my mouth twitch up, then nod. “I guess it’s a good thing I came back then.”

“It is.” His eyes gleam. “Tomorrow, I’ll have you start to review our intel. For now, it’s quite late. Your rooms have been cleaned.”

“I still have rooms?” My smile quirks up higher. “I can stay in the aviary…”

“Ly.” Now he fixes me with a look. “If you go back there tonight, I’ll tear it down.”

“But the hawks…!”

“They’ll agree with me.” He starts for the staircase. “Now come.”

I roll my eyes but follow. After last night, and the ride, I’m exhausted. A real bed does sound nice. And another bath, maybe, although nothing could compare to my last one.

He pauses at the top of the steps, the back of the mirror’s outline glowing on the stone in faint purple.

“We don’t speak of this outside my rooms or my office. Only discuss it with Dashol or Karns.”

I nod. I haven’t forgotten that Drina could be around any corner.

“One more thing,” he says. “Karns will need to change your job description, so no one questions your increased visits to my wing. Let’s

assign you to…" He considers for a moment. "Cartography. Using the hawks to collect reports and update the maps of my territory. That will explain the ink on your hands when you work on maps of the Citadel."

I giggle.

His lips lift, his eyes on my mouth. "What's funny?"

"One day I'm a princess. Then a governess. Then a hawk keeper. Now a cartographer."

"Ah. It's clear your skills were wasted at the palace. The world is just beginning to uncover them."

"And just how much more is there to uncover?"

"A lot, I think." His sly smile grows as he leans in close. "Although if you ever turn back to thievery, let me know. I'll want to hide my valuables."

The faint purple glow catches on his brow, his cheekbones, the hair framing his face. My fingers twitch against my thigh. I grip my skirts before they can reach for the curl hanging across his eye.

The exhaustion must be getting to me. I blink slowly, swaying.

"Come," he mutters, and leads me back through the mirror.

He walks me through the castle, only pausing to mutter something to a maid.

My steps drag. I should be panicking about joining a doomed rebellion, helping to kill my father, or the future of my family if we succeed. But all I can focus on is his broad shoulders, guiding me back to my bed.

He stops in front of my room. I open the door to find it just as I left it, the bed freshly made. A steaming cup of soup and black-salted bread are waiting for me on the table.

I realize now how long it's been since I've eaten. He must have asked the maid for the food.

"Meet Dashol in my office tomorrow morning," Alaris says, against the doorframe. "He'll help you get started on the maps."

"Dashol? Not you?"

He shakes his head. "I have to leave before first light. I'll be gone two days. Maybe three."

My eyebrows pull together in a silent question.

He leans close to my ear, static running over my skin. "Reconnaissance mission," he whispers.

"Dangerous?" I whisper back, as soon as I find my words.

He shakes his head once. “Just a visit to my cousin,” he says at his ordinary volume. “I’ll look forward to your progress on those maps.”

I want to ask more about where he’s going and why, but I’m not supposed to speak of the plan outside his rooms. “I understand. I’ll see you in a few days, Alaris.”

He dips his head. “Until then, Ly.”

I eat quickly and drag myself to bed. After nights sleeping in the aviary, I should sink into the mattress. Instead, I lie awake.

Why do I feel like running back into the hallway and begging him not to go?

Alaris’s shadowgates are my exit plan, but I only have to wait a few days. I’ve gone all this time without.

So why do I feel this sense of foreboding at the idea he won’t be here when I wake up?

28

When I crack the office door the next morning, I still hope to see Alaris seated at his desk, ringed fingers folded in front of his mouth. But his chair is empty. The lump in my chest grows heavier. It's too late to beg him to stay. Not that I would have a good reason he should, anyway.

Dashol arrives a moment later holding two cups. He kicks the door shut behind him. "Morning! I hear you've joined team kill the emperor and stop the wither. Happy to have you!"

Dashol's easy smile is familiar, but it's jarring to see it paired with talk of treason.

I cringe as I accept one of the steaming cups. "Is it really safe to say that so loudly?"

"This office is warded against outside listeners. With the door closed, we can speak freely."

Yesterday, he was just a friendly commander offering a helping hand with the hawks. Now he's a co-conspirator. How many of the maids and footmen I pass are rebels too? How many think Alaris is visiting a cousin, and how many know he's almost definitely not?

"Happy to be on the team." I examine his face, trying to figure out if he still believes my name is Lyra. "What did Alaris tell you about me?"

"A few things…he told me you lived in the Citadel before. He told me to help you with anything you ask for while he's gone. And to protect you with my life, although I think maybe I wasn't supposed to say that last part."

The view out the window is suddenly fascinating.

"Oh, and he told me to give you this!" Dashol rummages in his pocket. He opens his hand to reveal a black faceted stone: the voidstone, now dangling from a silver chain instead of the leather cord I cut.

After so long searching for it, hoping to see the gleaming stars on its surface in every drawer I opened, the sight of it stills my breath.

He holds it out to me. "He said you forgot it."

"That isn't mine." *Don't sell yourself short. You did steal from me.* A flush rushes over me as I remember what I did to get that off his neck. "But I'll just keep it for him, for now."

I hastily grab it and loop the chain over my head. I only hope that Dashol doesn't recognize it or know where it came from.

Dashol downs his cup. "Then let's get to work!"

He crosses the office to the narrow mirror set between bookshelves. I barely gave it a look when I searched this room, but now I know mirrors in this house aren't always what they seem. "Is this…another way downstairs?"

"Yep." Dashol grins. "Despite Alaris's reputation, we can't all be going in and out of his bedroom. Karns and I enter from here."

He flattens his hand on the glass. Just like the one in the closet, ripples begin to spread. As soon as the surface is more liquid than solid, he turns his broad frame sideways and steps through.

I pause in front of my wavering reflection, picturing Alaris leaning over my shoulder.

So it knows you.

I've given him reason after reason not to trust me. I want to prove he made the right choice to accept my help. I tuck the voidstone under my shirt and clutch it through the fabric as I step through the magic glass.

The stairs come down past the weapon racks, on the far side of the war room from the ones I descended with Alaris. I catch up to Dashol as he wrestles a stack of papers onto the large central table.

He stubs his toe on something and swears under his breath. "I don't know why he keeps it so dark in here," Dashol grumbles. "Just because he's the sovereign of night doesn't mean he can see in the dark."

I press my lips together to keep from laughing as he lights more lanterns and candles around the table.

“Our job is to check all existing maps and information about our way to the Flame.” He rustles through the papers, and spreads one in the center.

The flickering light reveals a map of the Citadel. The walls and buildings are marked up with ink of all colors. Some sections are dense with lines and notes. Others are nearly blank.

My eyes drift over it. “The Citadel is well defended. An army has never breached the walls.”

“Well that’s fine, because we don’t have an army.” Dashol taps the map. “Alaris worked on building up a larger force for years, but Vesper had a vision that a direct attack would fail.”

“Vesper…” I picture blonde hair and a dimple. “The one who made the mirrors?”

“That’s right. One of our few delvarian friends.”

“Okay, no army.” I study the sketch. “What’s the goal, then?”

“We want to get in a small force, twenty to thirty. There is no way we will avoid guards all the way to the Flame, so we need enough warriors to clash swords, but as few as possible to limit detection.”

Dashol says “we” a lot, but I think this time he’s including himself in the number. “You’re going to be one of those warriors?”

He cracks a crooked smile. “How could Alaris lead a charge without his commander?”

Whatever information I give Dashol here today in this basement, he’ll be betting his life on tomorrow.

I stare at the map. Walls inside walls. Paths filtering through gates. Wide open plazas. The throne room sits at the center.

Twenty people have to get through all this without anyone raising an alarm?

“Can’t Vesper provide another prophecy? Tell you what will succeed or fail?”

Dashol shakes his head. “She is better with illusions than prophecy. She tries, from time to time, but the visions are too hazy. Anyone else who looks at our threads would see our plans.”

Good prophecies are clear, but even they aren’t a guarantee. One might be true today but shift tomorrow with new choices. The more moving parts, the less reliable the predictions, and a plan like this is a many-legged beast.

My eyes land on the chest in the corner. “What about the oraculi? Could they show a way to the Flame?”

“Sophiri’s magic shows only past and present truths. It can’t tell us how to do what has never been done before.”

“Ah…right.” I stare at the map for another moment. There are guards everywhere. I’ve never thought about how to get around them before. “I can’t think of a single way to get to the Flame.”

Dashol laughs. “If you came up with the answer in less than five minutes, I’d be worried, not impressed. We don’t need you to come up with a plan. We’ve got dozens of plans. I just need you to tell me what’s true so we can find the flaws.” He takes a seat at the table and gestures for me to do the same. “Let’s not start with the big problem of how to get all the way to the Flame. Every wall, every plaza, every room…each is its own smaller problem.”

“Alright then.” I take the seat he offers.

“What area are you most familiar with?”

“Here.” I point to the Sunrise Palace, tucked away next to the outer wall, far from the center.

My fingertip lingers on the tiny rectangle that must be my bedroom balcony, and the U shape the outer wall makes around our private garden. And I realize I know something Dashol doesn’t.

The tunnel that took me from the dried fountain in the garden to the temple in the city isn’t on the map.

My skin prickles as I open my mouth. The only people that tunnel was ever meant to protect were the royal residents. And Rinalda would burn me alive if she found out I even considered breathing a word of it.

“There’s a way through the outer wall over here, into this garden.” I pause. “I’d rather not share it unless it’s the only way.”

Dashol studies the wall. He sketches an arrow pointing in, with no further details. “This garden is far from the Central Palace, so it may not be the best approach. We’ll see if we need it.”

“I’ll start closer to the center then.” Before I lived in the Sunrise Palace, I lived in the Central Palace with my siblings, their children, the empress, and the empress *pi mata.* It’s been ten years, and this aerial view of the building distorts the scale and shape of things. “Can I just describe it to you, and you mark the map?”

“Absolutely.” He picks up a pencil. “Whenever you’re ready.”

I close my eyes. Some areas I can picture clearly, while others I remember through moments. The time when I talked back to Jasper and had

to hide in a storage closet next to the kitchens for hours. Running from my little cousins after they realized I never countered their flames. Hiding from my mother under beds and behind furniture as I got older, and my power still didn't show.

One happy time when Rinalda let me into her room and brushed my hair.

Dashol asks questions that turn my jumble into facts. Hallways, exterior doors, balconies, windows. Bedrooms, sitting areas, and meeting rooms. How many maids and how many guards.

He marks the map as I go, the scratch of the pencil and my voice the only sounds.

I open my eyes to see a map significantly filled in with new lines. "Some of this might not be current," I say. "It's been a while since I lived in that part of the Citadel."

Dashol is staring at me. "You know the Citadel, very, very well."

I crack a small smile. It helps that I wasn't allowed to leave it much. "Did Alaris tell you anything else, about my life before this? Before I cared for the hawks?"

"No, and you don't have to explain it either." Dashol pauses. "Alaris brings us new allies from across the continent. They all have their reasons for being in this fight. Besides, he has a sense about people, and I've never seen him proven wrong. He doesn't invite just anyone down here."

My chest swells, but I quickly remind myself: I haven't earned this trust. This is just because of my station and access.

Dashol taps a seaward garden. "What about this area? Don't spare a brick."

By evening, I have walked him through the garden paths, the banquet hall, the route carriages take up from the river. That night, I lie awake in the dark, listening. All I can think about is the masked man. Without Alaris's shadowgates, the protections of walls and windows and locks feel like nothing at all. None of it will be enough to stop him if he comes for me.

But I survive my own spinning thoughts and return the next day to find Dashol has pulled out more detailed charts of a few areas: the temple complex, a plaza, and the stables.

"We won't get through every building before Alaris gets back, so I'm going to point you at specific areas where we already have plans that need better detail."

“What plans?”

“Can’t tell you.”

So much for trust. “Why not?”

“Because if you know what I’m looking for, you’ll remember what fits and forget what doesn’t.” He taps the drawing. “I’d rather get the raw version.”

Ah. I close my eyes and put myself back there: the corridors, the turns, the way sound carries in the vaulted halls. When I hesitate, he marks it in yellow. When I speak with certainty, he draws in black.

“Good to know,” he mutters, adding notes, as I advise him of an area where only priestesses would be. Any man in any clothing would stand out immediately.

It’s strange what sticks. I remember the things that bothered me more than anything else—Jasper’s friend who leered at me. The carriage driver who whipped a horse until it bled. The view from the balcony when Marus slapped Rinalda with a lick of fire after she refused a marriage offer made to her instead of the emperor.

But there are many things I can’t remember or never knew. I didn’t pay attention to where staff slept, or guard schedules. I don’t know how supplies arrived, or how they moved from gates to kitchens to tables.

He pauses as I pause. “Something wrong?”

“I’m realizing how many things I missed,” I admit.

He puts a hand flat on the table, fixing his eyes on mine. “What you’re telling me is the best intel we’ve gotten. Any detail could be the difference between success and the whole army being called down on our heads.”

I nod, returning his smile.

On the third morning, Alaris still isn’t back, but I’m glad for the extra day to get more done. I visit the hawks quickly, just to see how they are faring. There is no clicking of beaks or screeches. Only one flaps down to greet me, its whistle quiet. With most of them up in their roosts, I head to the office.

I catch Dashol staring as I fill in more details than anybody except a close personal maid of the royal family could ever know. To his credit, he never pries. I wonder if he has guessed…but then how could he ever guess the identity of a missing princess who hasn’t been reported missing?

As far as anyone outside the walls knows, Lysandra Ignaros is still tucked away in the Sunrise Palace.

When I can't stare at the maps any longer without the lines swimming, I make my way outside to the greenhouse. My knowledge of the Citadel isn't the only useful thing I brought to Arastos with me. The lobell seeds are all back together in one bag, the portion I left in the aviary undiscovered before I returned.

"Lyra!" Siro greets me, brown eyes flashing as soon as they gaze up from a garden bed. "So glad you finally decided to visit."

"I thought maybe I could help with the lobell."

"I'd welcome it. I'm on the third batch of buds, but after your feats last week, I can just tell you've got more secrets to share." She sticks her trowel in the dirt and stands, brushing off her lap. "I went by the aviary, but you weren't there." Her tone is inquisitive, without asking.

"Yes. I've been a little busy…map making."

We stare at each other. I'm not sure what Siro knows—about me leaving, about what I'm doing with Dashol, about Alaris's plans. She blinks. I blink.

Neither of us says a word for long enough to convince me she knows something. She is Karns's sister, after all. But I'm not going to be the one to broach treasonous topics. Alaris was clear: office only.

"So…gardening?" she asks.

"Gardening," I confirm. I hold out my bag of seeds. "For you."

I've been guarding these like they are my ticket home, or something I need to survive elsewhere. In fact, the number of burns I've sustained outside the palace has been zero. I've barely needed the lobell I brought, much less to grow new flowers.

It's not that the world outside isn't dangerous—it is. But even if nothing here works out and I'm on the road, I'd feel better if these seeds were blooming in soil near where the wither might hit again.

She reaches out for the bag and opens it, eyes widening. "We'll have to prepare more beds."

"We should start them in smaller pots, if you have those."

"Are you sure you want to give me these?" She turns one over between her fingers. "Based on your results, this is valuable stuff."

"They'll do more good in your greenhouse than in my bag. Let's plant a few dozen and see how they do in Arastos's soil."

Siro produces some smaller pots for seedlings, and I mix the soil to match what I used at home, sand worked into the dark loam until it falls

easily through my fingers. She takes one tray, and I take another, and we press a seed into each pot.

I brush off my hands once the planting is done. If Alaris is back tomorrow, I might not have much time for gardening, but I promise Siro I'll come back before they sprout.

But on the fourth morning, Alaris is not back. He said two days. Maybe three. Now it's been four. After a quick breakfast, I go to pump some fresh water for the hawks.

"Sorry I've neglected you," I call as I push open the aviary door, the bucket sloshing in my hands.

Silence. I blink. There's something on the floor. Black shapes, strewn about the straw.

The hawks are on the ground, wings tucked around their bodies, or bent under them, or flat on the straw. One chirps gently, barely lifting its head. Another starts flapping, trying to get itself up, its wings beating the ground.

"Stop, stop, stop!" I rush over to it, desperate to prevent an injured wing.

It takes a few more feeble flaps before collapsing, beak open. My eyes prick with instant tears.

"No!" I cry, seeing one wing over the edge of the water basin, a hawk inside. I dive for it, knees bashing into the stone edge, as I fish it out. Its head is dry, just kept above the water. It cracks one exhausted eye.

"You did so well," I murmur, cradling it. Its body is so, so cold. I take off my wrap, bundle it up, and hold it close to my chest. And I run.

My legs move on their own, pulse pounding in my ears. I have to get to the healers' wing. I race inside, take a turn too sharp, and nearly collide with a figure in the corridor.

It's Karns.

"Lyra!" he chides. "Where are you going?"

"Something is wrong with the hawks," I gasp. I hold out the hawk I'm carrying. "This one needs to be warmed up immediately. The others are sick."

I've never been happier to see his steely eyes, which don't even flicker with emotion.

"Landen!" he barks, and a footman coming around the corner behind him startles to attention. "Take this hawk to a fireplace and warm it up immediately."

The footman nods and dashes over, taking the bundle from my shaking hands. My cheeks are wet.

Karns's clipped tone breaks my fog. "Get them all to the entrance, Lyra. Help will be there soon."

The voidstone swings against my chest as I run, cold where it strikes my skin.

Back in the aviary, I gather them gently, murmuring constantly as if words can help keep them tethered to life. Their eyes are closed, and it's only the frantic little pulsing of their hearts that tells me they live. I lay as many as I can at the doorway, noticing for the first time how light their bodies are. All I could think of in the beginning was sharp beaks and claws. But they're fragile creatures.

Karns arrives with a wagon and a healer. I help transfer them to the blanket in the back.

A hand falls on my shoulder and I jump, until I recognize Dashol.

"Dashol…how could this be happening? What does this mean?"

"Lyra," Dashol says, his light eyes wide, shaking his head once.

I close my mouth. I'm not allowed to talk about it. I'm not allowed to say how strange it is that Alaris is missing, and all his messenger birds just fell ill.

As far as the household is concerned, he's still visiting his cousin.

On the fifth morning, I check on the hawks before anything else. They are with the healer, bundled in warmth and barely drinking. Their eyes stay closed. When I press my fingers to their chests, the pulse under their feathers is slow. I wish lobellum could help, but the healing magic only works to mend flesh and skin. They have no apparent injuries.

I carry the grief with me as I wait across from Alaris's empty chair. I stare at it until Dashol arrives.

"You can't expect me to believe Alaris going missing and the hawks being sick is a coincidence," I say, as soon as he shuts the door behind him.

He sighs. "No. I don't think it is. I can't explain it, but they're tied to his power somehow. I assume this has something to do with him."

"Do you think it means…?" I can't even think the words to finish that sentence.

Dashol shakes his head. "I'm sure he's fine, just overdrawing, maybe. Come on, let's keep going."

I let him brush me off, but on the sixth day, when the office is still empty, I stand my ground. “Where did he go, Dashol?”

“Reconnaissance.” He doesn’t meet my eyes.

I narrow mine. “Reconnaissance where?”

“Lyra, it won’t help to have you worrying too.”

“So you are worried!” I cross my arms and tap my foot. “I’m going to worry more if you don’t tell me, not less.”

Dashol’s eyes slide sideways. “I don’t know if that’s true…”

“Dashol! Now you have to tell me!”

He doesn’t speak.

“Didn’t Alaris tell you to help me with whatever I need?” I press. “Well, what I need right now is to know where he is.”

Dashol exhales through his teeth. “The Citadel.”

“Why?”

“He and four others went to test his shadowgates.”

“At the Citadel?” My crossed arms slacken. “It was warded against magic by Emperor Illio himself, and strengthened every year since. You know that. He knows that. Anyone even thinking about visiting knows that.”

“That’s why he’s never tried.” Dashol’s voice is steady, but his hands tighten into fists. “But we’re running out of time. We have to strike in winter, when the Flame is weakest.”

“Then wait until next winter!”

“We have waited, Lyra. Last winter, and the one before, and the one before. The time to plan is over.”

“But I’m here now! Why couldn’t he wait for me to…” I close my mouth. It’s not like Alaris could have predicted I would come back, let alone guessed who I am. He couldn’t have known I would help, after learning the plan involved killing my father.

“Maybe he should have waited…but this plan was already set. And we’re desperate.” Dashol sinks into the armchair. “In the next year, the wither could move as far as it has in the last five. As soon as it becomes public knowledge, there will be war. More people will die.”

I try to picture my father’s reaction to a public outcry, but all I can picture is Alaris, a lone dark figure in a palace of white marble.

“Trust me, Lyra. No one cares about this more than Alaris. More than me.” Dashol’s voice is gentle. “I came here when my whole family was

killed in the wither. I've lived for nothing else since I was fourteen."

I exhale slowly. I don't get to be more passionate about this than Dashol. I don't get to be more worried about Alaris, and I don't get to act like I know more than people who've been planning this for years.

"I just wish he had waited," I say finally.

"Let's do our best to make sure we have better answers ready for him when he gets back."

News comes the next morning. Dashol swings into the office, a crumpled notice in his fist. His eyes are shadowed and his face unshaven. "With the hawks sick, our usual communications are down, but I just got word from an ally. There are reports from the palace. Intruders were caught inside the walls." His grip wrinkles the paper. "The word is they killed them all on sight."

The room tilts. I put a hand on the desk. "Everyone? Alaris?"

"That's what the message says, but…this just means the palace believes no one got away." He straightens. "Alaris is one of the strongest divinials I have ever met. If anyone can survive the impossible, it's him."

He holds my eyes, his shoulders square. He means his words.

If my father had captured the Sovereign of Arastos trying to break in, the news wouldn't stay quiet. He would drag Alaris through the capital in chains. Orso and his men would march on Arastos. I hold onto that.

I turn toward the mirror. "Then we keep working."

He nods once and leads me downstairs.

We try. Dashol lays out the maps. I struggle to remember what I was talking about, much less buildings and corridors I haven't visited in years. He draws a line, erases it, draws the same line. I stare at a guard rotation chart until the ink blurs, pressing the voidstone into my palm until the facets leave marks.

Dashol doesn't object when I turn in early, skipping our usual late dinner. The days are getting shorter, and colder, but I don't add another log to the dying fire. I change and tuck myself into my bed. My only relief from worry will be sleep. I can't even think about Alaris not coming back. If he isn't back tomorrow, I don't know what I'll do.

I turn onto my side and freeze. Someone is standing on my balcony.

29

Cold floods my veins, instant and absolute.

A figure is pressed against the wall of my balcony, blending into the darkness. If I wasn't already familiar with the curve of that hood, I might have thought it was just a shadow. But I know that shape. I've traced his outline again and again in my dreams, and in so many sleepless nights after.

It's the masked man. He's here to kill me.

Pressure clamps around my chest, squeezing my heart until it feels like it will burst. He's right there, with only a pane of glass between us. My lungs refuse to fill. I gasp, limbs locked, staring.

But he doesn't move. Seconds pass, and he stays exactly where he is.

He could have rushed in as soon as I got back to my room. If my dreams are any guide, he will not hesitate to attack me head-on.

He's waiting for me to fall asleep.

That means I have minutes. I need to get out of here.

Slowly, I roll away from him. I slide my arm deep beneath the mattress and grab my knife. It's too bright in here. My stare bores into the glowing embers in the hearth, willing them to turn to ashes. I don't know if it's Ignar's power finally answering me or nature's course, but over a few breathless minutes, the coals dim, then dull, then go out.

Now it's lighter outside than in, dusk just on the cusp of night. I doubt he can see much past his own reflection in the glass.

It's time to move.

I pull my pillow down along my side, scrunching the blankets around it to add bulk, then ease off the far side of the bed.

I crawl toward the door.

Behind me, the latch clicks softly. Too late.

I pull back and slide beneath the bed, flattening myself against the floorboards. The slats are close enough to graze my nose. A gust of cold air whispers over my cheek as the balcony doors swing open.

He enters, placing each boot carefully. I watch, wide-eyed, as he circles the edge of the room. He's heading for the side of the bed where he thinks I'm sleeping. I clench the knife between my teeth, grip the slats above me, and pull myself hand over hand toward the balcony.

He stalks toward the pillow wrapped in blankets just as I slide out by the windows.

I ease onto my knees, staying bent below the edge of the bed. When he discovers it's empty, he'll find me in seconds. I need to distract him. I lift the chain over my head and clutch the voidstone to my chest.

I hold my breath.

A heavy blow *thunks* onto the mattress, shaking the frame.

Panic moves me. I scramble around the foot of the bed and pitch the voidstone into the far corner of the room. It clatters off the wall. His bootfalls bound after it, as I spring up and bolt onto the balcony.

I slam the doors shut behind me, wrench the shutter rod free from its bracket, and jam it through the handles.

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He appears out of the murk on the other side of the glass, and I shriek around the knife. Iron floods my tongue. Heart pounding, I pull the blade from my teeth and hold it out. Between the mask and the hood, I can only see his eyes.

He rattles the doors. The rod bounces but holds.

It won't stop him long. I climb over the railing and jump. Air tears past me, and pain explodes up my leg as I hit the ground hard. But I lurch ahead on what I hope is just a twisted ankle.

Gravel digs into my bare feet as I race across the grounds. If I scream for help, he'll reach me before anyone else does. The boundary wall looms ahead, and I spot the door I followed Drina through. The trees will hide me.

I yank open the crossbar and plunge into the woods, ankle throbbing. The dirt softens underfoot, the starlight disappearing into the canopy. Branches snag at my nightgown and rake across my arms. The riverbank diverts my path, and I follow it until I reach a bridge, dashing across for cover.

I don't know how far I've run when my ankle buckles. I catch the nearest tree for balance, glancing back the way I came. The forest is quiet aside from my own harsh breaths. Nothing moves in the dark behind me.

I shove off the trunk and run again.

The woods open onto a clearing, but I don't make it far across. My ankle twists on nothing, throwing me to the grass. I force my way to my feet, and limp forward, scanning for somewhere to hide. My nightgown is a white flag against the darkness.

Something catches my eye in the tree line.

No, no, no.

His silhouette resolves from the shadows as he steps into the clearing.

My breath comes out in a tangled sob. He stalks toward me. His dead eyes are focused, his steps sure. This is exactly like my dreams. I know the swagger of him, the gloved hands, the curve of his hood.

I know how this ends.

"Stay away!" I yell, stumbling backward. "Stay away from me!"

My words don't even slow him down, so I run. Three strides in, my ankle fails and I spill into the cold grass.

I scramble to get a grip on my knife and twist onto my back just as he closes the distance between us. His boots settle on either side of me, and he bends down until his hood blots out the stars. A long dagger glints in his hand.

I bellow, hoarse and primal, and slash at his legs.

My blade catches, and he grunts and stumbles back, slicing his dagger at me. The steel bites into the inside of my upper arm. I screech as blood

spurts across my nightgown. The burning pain shocks me. This can't be happening.

But it is happening. He stalks forward again. I dropped my knife somewhere. My bloody fingers sweep through the grass and find nothing.

He grabs my nightgown and raises his dagger.

"No," I choke out.

The world turns white.

30

The clearing vanishes in a blinding burst of light, erasing sight and sound. Force slams me back into the grass. White sparks and wind howl around me, yanking at my hair, stealing my breath.

Then it stops, and the world is all dark. I cough and roll to my side, pushing myself up on trembling arms. Bright spots blot out my vision.

I lift a shaking hand to my throat. There is no new wound. He didn't strike. And I hurt too much to be dead.

A groan cuts through the ringing in my ears. The masked man stirs a few feet away, also on his back. We were thrown apart by something. It's like the air between us exploded.

Before I blink away the spots, he's already on his feet. He staggers toward me. He's still coming. That blast of energy only delayed him.

"Help me," I whisper, tears squeezing out.

Something slams down between us, shaking the ground. A comet, smoking black and glowing white. My mind rearranges around what I'm seeing as it moves and stands, resolving into a man.

A man, glowing bright as the stars, with dark, misting shapes extending from each shoulder.

Wings. A glowing man with wings.

I would think I'm hallucinating, but the masked man stumbles back, eyes wide. For a breath, the three of us are frozen, the strange man between me and my pursuer.

The masked man looks past the newcomer to me, and flips his dagger, grasping it by the blade. He raises it. He's going to throw it…

The air shatters again. A burst of shimmering energy explodes from the stranger's outstretched hand, slamming into the masked man and flinging him across the field toward the tree line.

My sight is still painted with afterimages, but I make out the masked man clambering to his feet once more. He stays bent, as if one side is injured. The dagger hangs in one hand, still red with my blood. He takes one step forward, and the stranger steps forward too, palm outstretched in a clear threat.

The masked man glances at me, then melts into the trees.

I'm alone with the stranger. I no longer feel my arm, the pain replaced by numbing cold.

He turns. Huge, feathered wings extend from each shoulder. Either they are misting, or my vision is blurry. His skin glows as if all the starlight in the field is landing on him alone. Hair like ink swirls around his bare chest, reaching his waist. And his eyes are even more inhuman—they blaze bright silver.

If the gods walked this world, I would think this was one of them.

"Lysandra." The voice reverberates through my bones.

I know that voice.

I inhale. "Alaris?"

He kneels in front of me, faster than I can track. I'm frozen in his starlight stare. "Are you hurt?"

The edges of him blur. "Is this real?" I whisper.

He reaches for me. His fingers cup my face, tilt my chin, checking my neck. His hands move over my blood-soaked nightgown, down to my chest, my stomach, pressing, searching. "Lysandra. Focus. Were you stabbed?"

I blink, and his outline sharpens. I have to warn him. The masked man left the clearing, but he could come back. "That was him," my voice rises. "The man after me. He followed me from the palace…"

His entire body goes rigid. "That's the man who tried to kill you at the palace? He's the reason you left?"

I nod, gasping.

The air around him dims as his eyes blaze. He bares his teeth in a snarl and twists toward the trees.

He's going to go after him.

“No.” I grab for his arm, smearing red on his luminous skin. “Don’t—please don’t go. Don’t leave me.”

The tension in his frame doesn’t ease, but slowly, slowly, his attention returns to me. His glowing gaze drops to the red mark I left on him.

He catches my hand and turns my arm over, tracing the blood up the inside. His fingers find the wound. He pulls the torn fabric back, and his starlight gaze flashes.

“Ouch,” I say sluggishly. Now that I know he’s not leaving, my eyelids droop. I can rest.

I don’t know if I’m moving slow or he’s moving fast. In a second, his arm is around my back, and his long fingers press into my neck. My head lolls into the pressure.

His expression goes hard. “Shit.”

He grabs my arm and squeezes it, swinging my legs into his grasp. Gravity vanishes as he pushes off and we shoot straight up.

I’m tucked into his chest so tightly, I can only get a sense of the dark world rushing past us out of the corner of my eye. His skin is smooth against my cheek. I always thought of his touch as cool, but it doesn’t feel that way now. My limbs are tingling. I close my eyes.

“Don’t go to sleep, Lysandra,” he says, above the wind. At the way he says my name, the command in it, I open them, even though my vision swims.

The pain in my arm thrums as we land, but it’s a dull, distant thing. Alaris is walking fast toward the castle lights. He’s shaking. I glance up in alarm, but I can’t focus. Why is he shaking? But no, it’s not him—it’s me. I don’t feel cold, but I’m shivering.

“Stay awake, Lysandra. Don’t you dare go to sleep.” He kicks open a door. “Karns! Healer, now!”

Everything is blurring, but I keep my eyes cracked as he told me to. I’m floating as we move through halls and rooms. He lowers me to a bed. A huge red smear on his chest drips down his stomach.

“Karns! In here,” he shouts again, ripping open my collar to bare my arm. He presses a cloth into the wound, holding it hard.

I grunt and try to wiggle away. “Hurts.”

“Hold on, sweet Ly. I have to stop the bleeding.”

I close my eyes, quaking.

When I crack them again, the room is bustling with people. It is not my room. I find Alaris. He is still gripping my arm, twisting to yell at a blue-robed healer. I want to tell him not to yell, that it's okay, but my lips don't move. His onyx hair once again curls around his face, the longest pieces reaching his shoulders. His skin is no longer luminous. His eyes are dark. Someone draped a shirt over his back.

Hands press a cup to my lips, and the bitter taste of medicine hits my tongue. I place the smell and cough and sputter. It's a sedative.

"No," I murmur, my voice weak. Panic curls in my chest. It jolts me more awake, but the room is already tilting from the little I've swallowed. "Don't want it."

I try to jerk away, but Alaris's grip keeps me still. "Ly, they have to stitch your arm."

I shake my head fiercely. "No," I moan.

"They have to close the skin before they use ointment."

"He'll come back," I whisper. I need Alaris to understand. I can't be put under. I need to be able to run if the masked man returns for me.

"He won't." His voice is hard. "I promise I won't leave your side. Not for a second."

He takes the cup from the healer and holds it between us.

My gaze shifts from one of his eyes to the other. If he leaves, I'm certain the masked man will be back through the window. And I won't escape again. "Not a second," I echo.

I let him put the cup to my lips.

The sedative takes effect quickly. The room fades, and his grip on my arm releases.

I can't see where he is, and I can't feel him anymore. *No, don't leave*, I try to say, but I don't think the words come out. I feel thread pulling through my skin, the slight tug too distant to bother me. The darkness is pulling me under no matter how hard I fight.

Where is Alaris?

Then the bed on the other side of me sinks. I catch his scent through the haze. Night air, cool and clean, and cloves.

So I let the draught take me.

31

Everything is dark. I can't remember where I am, only that I'm in danger. I need to run. I need to hide.

I drag my eyes open. I am in a large bed. Light filters through curtains, catching on sparkling crystals.

Everything is slow and thick, but I piece it together. Dark wood and jewel tones and bookshelves tell me I'm in Alaris's room.

"Ly," Alaris says, from nearby. "Can you hear me?"

I twist my head to him. I let out a shaky breath. He's alive. The relief hits so hard my eyes sting. "You're here."

"I'm here," he murmurs. "How do you feel?"

My ankle throbs dully from somewhere far away. "Just fine."

"Your arm?"

I shift, and the inside of my arm pulls. I glance down. The skin is sealed in a red line that smells like lobellum.

The sight of it brings last night back in pieces. The shape on my balcony. Running through the trees with my ankle screaming. The clearing. The blade in his hand. Blood on my nightgown, hot and spreading. And then light and a voice that shook my bones: Alaris.

Who appeared after I spent the better part of the week in his basement fearing he was dead.

"You left," I blurt.

His eyes widen. "Ly…"

“You left for the palace.” I can’t tell if the sedative is tripping my tongue, or loosening it. “You asked me to help you find a way in. And then you went there without hearing a single thing I had to say!”

“I know what you would have told me, Ly,” he says gently. “You would have told me not to go.”

“Because you shouldn’t have gone,” I say, voice hoarse. “Why would you try to test unbreakable wards? Why would you take that risk?”

“I would take any risk to figure out how to stop this,” he says simply.

Relief flips to anger, rearing up. “You could have waited one day. Or one hour,” I sputter. “I’m right here. You know who I am now. Use me!”

His lips part. We stare at each other.

“I really thought you were dead,” I whisper, my chest not fully free from the gripping grief of losing him, even though he’s right in front of me.

He pauses another moment, then clears his throat. “You’re right. I could have waited one more night. If we had tested the wards farther from the guards, maybe things would have gone differently.”

His words are a reminder that just because he’s back doesn’t mean he’s okay.

I force myself to focus on him, which takes more effort than it usually would. Fatigue rims his eyes, and his mouth is a grim line. Dirt and dried blood cover his cheeks and neck. His clothes are fresh, but he looks more ragged than I’ve ever seen him.

It takes the fight right out of me. “What happened at the palace?”

“Things didn’t go according to plan,” he says, his tone low and flat. “The gates worked through the outer wards, but the inner wards rebounded. Violently. Guards came before we recovered.” Shadows crackle to life across his palm, then fizzle out. He closes his fist. “My gates haven’t worked since.”

“And the others?” I whisper.

“I left one with an ally to recover.” For the first time, his eyes are flat and hollow. “The other three died inside.”

My arm is slow to respond to me, but I reach out and touch his white knuckles. He pauses, staring at the point of contact. The position tugs at my newly sealed cut, but I keep my fingers there.

“I burned their bodies,” he says softly. “And left no living witnesses from the palace.” That haunted look deepens. “But I got the answer.”

He slides back in the chair, his ringed hand pulling out of my reach. He watches me, chin low.

The fire pops in the silence.

Does he think I'll blame him? That I'll shrink back from failure and death? I won't. If my father found any evidence people from Arastos were involved, we would all be in danger.

"You're trying to save everyone from the power of the emperor, Alaris," I say slowly. "You can't do that and…save everyone."

His throat moves once.

Guilt twists in my stomach. I may be adding lines on a map, but it's his word that determines who lives and who dies.

"I'm just glad you're back," I say, letting one side of my mouth tick up, then fall. "How did you get here without the…?"

And then I remember that impossible sight. Wings unfurling, vast and smoking. Long inky hair. Eyes shining like stars.

I search for a trace of what I saw in the clearing. But there is only Alaris. I open my mouth to ask…

"Ly, I've waited patiently for you to wake up," he cuts me off. "I'm the one who needs answers now. What happened last night?"

I close my lips, heart rate picking up. I told him my true name but kept my reasons for leaving the Citadel vague.

"You said you were in danger at the palace. But yesterday…" He shakes his head. His eyes are hard. "No more secrets, Ly. Tell me."

He saved me. He saw what I saw. So I take a deep breath, and I tell him about the fear that woke me on my birthday. About the dreams in Delvos. The prophecy I left behind when I fled Lord Norville with him in the night. The relief I thought the voidstone would bring me. How I've spent the last few months jumping at every shadow, knowing, somehow, that the masked man would arrive sooner or later.

He doesn't interrupt. Doesn't show the hint of doubt I'm looking for. His hands grip tighter on his knees with every word.

"It took him a while to find me," I whisper. "But I knew he would. Eventually."

I glance down at my pale, limp hands.

When I return my eyes to his face, Alaris is staring at nothing, his chin low. "So you've never seen this man before?"

I shake my head.

He refocuses on me. “Then how did you know he would come?”

“I have no idea,” I say honestly.

His gaze traces the sealed line on my arm. He drops his head. He is quiet so long I wonder if he is going to say anything at all.

“You told me you might need the shadowgates. Anytime. Day or night,” he says finally. “I promised you. But I was gone and you were attacked. You almost…”

A tremor moves through him.

It pulls me into the present. I’m alive. Alaris is alive. “But I didn’t. You got back just in time. I’m also…relieved.” The word surprises me as it leaves my mouth, but as soon as it does, I know it’s true. “I wasn’t sure if I was losing my mind.”

I was right to run. All those nights, I was right to be afraid.

I take a deep breath and let it out, sinking into the bed. The masked man has finally appeared before me in the flesh. Between terror and the satisfaction of certainty, I choose satisfaction in this moment. I would rather face reality than formless fears.

But under the relief, there is a needle in my heart. Even though I survived last night, I know he won’t stop.

“He’s still going to come for me,” I say softly. “He won’t stop until he kills me.”

The air goes cold, like a window open at night. Alaris’s eyes harden, a flicker of something dangerous moving over his features. I shiver. If I were the masked man, I would not like to see that look in the Sovereign of Arastos’s eyes.

“Never.” The power that rolls off him presses against my skin, buzzing in my blood. “He will never touch you again.”

Alaris is more powerful than I knew. But he can’t be beside me every hour of every day.

“Alaris.” I try to smile, but it falters. “I can’t stay in Arastos. He knows where I am now. I need to keep running.”

No matter how many knives I hide under my mattress, if he gets his hands on me, I can’t stop him.

I got lucky this time.

The hot tears rise up before I can stop them. I cover my face, swallowing against the panic. I got lucky. I’m alive.

Through my shaking fingers I see his hands reaching for mine. They pull my palms away, and with a touch so gentle I barely feel it, swipe the tears from my cheeks.

"No, Ly, you will stay," Alaris murmurs, his voice low and soothing. "I'll make sure you are safe here."

"How? You can't stay beside me all the time."

"Who says I can't?"

Ridiculous. I want to tell him so, but every blink is getting heavier. "You can't."

"I will make you safe," he says again. "If it's not to your satisfaction, you can have a hundred horses to ride away from here."

I half laugh, and a few more tears leak out, replacing the ones he took.

Whatever words I want to say next dissolve before I can find them.

He settles my hands close to me and covers them with the blanket. It might as well weigh a thousand pounds, for how heavily it presses me into the mattress.

"Go to sleep, Ly." His voice is a humming lullaby. "I'll be here when you wake."

I want to argue. But the sedative, or my injury, makes it impossible to fight.

I may never be able to sleep on my own again, but at least for now, I don't have to worry about the masked man. I believe Alaris will stay here until I wake up.

32

When I surface, a fire is crackling, but otherwise the room is quiet. Alaris is in the sitting area, a large book in his lap.

His head lifts, gaze locking on mine.

"Hi," I say shyly, suddenly awkward. Last time I woke I was hazy from the sedative. Now I'm all too aware that I'm in his bed. "How long was I asleep?"

"I'm surprised you're awake." He sets his book aside. "It is late afternoon. How is your pain?"

My whole body is stiff. My ankle aches. I push myself higher on the pillow and wince as the inside of my arm stings. It seems the dulling effect of the sedative has worn off. "Fine."

"Hm." He frowns. "The healer should be here shortly."

I wonder if it's the same healer who took the…"The hawks!" I lurch up. My head spins, so I sink back to my elbows. "Are they alright? They were sick."

"They're recovering quickly."

"Are they eating? Drinking?"

"They'll be better in no time."

I ease back down, and my eyes catch on the far wall. Deep blue velvet hangs from a rail there, drawn shut around the section of the room where his writing desk sits.

"What is that?"

Before he answers, there's a knock at the door.

Alaris rises fluidly and admits a young man in a healer's cloak.

I tense as he comes to the bedside. I know this healer can't be the masked man. The man who attacked me was taller, with a bigger frame. But my body does not care about logic. Every muscle locks as this stranger reaches for me.

"Could you tilt your head?" he asks, hovering his hand near the side of my neck.

I jerk away before he makes contact.

"I need to take your pulse." He glances at Alaris, but Alaris's eyes are on me.

I swallow. "Can…can you check my ankle first?"

The healer nods and folds back the covers. The room is cold even though the fire is blazing, or maybe it's just me. My calf is nearly as pale as the white bandage around it. He prods the wrapping and I lie back, trying to calm my nerves.

He's just a healer. He's here to help.

"It's still swollen, but it doesn't need to be rewrapped," he says. "Now I need to check your pulse."

Jaw locked, I give him a short nod. My body tenses all over again. I force myself to bare my throat.

Without a word, Alaris takes the healer's place at the end of the bed. He slips his hand onto my bandaged ankle. The gentle touch feels good against the swollen flesh, sending a pleasant buzz through me. I lie still, not wanting him to let go.

His thumb sweeps back and forth over the cloth. The hollow above my heel is sensitive. Each pass ripples up my leg. I flinch as the healer reaches for my neck, but I cannot look away from the long fingers wrapped around my ankle.

Alaris's eyes are half-lidded, his face perfectly calm. His fingers drift over the top of my foot, stroking lightly across the bandages before retracing the same path.

I barely notice as the healer moves to check my arm.

Alaris runs a finger under the edge of the bandage and I inhale. My leg tightens.

He is watching so closely, I know he can see his effect on me. I love it. I hate it. I want him to touch me, and I don't want him to know that.

I want to break his composure. To find a way to surprise him and make him the one who is breathless and flushed from a simple touch.

When his fingertips slip off the wrapping and slide over bare skin, a jolt that has nothing to do with pain sparks up my leg. I squirm before I can stop myself. The look in his dark eyes is lazy, but too intent to be casual.

Oh, this devil *definitely* knows what he is doing.

I want to push my foot into his chest and pull him closer at the same time. Tingles are turning into heat. His caress is making me think things I should not be thinking with another person in the room.

"I'm finished," the healer says, startling me.

Alaris stands. "Anything new?" His tone is practical, as if he wasn't just touching me in a highly impractical way.

The healer shakes his head. "The cuts and ankle are mending, but the blood loss is significant. The body needs time."

"I feel much better now." I force myself up onto quivering arms. The buzz of Alaris's hand on my ankle has chased the cotton out of my head and I am about to jump out of my skin. Or jump Alaris's.

The healer looks at me. "Too much activity could strain your heart. You need to stay in bed."

"You heard him," Alaris says, putting a pillow behind me and gently pushing me back against it. "Stay in bed."

He gives me a serious look that makes me want to disobey.

His mouth twitches like he can tell.

"I'll walk you out," he says to the man in blue, escorting him to the door.

I deflate against the pillow. My ankle still hums where his fingers stroked the bandage. My fingertips are cold and slow to answer me, but I drag them back and forth on my stomach, trying to recreate the sensation.

The door shuts. I stiffen and glare as Alaris returns, daring him to tell me what to do.

He smirks. "You look like a wounded kitten who is about to scratch. Good thing I brought milk."

Before I can snap back, he produces a tray bearing a spread that makes my mouth water. Fruit and olives gleam next to cuts of red meat, and a honeycomb oozes syrup onto bread. I reach for the cheese with a rind of black salt I've come to crave, but he pulls the tray out of my grasp.

“Meat first. You need iron.” He turns the tray, moving the medallions with cracked, charred edges and red centers into my reach.

“You are abusing your power because I’m injured,” I say, hunger beating pride as I accept a piece anyway and pop it into my mouth. Honeyed and savory flavors burst on my tongue and I stifle a moan. I chew, looking away to hide how much I enjoy it.

When I glare at him, I expect another smirk. Instead, his face is intent, his eyes on my lips, as if he wants to follow every chew. My neck flushes.

I swallow and purse my lips. “There. Meat.”

He reaches out with his thumb and wipes some oil left on my lips. They part, and my heart rate picks up. I want to catch that thumb in my teeth.

“Good.” He sets down the entire tray on the table beside me. “Keep eating.”

“So demanding,” I grumble, reaching for another piece only once his back is turned. The meat satisfies me in a way that makes me think maybe my body does need it.

He fetches a stack of papers from the low table in the sitting area. “Is it alright if I step out for a moment?”

I pause, a piece of cheese hovering on the way to my mouth. Embarrassment crawls up the back of my neck. “Yes!” I burst out.

He doesn’t even blink, seeming unaware of my flush of shame. He waits a little longer, eyeing me. “I’ll only be a second.”

As soon as the door shuts, I put down the cheese and cover my face. I’ve kept him hostage in his own room. I made pathetic pleas for him not to leave my side…has he even showered? I’m in his bed. Where has he been sleeping?

I have to get out of here.

The door swings open. He really was only a second.

I avoid eye contact. “I should go back to my room. I have taken your bed long enough.”

I slide out from under the covers and stand. The floor tilts. My vision fades at the edges and I grab for something.

He is beside me in an instant and catches me with an arm around my waist. “What are you doing?”

I’m mortified, gripping his forearm for balance. “Right, sorry.” My heart pounds too fast for someone standing still. My legs shake. I lock my knees and hold on.

“Lysandra.” The teasing is gone from his voice. “You were attacked last night. You are not well.”

“You’re right.” The words come through my teeth, breathless. “I’ll join the hawks in the healers’ wing.”

“If you really want to get out of my bed,” he says, slowly, “I will help you to yours.”

I nod. That is all I want. To get out of his way.

He scoops me up with an arm under my legs before I can protest. My arms go around his neck on instinct. For once, we are the same temperature. I hold myself stiff instead of sinking into him, willing to endure this additional humiliation to get out of here. But he walks the wrong direction, away from the door.

“What are you…”

He parts the new velvet curtains with his shoulder, revealing a second bed where his writing desk used to be. It’s piled with blankets and pillows in deep blues and purples. Dozens of the crystals are strung above it, catching the candlelight and scattering it across the velvet in small bright points.

He sets me on the bed before I find words.

“Your room isn’t safe.” He straightens, looking down at me. “You are staying here.”

“Here? With you?”

He nods.

“This is not necessary.” My hands curl in the blankets, my heart hammering.

“It is necessary. I warded the room. No one can enter without my permission.”

Wards require powerful blood. Alaris has proven himself as strong as any divinial I’ve met outside my own family. If he says no one can get into this room, I believe him, which is a marvelous solution to my murderer problem. But staying here…with him…

“Won’t I be in your way? When you have”—I glance toward his bed —“visitors?”

He raises an eyebrow. “I thought I made it clear my visitors are all business associates.”

I never fully believed him. “Yes, but you’re still a…”

A man. An infuriatingly gorgeous man that women throw themselves at.

He cocks his head. “I’m still a what?”

I skip over the sentence I would rather die than complete. Blood loss is doing dangerous things to my control over my words. “Your reputation cannot be entirely fake,” I spout.

His mouth curls, shapely and wicked. “You should know whether at least one part of my reputation is fabricated.”

Heat floods my face. I can still feel his mouth on mine. He knew exactly where to touch me. His reputation as a lover is definitely earned. I swallow.

“But as for sharing my room.” His hand flexes. “You won’t be in the way of anything. I haven’t taken anyone to bed since I became the head of this house.”

His tone is sincere, conviction clear in his eyes. I think he means his words. But he and I were on our way to what I would consider a bedding when I was a black-haired stranger in a mask…

Unless he meant it when he said he was never going to let the night get so far. Or unless I’m so sheltered that we have very different definitions of abstinence.

“This is inappropriate, though,” I sputter. “I am your hawk keeper, or cartographer. What will the staff say?”

“That I’ve found a new lover.” He says it with the same cool expression as ever. “And I’m too attached to stay apart for even one night.”

“Do your lies always fall back on…sex?” The word sits in the air between us. I’m not sure if I have enough blood in me to flame red, but whatever is left for my heart to pump is trying.

“Only the most important ones.” His tone is calm, but the devil is back in his eyes. “Treason, a princess who needs hiding away, and the like.”

Princess.

He knows who I am now. He’s not going out of his way for Ly the hawk keeper. He’s put up wards and given up the corner of his room to protect the life of Princess Lysandra. And wards are a better solution than staying by my side all the time.

Between the teasing and the sex talk, my heart is doing something inconvenient. I can’t mistake duty for more, or I’ll humiliate myself beyond recovery.

“Keeping a princess here against her will also qualifies as treason,” I grumble.

“Add it to the reasons the emperor has to want me dead,” he says, lifting his chin. “Anything else?”

“Yes…” I let out a long sigh and fidget with the covers. “Thank you. I probably wouldn’t be able to sleep in my own room.”

“Sleeping is exactly what you should be doing, instead of spending every ounce of energy arguing with your lord.”

I pick up one of the smaller pillows and give him a whack. “I outrank you. Now go bathe.”

“Now who is demanding?”

“You have blood on your neck. And dirt in your hair.” I’m not actually annoyed, but I can’t take the fact that he didn’t even shower while I slept.

He does not move, looking me over in this bed. I raise my eyebrows at him until he exhales through his nose.

“Before I go.” He reaches into his pocket and holds out a dark stone on a silver chain. The voidstone. “Karns found this on your floor.”

I take it from his palm and loop it over my head. He watches the chain disappear beneath my collar. Then he turns for the bathing room, pulling the curtain closed behind him.

I sink down, the layers of blankets pressing me flat. The voidstone settles against my sternum. With the velvet curtains muting the world beyond, this corner could be a room of its own.

My eyelids are heavy. Behind these curtains, behind his wards, I feel safe.

A faint rush of water hisses through the air. My tired, disloyal mind decides this is a fine moment to conjure up an image of Alaris, shirtless. His wet curls against the back of his neck. The arms that lifted me to this bed without strain. Water streaming over his shoulders, his back. The line of muscle from his ribs to his hips…

I do not know how I’m going to survive sharing this room with him.

Sleep takes me before the water stops.

33

I wake to my name spoken from very close.

Alaris is bent over me.

“Ly. It’s me.” He steps back from the bedside. “It’s morning. The healer is here.”

The curtains pull back and a woman in a powder-blue robe steps in, older than the man from yesterday, and unfamiliar.

She crosses to me and takes my wrist. Her hands are warm against my skin. She counts my pulse, examines the sealed cut on my arm, and rewraps my ankle. I hold still, trying not to feel disappointed as Alaris stands back with his arms folded.

She finishes and steps away. “Pulse is fast. Color is poor. You’re not ready to be up and about. You should stay in bed, with minimal exertion only.”

I open my mouth to argue, but Alaris catches my eye, and I close it.

“Thank you,” he says to the healer. “I’ll be right back,” he says to me.

I adjust myself higher on the pillow and do my best to smooth my hair.

He returns a moment later with two people in tow: a maid with a straw-colored braid I’ve seen around the castle, and a wiry older man.

“Ly, this is my footman Walder, and a maid who will attend to you, Flora. Aside from Dashol and Karns, they will be the only ones coming into the room while I’m not here. They’ll bring your meals, and you can call on them for anything you need.”

He gestures to the velvet cord hanging by my bedside, which was surely here so he could ring for staff from his writing desk before I occupied this corner.

Alaris knows I'm scared. He is making sure I won't be frightened by anyone in this space. "Thank you."

"Thank you both," he says, dismissing them. After the door closes behind them, he adds: "They'll also be discreet. The staff already knows you're here, but no one needs to know you're in a separate bed. Now, is there anything I can get you? Anything that would make you more comfortable?"

I shake my head. "You've spent far too much time on me already."

"That wasn't the question."

"I'm fine. Really."

"Ly." His voice drops. "You told me everything was fine all this time, while you knew a man was trying to kill you. Forgive me if 'I'm fine' doesn't settle it."

I pick at the blanket. "Well, I can't help it if I really am fine."

He tilts his head, the crystal at his ear swinging. "Why is a princess so bad at saying what she wants?"

Every time he mentions my rank, it feels like an insult. "Perhaps everyone isn't as all-consumed with their own pleasure as you."

"Hmm." His low voice hums over me. "That's not what I find myself 'all-consumed' by lately."

"That's exactly why I shouldn't take up even more of your time."

"Don't think of it as asking for what you want. Think of it as *my* recovery."

"*Your* recovery?"

"After watching you bleeding." His voice softens. "It would make me feel a lot better if you would ask for one thing just because you want it. Not because you need it to feel safe, just for joy. Just one thing."

This is what he thinks is appropriate for a princess, I remind myself. This is what he probably thinks I'm used to.

I stare at the blanket. What do I want?

"Could I…" I stop. It's stupid.

"Come on now," he says, lip twitching. "I know you can do it."

"Ugh."

"With words, Ly."

"Ugh!" I repeat louder, scowling. "The fur. From the aviary."

"Done." His smile makes my scowl deepen. He turns and strides away.

"It's just warmer than these," I call after him. "And it smells like…"

You. I cut myself off before I say something foolish, but I needn't have. The door is already closing. I don't think he listened to a word of my explanation.

Now I'm left to lie here and squirm. I hope he isn't personally going all the way across the castle, across the grounds, for me.

Please ask a servant to go fetch it and continue with your day.

Unfortunately, there is no indication he did anything of the sort, as the door swings open, revealing him with the giant fur draped over his shoulders like the most dramatic cloak.

"Apologies for the wait," he says with a smile. "Fetching things is a little slower since my gates stopped working."

I cringe at the reminder. "How long do you think it will take for them to recover?"

"I'm not sure. This has never happened before." He sparks shadow between his fingers, his voice light and unconcerned. "But it's getting stronger by the day. Maybe a few more."

He strides into the room, slides the fur off his shoulders, and holds it up between us. "On? Or folded at the end of the bed?"

"On," I say, wiggling. I can't fully fight my smile at seeing it. And when he lays it over me, its familiar weight is bliss.

It still smells of cloves. I turn my face away as I adjust under it, hiding my expression.

When I've controlled myself, I fold the edge back neatly and clasp my hands on top of it. I glance up at him. His dark eyes are alight.

"Hmm. All-consuming," he murmurs. He checks the clock, and he sighs. "I have to meet with Dashol and Karns. I saw some of the work you did with Dashol. It's excellent. When you feel well enough, you can join us."

A thrill goes through my chest at having been useful. I've taken up so much of Alaris's time, the least I can do is help him find the best way to the Flame.

"I feel well enough now!" I pull the cover off and shift to stand.

Before I can swing my legs off the bed, he catches the fur and yanks it back over me. He falls forward on his hands, pinning it around my hips.

With his weight caging me, I can't budge.

"No." He leans over me, a stern look on his face. "You'll stay."

"Hey!" My eyes land on his full bottom lip, then pull back up. "See, I do say what I want! You just ignore me!"

The look in his eye grows harder. "Difficult Ly. You only say what you want to trick me. Or to punish yourself for what you think you shouldn't want. And in this case, it's the latter."

"When have I ever…how am I *punishing* myself?"

"You don't think you should rest when there is work to be done," he says simply. "Good thing I'm here to make sure you don't have a choice in the matter."

My mouth falls open at the audacity of this lord. I want to call him pleasure-seeking. Lazy. Frivolous. But unfortunately, it turns out he is none of those things.

I'm too tired from blood loss to think of how to pin him right back.

"I just think you like torturing me," I grumble.

"Maybe I do. Or maybe I care about what you want too much. Up until the exact moment where it hurts you, at which point, I am more than happy to be your villain. Now." He leans closer, herding me back to the pillow. "Stay. In. Bed."

His low and ominous tone rolls over me. I wonder too late what would have happened if I'd held my ground and let him close the distance between us.

I'm going to get him back for this.

His lip twitches. "That's a dangerous look, Ly."

I narrow my eyes. "If you're not worried, you're a fool."

"As long as you stay right here, I'll live with the consequences." His eyes flick to my lips. Then he's off the bed, and by the time I fully exhale, he's at the curtains.

"The healer will decide when you can join us," he says over his shoulder. "Call for me if you want anything else."

He lets the heavy velvet curtain fall.

I won't call him if my wound rips open and I start bleeding. I'll let myself run dry before I give him the satisfaction.

I fall back, exhausted. My blood only buzzes when he is here. Despite my desire to be useful, I really am tired. I spend the rest of the day in and out of sleep. As I drift, my hazy thoughts go to the hawks.

Hopefully, as Alaris's power recovers, they do too.



I wake the next morning to the healer's arrival. Alaris stands behind her again, his arms crossed over his chest. So he hears when she clears me to move about slowly, with frequent rests.

I glance at him triumphantly. "Does this mean I'm free?"

He sighs. "I'll call Flora."

Flora brings me breakfast, along with a small ceramic pot. I squeal when I see it. It's only been a week, but the distinct shape of a lobell shoot is already poking up out of the dirt. A note is tied to the front, and I unfurl it:

Check it out! The first seedling. You take care of yourself and this one, I'll take care of the rest. But hurry back to the greenhouse because they are growing like weeds and I'm out of my depth. Feel better! —S

The seeds sprouted far faster than they ever did for me at the palace. This soil must suit them. I run a finger along the curve of the stem, then set the pot on the side table where it can get light from the window.

As eager as I am to get to the office, I need a shower. Flora helps me limp to the bathing room, then I wave her off. I have to sit on a stool under the stream and take breaks from lifting my arms as I wash my hair. My body fights me to go slower the whole time.

But I push through. I have important things to do. The shadowgates didn't work, which means Alaris will be revisiting other plans. Any detail about the Citadel could matter.

I dress and slide my damp bandaged foot into slippers Flora left for me. I limp to the door and pull it open. The hallway is dim. I hesitate.

Alaris only warded the bedroom.

My chest seizes and my heart takes off, thudding in my chest like I broke into a run. The masked man knows exactly where I am now. He could be in the shadows, waiting for me to take a single step out of safety, his knife ready.

It’s silly, I negotiate with my racing heart. I’m deep in the castle. Alaris and Dashol are just down the hall, expecting me to join them. I step across the threshold.

The corridor twists and warps, the shadows deepening. I jump back into the room and slam the door, heaving in clipped breaths. He’s out there. I can feel it.

Panic and blood loss do not seem to be mixing well. The floor is swaying beneath me, and black spots threaten the edges of my vision. I stumble back to the bed behind the curtain and flop down, waiting for my frantic heart rate to slow. Eventually, I recover enough to kick off the slippers and climb under the fur.

She signed the divorce papers. Now he wants to talk.

Sometimes the best part is watching him earn a second chance.

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But I’m not tired enough to sleep. Which leaves me fully awake and full of guilt.

People just died trying to find a way to the Eternal Flame. I can’t languish here. I have knowledge no one else has…but I’m too afraid. My dreams in Delvos were right. I was right the whole time. How can I ignore my instincts now?

I slide my nails along my scalp, trying to organize my mind.

Who is he? Who would want me dead? Does the masked man know me, or did someone send him?

I’m inconsequential—a princess who only exists to marry and have children. I’m lowest in the succession, so my siblings have no reason to want me gone. My mother hates me, but I just became marriageable. With my birthday, my value to her and my father has only increased.

Maybe I did this to myself. Maybe, by running from my premonition, I ran straight into the danger: Norville. Alaris said he was angry enough to involve his cousin, Kalgasari, the Sovereign of Delvos, in his search for me. But Norville doesn’t know I’m a princess who could bring the emperor’s

wrath down on his head. As far as he knows, I'm just a woman from Trellis, who knocked him out and escaped him.

Would he really hire an assassin to hunt down a missing governess?

It doesn't make sense. No answer does. I spend the day in and out of spinning thoughts and fitful sleep.

Late in the evening, the door opens and I jump, but I know who it is without a word. Alaris's gait is clear as he enters the room.

"Ly, are you awake?" he says softly.

I consider pretending so I don't have to explain my absence from the office earlier. But I'm sure he heard me move.

I sit up and arrange myself. "Yes."

He opens the curtains with a flick of velvet, carrying through a tray with tea, bread, butter, and a pot of honey. "I'm glad you decided to rest. It seems your lord's good sense is rubbing off on you."

"Good sense?" I scoff. "Is that what we're calling your continued abuse of power?"

"Last time you tried to get up on your own, you fainted." He places the tray on the table beside me. "I think another day of rest was wise."

"I didn't faint."

"You were about to faint." He pours the tea. "Now eat something."

I tear a piece of bread because I'm hungry, not because he told me to. He pulls a chair from beyond the curtains and sits at the foot of my bed, one ankle crossed over his knee, watching me eat with an expression I can't read.

"The guards searched the grounds and the clearing," he says, after I've swallowed. "They found blood and broken branches. And a knife, which I believe is yours. But no other evidence of the attacker."

"I see."

"I hoped I might be able to give you some answers, but so far, I have none. I'm still looking into it."

"I suppose it's too much to hope that he left a calling card." I pick up the tea and swirl it. "Thank you."

"There was something else I found interesting."

"Oh?"

"They didn't find a single scorch mark."

I still. "Ah."

“You did well surviving what appears to have been a trained armsman,” he says slowly. “I’m just curious why the emperor’s youngest daughter didn’t use fire, even to save her own life.”

I school my expression into careful blankness, meeting his dark gaze. Should I try to claim I was just hiding my identity? Or that I did use flame, but there was no evidence?

I set the teacup down. “I…sometimes struggle to call the flame,” I say, landing on a half-truth. “Especially when I’m nervous.”

“Hmm.” The pause stretches long enough that the fire crackles. “Inconvenient.”

“Very.”

We stare at each other. I keep my face a blank slate. This is a familiar lie, but I’ve never been challenged on it quite like this. No one at the palace would imagine or dare. Curse Alaris’s powers of perception.

I resist the urge to touch my hair or twist it between nervous fingers. I wait for more prodding questions, more accusations, but they don’t come.

He stands. “I might have something that can help.”

He crosses into the wider room and rummages around his bookshelf. He opens a few drawers, then returns.

He holds out a dagger, hilt first. The blade is plain steel, the handle wrapped in strips of dark leather. The pommel is a rounded stone, with a milky shimmer that shifts in the light.

I take it and grip the round end. A chill spreads through my fingers. It reminds me of how Alaris’s skin feels on mine.

“What is this?”

“Moonstone. It has calming properties.” He points to the blade. “And that end is for stabbing. Both might prove useful if you find yourself struggling to call fire due to nerves.”

My mouth twitches. I turn it in my hand. The shimmer shifts as it moves, and the weight of it is doing wonders for my pulse. “You just had this lying around?”

“You might have noticed, I’ve got something of a collection.” He gestures at the room of treasures behind him. “That crystal above your head is also moonstone. And I have more blades, if you’d like something else…”

“No, this one is beautiful.” I wave it back and forth.

“You don’t have to trade. I’ll give you ten.”

I giggle. “You seem to like collecting things. A side effect of your… ease of travel?”

“It’s only a recent habit.”

“Really? You haven’t always flitted from market to market, picking up treasures?”

“Quite the opposite.” He shakes his head, returning my smile. “I didn’t used to see the point of acquiring objects.”

“You aren’t serious.” It’s hard to imagine this beautiful lord, dressed in rich silk, with crystals and constellations sparkling over his head, ever lived an austere life.

“It’s true. It’s just how I am. Or was.”

“What changed?”

He pauses. The smile that touches his lips is sad. “I found myself wanting someone else to get a chance to see more of the world. And after she died…the best I could do was try to see some of it for her. Keep it, even.”

My fingers still on the pommel. *She*.

Something in his expression tugs at my memory. “Is this the…the friend of yours, who couldn’t leave her bed?”

He pauses for a moment, then nods. “That’s right. She was bedbound for a long time.”

The look in his eyes is far away, but steady. An old wound, the pain scabbed over by time. I think of what Dashol said about everyone having their reason for being in this fight. “Did the wither kill her?”

His eyes lift to the crystals above my head. “Not directly, but…yes. It was the reason she got sick and eventually died.”

I press my lips together. I’ve pried enough. “I’m sorry.”

“No need for you to be sorry. I’m going to stop it, Ly.” He reaches up and taps one of the crystals. It spins, casting sparkles on the velvet. “Collecting these things reminds me that we haven’t lost yet. That life is still flourishing. That there is still time.”

His dark eyes track the crystal, absorbing every point of light.

This room of rarities from across the continent takes on new meaning. These objects don’t represent careless wealth and opulence, or even a simple love of beauty.

They represent what Alaris is fighting for. A vibrant world, full of color. Full of life.

And also, someone he lost.

She.

I turn my face away. How distasteful of me to be jealous of the dead.

"You must be tired," he says. "I'll let you rest."

He lifts the tray with one hand and drags away the chair with the other.

"Sorry if I…sorry if I brought up painful memories," I say.

"It doesn't matter. She isn't in pain anymore." That sad smile is still on his lips, but when his eyes fall on me, they are hard and gleaming, like obsidian. "And I will stop this. No matter what."

The velvet falls closed.

That look in his eye…he's determined. With a look like that, I'm not surprised he went to test his shadowgates, even though he easily could have been caught and burned for treason. He's not going to wait for next winter, whether there's a safe plan to get inside the palace or not.

Alaris is going to die.

The unwelcome words run through my head, and I throw myself under the heavy fur. I press my face into the pillow and curl my fingers around the voidstone.

He's strong and beautiful, and I want to imagine he's invincible, but he's not. Up against the scorching, burning force of the emperor and the Eternal Flame, this lord of night will fall.

I need to help him find a way in. But I don't think I can bring myself to leave this room.

I roll over and stare at the lobell shoot, the first leaves starting to split free at the top. I feel like I'm slipping back into something I used to be—a princess, safe in her marble cage, shut away from the realities outside. I'm back to being the girl who never left the Sunrise Palace, with little to do but watch flowers grow.

I can't help anyone hiding here, and I can't protect myself without answers. I need to understand who hunts me and why.

I need an oraculi.

34

This time, when the healer comes, I don't wait for her assessment.

"I was dizzy when I got out of bed yesterday," I say, keeping my eyes low. "What do you recommend?"

"More rest," she replies instantly. "Blood loss cannot be healed as quickly as skin."

I nod. I can sense Alaris's gaze, but I don't meet it. I wonder if he's guessed I'm afraid to leave the wards. Let him think that. It's true, after all, even though it's not the reason I want the healer's clearance to stay in the room today.

As soon as they both leave, I scramble out of bed. Guilt prickles at me as I creep into the closet, still unsteady on my wrapped foot.

It's not stealing. It was clear based on the way the oraculi were piled in the chest that Alaris has already used them for his purposes, extracting every useful answer about the wither. My questions are simple and shouldn't take much power in comparison: who is the masked man? Why is he after me?

It feels selfish to seek answers that only serve me when everyone on the continent is in danger. But I won't be anything but a burden if I can't make it twenty steps down the hallway.

I'm not exactly sure what I'll be able to do with the answers, but maybe they will help me figure out a way to protect myself. And regardless, I feel a burning need to *know*.

My pulse thuds in my palm as I press it to the mirror. Ripples spread from my fingers, then the glass shimmers and gives. I hold my breath and step through.

I strain my ears as I descend, listening for anyone else who might be down here. But no sounds echo from below, and when I reach the bottom, it's clear I'm alone with the armor and maps.

I head straight for the chest nestled in the corner and unlatch it, revealing the glowing oraculi, stacked in velvet. Most are cracked, shattered, useless, but others still hum with a faint energy. One ring catches my eye, gleaming with a stronger sheen.

It might not be enough to reveal the emperor's ancient secrets, but hopefully, it's enough to reveal one man's identity.

I pick it up, and its power thrums through my fingers like a heartbeat. I can't ask for a name or a face alone, in case I recognize neither and learn nothing. I flip it over once, then again. *Please*, I beg Sophiri's blood silently. *Show me the truth behind the masked man.*

I hold the ring to my eye, the way I saw my father do it. For a moment, nothing happens. The faint illumination makes it difficult to see the surrounding room.

Then it surges.

A bright flash erupts from the ring, flooding my vision. I see with my mind now, not my eyes. A figure takes form, stalking toward me. His edges sharpen as he moves from darkness to light. It's him.

Shapes and colors swirl around him. They overtake my focus on the figure, coming too strong, too fast. His details fade into a sea of images, scenes of people and places I can't catch. My head spins violently, the world whirling faster and faster, until I can no longer keep my balance.

My eyes roll back, and I fall. I bounce against the stone, but there is no pain. I'm too distant from my body for that. I'm lost in a torrent of sights and sounds.

Until finally, it all goes still.

I open my eyes.

The scent of roses hits me.

I'm in my bedroom in the Sunrise Palace.



I glance at the clock, squinting in the dark: it's midnight. My birthday is over.

What woke me? My heart is pounding. Something is wrong.

I sit up. The scent of roses fills the air. My birthday bouquets crowd every surface, their sweetness damp and overripe. I catch my dim reflection in the mirror—I'm wide-eyed, my long hair mussed from sleep. It falls over my shoulders like a veil.

I glance around the room, searching for movement in the shadows. Nothing is unusual except the roses. But I'm not getting calmer as sleep fades. If anything, I'm getting more panicked.

Something is definitely wrong.

I untangle my legs from the sheets and leap from the bed. I check the lock on the door and the latch to the balcony. I look behind the drapes. I kneel and peek under the bed. Every corner is empty.

But my hands will not stop shaking. I have to leave. I cannot explain it, and I cannot wait.

I could shout for guards, but I run toward Rinalda's rooms instead. I never bother her, creeping through these halls as if I'm an intruder. But when I was a child, her room was always the safest place in the Central Palace.

I skid in front of her door and raise my fist to knock. It opens before I can. Rinalda stands there in a robe, long red hair glinting in the torchlight.

She takes me in, and her eyes widen. "What are you doing here?"

"Rinalda." My voice cracks on her name. "Help me, please."

She scans my bare feet and nightgown. "Help you? What are you talking about?"

"I need to leave. I'm in danger."

She glances down the empty hallway. "Danger from what?"

"I don't…I don't know." I realize how strange I sound, but I can't come up with an answer.

"You aren't making sense. Now be clear: what happened?"

"Nothing happened…I just know I can't stay here."

Her face sets, her typical icy exterior re-forming. "You're talking nonsense, Lysandra."

This was a mistake. I ran here in a panic with no plan. I'm going to have to leave and seek reasons later. I back away.

"Where are you going?" she snaps.

“I’m not sure. Just forget I came here. I’m sorry.”

“You need to go back to your room.” She looks me up and down again. “Come with me. Now.”

I trail Rinalda to the stairs. She’s going to help me leave.

She leans over the rail. “Guards! Up here, quickly!”

“No!” I screech.

She grabs my wrist before I can run, tight enough to hurt. I try to twist out of her grip.

Her palm heats, scorching my skin. “Lysandra, just let the guards sort it out before you make a scene.”

The crash of the bar on the outside of my door reverberates through me. I knew the doors of the Sunrise Palace had decorative slots for barricades; I just never thought one would be used on me. I pace between the windows and the door. My nails leave red tracks on my forearms. Every minute since midnight feels like a borrowed breath while I’m still here.

Seran comes. I try to tell him about the threat I can’t see, but he doesn’t listen either. Instead, he sends in healers.

The healers say it’s a nervous episode, but I know it’s not. Every time I insist there’s real danger, the watch over me tightens. First, it’s a lock on the balcony, then a guard outside my door, then a stronger draught at night.

Even in the forced haze keeping me calm, I’m sure if I stay, something is going to kill me.

Honesty is what’s keeping me locked up. If I want them to loosen the watch, I have to lie.

I start masking my fear, folding my hands and nodding when the healers talk. I take my tincture passively, even though my heart flutters with panic as it lulls me to sleep. When Seran visits, I apologize for my hysterics, only screaming on the inside.

The restrictions ease, as do the eyes. I wait to be allowed to walk the gardens alone so I can flee through the passage under the dried fountain. I wait and wait, but they never let me go. Even when I hint that fresh air would do me good, I’m escorted.

I know I’ll die if I stay here much longer. I need another plan.

I’ve paid little attention to the changing faces of staff in the Sunrise Palace these last ten years, but now I hover at every window, tracking the comings and goings of each person to the minute. Every morning, a maid leaves the Sunrise Palace to fetch bread. The Sunrise Gates are guarded, but

she doesn't go through them. She goes through a side gate in the hedges, bolted from the inside. The guards can see it but barely even glance her way.

I note her clothes, what she carries, how she moves. I wait until I'm sure I can time it right, my jaw clenched so hard its ache is a constant pulse.

On the morning I go, I wrap my hair in a scarf, take an empty basket, and slip out the service door a few minutes before she would. I walk through the gate in the hedges. No one stops me. I keep my face down and cross the grounds toward the earthward wall.

"Alaris!" a distant voice calls. "Get down here, now!"

The voice isn't here. It's somewhere else.

"Ly? What's wrong? Wake up. Open your eyes."

It's a second person. This voice tugs something in me. The courtyard warps and wavers…

"What's wrong with her?" The first voice again.

"Get Karns," the second one commands. "Ly, please, stay with me…"

The ground steadies. I hurry across the courtyard.

A gate through the earthward wall is ahead of me, carts lined up to exit. I fall in behind one, keeping close to its back wheel. A guard holds out his hand, and the driver at the front produces a brass token. The guard checks it, nods, and waves the cart through. He does the same with the next, and the next. I am three carts from the gate when the bell sounds.

I drop the basket and rush to the driver of the cart in front of me. "Please," I whisper. "Let me leave with you."

He scowls down at me. "Stay in line."

I whirl and catch the arm of a woman behind me. "I need to get out of here," I hiss. "Can I go with you?"

She pulls her arm free, stepping behind her horse.

I dart ahead and climb in the back of a cart. Hands drag me down by my dress, throwing me to the stones.

"Guards!" someone calls.

"Just let me leave!" I screech, the space around me widening. "Please, if I don't, I'll die here!"

Guards thread through the crowd and haul me up by my wrists.

When they walk me back through the Sunrise Gates, Rinalda is on the balcony. Tears stream down my face, blurring her expression. I want to cry out for her, but begging won't help.

They lock me away in a stone tower with plain furnishings that are bolted down. The door doesn't open from the inside, and the window is too small to fit through.

The fear doesn't fade—it only grows. I'm sure that because I'm trapped here, I'm going to die here.

It's hard to keep track of time. The servants wear gray robes and bring my meals. I suspect they have no tongues, because they never speak. They are prisoners here as much as I am, keeping the secret of the Princess of the Dawn and whoever else is locked in this tower.

Until one day a servant walks in without the hunched shoulders and shuffling gait I'm used to. He slides my meal in front of me, and as I lift my fork, something wraps around my throat and yanks me back. I gasp but nothing comes in. My eyes bulge.

This servant is no servant at all. This is what was coming. This is what I have been afraid of since my birthday.

His hands are iron. My fork clatters to the floor. I claw at the strap but can't get a nail under it, gouging my own skin instead. I kick against the bolted table. My chest burns, my mind full of desperate screaming I can't let out. The edges of the room go dark first, then the table, then the tray in front of me. The last thing I see is my own hands, falling limp off my throat.

Then darkness.

35

Air fills my lungs. Precious air.

Lips are on mine. Clamped down, forcing it in, stretching my chest.

I choke and seize. They lift off.

A voice reaches me, rough and desperate.

“Ly, breathe.” It’s insistent. “Just breathe. Breathe.”

I spasm and cough, gasping in air on my own.

“Slowly,” the voice commands. “Slower.”

I struggle to obey, fighting my lungs to slow down and find a deeper rhythm.

My throat aches. I try to lift my hand to touch the ache, but my arm will not respond. I was dying, choking. Strangled. But now I’m alive. Alive. Was I saved in time?

Cool fingers lift my wrist, pressing deep into the thrum of my pulse.

I open my eyes, trying to push through the thick fog surrounding my mind. I’m not sure where I am, but I don’t think I’m in the tower. My eyes dart around the shadows, but I can’t force anything into focus.

“What is happening to you?” A cool palm cradles the back of my neck, an echo of the violent strap that squeezed a burning line across its front. The voice sounds strained. “Please, answer me.”

The words cut through the haze. I want to speak, to tell him I’m fine now. Air was all I needed. But my lips are numb. This bed smells wonderful —of cloves. My heavy eyes close.

Am I still in bed? It feels like it's spinning. I register his voice again, faintly.

"Please…stay with me. Stay here."

I try. I want to stay right here, in the clove-scented dark. My fingers twitch against sheets, trying to hold on to something.

The world is spinning. I cannot hold on.



I open my eyes to the clock across from my bed. It's midnight. My birthday is over.

My pulse is racing. Something is off.

Sunrise-colored roses crowd every surface. The scent is oppressive, with just a hint of spoilage. The mounds cast odd shadows.

I sit up, slowly. In the mirror, my reflection is barely visible, my hair hanging around me in sleep-twisted waves. I get up the courage to slink out of bed, and check the door, the curtains, the balcony.

Nothing is unusual but the birthday bouquets.

Still, I'm afraid. Being here feels unsafe, as if the palace itself is about to come down on my head.

I consider getting the guards, or Rinalda, but what would I say?

The feeling doesn't subside. I lie awake, tossing and kicking, until dawn.

I expect it to fade with the daylight, but over breakfast, all I can think about is how to get away. I imagine putting down my sliced fruit, feigning a walk in the garden, and slipping under the wall. But that's trading imagined danger for real risk. Where would I go? I would wander the city with no money, no map, no place to stay. I would be dragged back within the hour.

The anxiety claws at me over the next few days. How can I get away from the Citadel? There is no land I can claim to want to see, no errand on behalf of the emperor I can be sent on. Daughters aren't sent to experience the provinces, only sons.

I've never left Illios, and just like my sisters, I won't until marriage.

The good news is, my father has announced me marriageable, and event invites start arriving. I accept every single one. Every luncheon and party represents a room full of lords who could take me from this place.

But simply attending events will take too long. If I wait out the year here, I'm sure I will die here.

I can't go to my father and ask him to pair me quickly. He might withhold marriage, just to remind me it's his choice. Pushing for what I want is akin to disobedience. I need to appear like I'm only concerned with taking the shape he prefers.

Which means I need to attract a man my father will say yes to. And based on my sisters, that means a shadoward lord, as high in his province's succession as possible.

I dress in gowns lords seem to like: clinging silks, pale golds, sunrise pinks. I oil my skin and let the sun warm its glow. I take the mortar and pestle meant for crushing lobell and use it to mash red rose petals, creating a paste I work through my hair. It makes the pale shade a little more rosy, to remind everyone I am of the flame. I sleep little, and eat less, and I drop hints to staff, and ladies, and advisors, about lords I might be interested in.

My father receives some offers, but he sneers from his throne and rejects them with a blast of heat. I can tell he's pleased as he sits back, the scorched lords scampering away. Just as I thought, he is happy to hold me back or move me out on the board, as long as he is the one in control.

I make myself as visible as possible, seeking the company of visiting nobles. I pretend not to notice when they admire me. I let them talk on and on, and giggle at their jokes, and brush against their skin. I let them imagine what it might be like if I belonged to them.

At last, Seran comes with news. The emperor has named my match: Cantor, son of the Sovereign of Nyvos, the shadoward wind-blown province. A second son, not far from the provincial seat. I have my path.

Cantor is handsome and charming, with rich olive skin and a laugh that catches my ear. It takes two weeks for his people to arrive to witness the engagement blessing. I will the priests to rush through the rituals as they spread ash on my stomach and bless me to have a sun-strong child before the Flame. I take Cantor's hand with half-sincerity.

My chest loosens for the first time since my birthday as my carriage rolls through the gates of the outer wall, bearing me to Nyvos for the wedding.

We travel shadoward. When the first snow falls, I exit the carriage and stand in the road with my hand outstretched, watching the flakes melt against my palm. The cold bites through my clothes. I'm not used to the

sting, but I celebrate every mile between me and the Burning City. Behind me, Cantor's horse stamps. When I look back, he is watching me from the saddle with his chin in his hand.

The night before the wedding, we sit alone together beside the fire in the castle he grew up in. His eyes are the color of a clear sky, his smile slow and easy.

He's more than I could have hoped for.

"You're more than I could have hoped for, Princess Lysandra."

I'm shocked to hear the words I just thought spoken back to me. "In what way, Lord Cantor?"

"You're brave."

Given all the practiced deference I've shown him, this is not the compliment I expected. "Why brave?"

"You've come all this way, with a stranger, to marry. And it feels like you're eager, rather than afraid."

I stare a second, surprised he noticed. I turn my eyes to the roaring fire before us. I watched him the whole way here. He shared his furs with servants and bore the wind cutting through his clothes without complaint. "You're not a stranger anymore."

He grins. "No, I suppose not. Then I hope you won't treat me as one tomorrow night." His voice dips low. "We'll only do what you want, of course, but I hope I can entice you to our marital bed."

That makes my heart beat faster—I'm nervous, but I feel closer to peace than I have in months. I would like to take something for myself, not just use my body to attract a way out. Maybe, just maybe, I can find some joy in this marriage.

I smile shyly. He reaches for my hand. I let him take it. It's warm and pleasant.

The door creaks behind me, and Cantor glances toward it. Before I can blink, my husband-to-be is on his feet. The air in the room swirls, the gust sudden and cold, pulling at my hair and scattering flaming embers from the fireplace to the rug.

I whirl, batting my hair down. A man, masked and cloaked in black, steps into the firelight.

The wind howls, yet Cantor's voice rises above it. "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

The intruder does not speak. He moves through the wind, fast and low, inside Cantor's guard. After a short struggle and a hilt to the temple, Cantor is on the ground.

The man turns and stalks toward me.

I scream, but my voice doesn't stop his blade.

He stabs me cleanly, once, through the ribs.

I fall off the chair and crawl toward the hearth. The shock dulls the pain, but only for a second. Blood spills down my front, the scattered embers burning my hands and chest, lighting my dress on fire.

I'm burning.

I'm burning.

36

I drift, my mind only tethered to pain. My breath is hot and suffocating, my chest heaving. With each breath I sink deeper and I cannot tell if the dark is sleep or something worse.

Voices murmur around me, blurry light spilling in as someone forces open an eyelid.

"Fever is getting worse…"

"…some kind of episode?"

"…she's burning up…need to cool her down."

I am half-conscious, floating between the world of fever and dreams, each moment slipping into the next. There's a soft sound—water, trickling. A female voice murmurs, and hands rub a wet cloth over me. Each pass of the cool cloth is my only relief, gone too quickly.

I want to grab the cloth and hold it to my throat, my eyes, my chest. I'm so hot, I must be near a fire. Why won't someone move me farther away from the fire?

The scent of lavender wafts through the air.

"Enough." A voice, low and rough, cuts through the haze. "I'll take her."

Arms lift me, bobbing gently as they carry me. The lavender scent grows, my lungfuls of it the only ones that feel fresh, compared to the breaths I swear I sucked straight from the base of burning logs. Water touches my feet. It's too cold. It's freezing. I flinch and squirm, but the arms hold me steady.

“Shh, this will help.”

The water engulfs my calves, my hips, my ribs. I shiver, but it eases from frigid to cool, wicking away the pain from my burning skin.

The arms hold me steady as I float. I inhale lavender and exhale cool air. I can breathe.

“I can be patient, Ly,” he murmurs. “I’ll wait, without complaining. As long as you come back in the end.”

His voice sounds sad. Broken. I try to tell him that I want to stay with him too. That I’m confused and frightened.

But there is a stronger tide, pulling me under.

The world swirls again, and I lose track of the water lapping at my skin. The arms holding me disappear as roses take me away once more.



I open my eyes. It’s midnight. The roses, piled high from yesterday’s birthday celebrations, are starting to spoil, the sweet perfume cloying in my throat. My heart beats hard. Did something wake me?

I sit up slowly, brushing hair from my damp neck. My chest hums with a whisper of dread, dull and steady.

Did I say something wrong at the party? It is no benign thing, to offend my siblings. Even if I acted out of turn with other lords and ladies, it might get back to my mother or father.

I can’t think of anything I said or did. And nothing in my room seems amiss. Yet my sense of unease lingers.

In the weeks after my birthday, event invites begin arriving. My father has announced me marriageable, and it’s an open door that many a lord tries to walk through. I let the letters stack up. I can’t face crowds when something inside me is fraying.

But the Sunrise Palace doesn’t feel safe either. Sometimes when I’m walking the corridors or the garden, my chest will tighten, my breath going shallow, and I’m sure—without reason, without proof—that someone is behind me. The palace feels too big at night, as if the shadows are hiding something. Even alone in my room, I itch with discomfort.

After Somnus, Seran shows up with a stack of invites he’s decided I should accept. At one of the parties, I stumble upon Borin and his entourage

in an enclosed courtyard. Borin reclines on a velvet chaise, boots kicked up, glass in hand. He's laughing at something a dark-haired woman said, limbs and expression loose. I stare at the bottle beside him, failing to look away before his companion notices.

"I think your sister might want a drink," the woman chuckles.

Not wanting to become this evening's joke, I turn away.

"Come here."

I can't ignore my brother's direct command.

"Want some?" Borin asks.

I nod, face flushing at the circle of strangers who seem to be in on some gag I'm not. He pours it for me, so I drink. It burns. I try to hold back a cough, and choke, which delights everyone.

But after it is done burning, my shoulders drop. My jaw unclenches. For the first time in weeks, I can take a full breath.

I'm not supposed to drink much. Princes can indulge, but not princesses, who must maintain propriety as vessels of Ignar's power. But every party has wine, and I get better at sneaking a few cups, switching between servants with my requests, keeping outside the gaze of my mother. It makes it easier to endure the flocking lords and the whispering advisors and the burning eyes of my father, which have found me more often in these months than they have in the last ten years.

At the winter solstice, Noctus, I spot Rinalda across the room. Even though my social calendar has me attending multiple events a week, she is still only invited to high holidays. She stands apart from the crowd. I've had more than a few cups tonight, and the wine inspires me to approach her.

"Rinalda." I lean against the column beside her. "Any of these lords catch your eye? I can barely keep them straight."

She stares down her nose at me. "Are you drunk?"

"Maybe. I guess that's why I can't keep anything straight." I wave a carefree hand in the air. "How else are we supposed to endure marriagea… marriageability?"

"We?" She scowls. "What we? How dare you speak to me about this? After you are the one who found the…"

Her furious expression and tone are clear warning signs. I try to sober up enough to follow her words, but I only manage to grasp pieces. Letters, she is saying, letters I found, in the bedpost, the screw-in bedpost in her room. How dare I come to her now and talk about marriage as if it is a

game I am winning? Did I think it was funny, reading them? Did I tell anyone?

The air around her blisters, the heat on my skin having nothing to do with the wine or the weather. The marble column beside her chars under her palm. She whirls and stalks away, blending into the crowd.

I sway to the next conversation, glad when the lord who approaches me brings another cup of wine. But when I sober up in the morning, I realize how lucky I was not to have to endure a painful walk back to the Sunrise Palace. Indulging in public comes with risks.

Instead of waiting for parties, I ask maids to bring wine to my rooms. They protest when a request for a glass turns into a bottle, then two. But when I threaten to tell my father lies to get them in trouble, they stop hesitating. Then I threaten to tell him how much they've been giving me to keep the liquid flowing.

The alcohol coats the unease like glass over rot. It doesn't make the fear vanish. But it dulls the edges enough that I can sleep at night.

Until it's not just at night—I add a splash of liquor to my tea. Then a cup in the afternoon. It hardly even spikes my pulse when, one morning, the smell of sour smoke drifts through my window. Guards shout and dash about the grounds, and a maid tells me intruders were discovered in supply carts. The air stinks for the rest of the day, lingering in the courtyard where the evening events are held.

The dread I have carried since midnight after my birthday gets heavier, and I stay in my rooms, only content when I am drifting in a haze, a bottle in reach. It's not enough to coat the rot now. But it keeps my hands from shaking, offering the briefest distraction, even as an enduring headache grows.

Tonight I have sipped from morning until dark. The wine ran out after dinner, and I switched to something that burns going down. I lean on the cool marble railing, watching the flickering torches far below.

Something catches my addled attention.

I turn, slow to focus, and squint at the figure on the balcony with me. My skin prickles. He is not a servant. He's wearing a hood, and he is masked. By the time I slur that he should not be here, his hands are on me.

He grips my arms with terrifying strength and lifts me over the railing. Panic floods my veins as I tip, but it's too late. Nothing is there to catch me. The wind whips through my hair as I fall, the marble rushing up to meet me

with sickening speed. My body smashes into the stone, the pain white and total. I blink once, vision blurring, his silhouette high above. It’s the last thing I see before everything goes black.

37

I jolt, aches fading. I'm not broken against stone. Instead, I'm swathed in softness, a blanket tucked around me, a crackling fire nearby. I blink against the light, then focus on someone sitting beside the bed.

Alaris. His elbows are on his knees, his dark hair falling across his eyes.

"Alaris?" I croak, my throat dry.

His head snaps up.

"Ly." His voice is thick with relief. "You're awake."

"What's going on?" I mutter, squinting. "I was just on the balcony…"

His hand lifts from the chair arm, drifts toward my face, and stops. He curls his fingers and sets it back down. "You've been unconscious for three days."

Three days?

I process the words slowly, along with the room around me. I'm in Arastos, with Alaris. But a moment ago, I was in the palace. Events and places layer over each other. I close my eyes, trying to stop the spinning images.

"Please talk to me. What happened?"

The slight break in his voice brings me back to the surface. Whatever dreams I've been stuck in, I'm here now. Here, I note, in Alaris's bed.

"I saw visions of…versions of myself." A pang goes through my temple. "Ugh."

Alaris's lips part, like he wants to ask more, but he bites down on the words, his jaw tense.

He takes my chin with delicate fingers, and guides my face this way and that, leaning forward to examine my eyes. “Don’t push yourself. Take it slow.”

The tightness squeezing my head eases as soon as I stop trying to focus the swirling sounds and images. I breathe in his scent, and it orients me even more. I examine him. Exhaustion shadows every angle of his face.

I swallow. “Are you okay?”

“Am I okay?” He half-laughs, but the downturn of his mouth at the end takes away any humor. “I’ve spent the last three days thinking that if I take my eyes off you, you’ll stop breathing again. So no, Ly, I’m not okay.”

There is a wild gleam in his eyes. A lump forms in my throat. All I get out is a weak: “Sorry.”

He shakes his head, his tone firm. “Don’t be.”

I am though. I have so many questions, and fears, and too many images crowding my head. I had no idea using an oraculi could do this to me.

“I should get to the…” I raise a hand to point to the bathing room.

“I’ll call Flora to help you.”

Flora steadies me as I hobble to the adjoining room. I startle when I catch myself in the mirror. My hair has grown out. Rose gold waves wind past my collarbone, only the bottom third still stained with charcoal. Flora ties it back and helps me into a fresh nightgown and robe. I have to sit as I wash my face and rinse my mouth, but I shuffle back into the bedroom on my own power.

I walk myself to the bed behind the curtains. My bed.

Alaris watches every step but doesn’t stop me. “Flora, bring some water and light soup.”

She curtsies and leaves.

As soon as my calves meet the mattress, I plop down, legs shaking under my robe.

“Lie back, you shouldn’t be up yet,” he says, his eyes taking in everything.

I scoot back until I’m reclined on the pillows. I squirm under his gaze. I can’t tell if it’s worry or suspicion or anger tightening his features, but the intensity of it is unmistakable.

Flora returns with the soup on a rolling table. With a nod from Alaris she curtsies and leaves again. I almost call after her to stay.

“Eat,” he says, crossing his arms.

I sense he's not in the mood for argument, so I welcome the distraction of soup. My hand shakes, the spoon clattering against the ceramic as I dip in slowly. I lift a spoonful, only to slosh broth over the edge. I crunch my brow to focus.

I don't look up as he comes closer.

His hand wraps around mine, taking the spoon. "Stop. You'll burn yourself."

I flush as he sits on the bed next to me. He dips the spoon into the soup. Tests it against the inside of his wrist. Blows on it. Then lifts it to my lips.

I squirm. There has to be some way to avoid this. "Can't I just have something else?"

He holds the spoon where it is, eyes glinting. "You need salt. And fluids."

"But…"

"Open, Lysandra."

At the sound of my full name, my lips part, and he gently places the metal against my bottom one. I drink from the spoon, unable to meet his gaze.

My throat aches. Swallowing is difficult. I'm weak from hunger, but my stomach still roils at the bite. I cover my mouth.

"Can you take more?"

I nod and he fills another spoonful.

If he's uncomfortable feeding me, nothing in his face shows it. His attention is on my lips, on every swallow. He feeds me half of the bowl before I shake my head at another bite.

The soup helps almost instantly. Warmth spreads through my limbs, and the trembling in my hands steadies.

He sets the bowl and spoon aside. "Better?"

I nod.

"I'll have them bring bread later." Once more, he takes my chin in gentle fingers and examines my eyes. "How is your head?"

"Clearer. Better."

He nods and curls fists on his lap. "Then tell me what happened."

"I…I'm not sure." I bite my lip. I have no idea how to describe these… visions? Prophecies? Dreams? "But I'm just fine now."

"Ly. Do not play games with me."

"I'm not. I really don't know what happened."

“Difficult Ly. Worrisome Ly. Then I’ll tell you what I know.” That simmering energy that feels a lot like anger buzzes from his skin. “Three days ago, I found you unconscious, barely breathing, a broken oraculi next to you. No healer could tell me why you wouldn’t wake up, why your skin burned with a deadly high fever, why your heart rate oscillated between high and low. At one point, you stopped breathing. I watched you every minute of every hour, unable to wake you.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize to me. But don’t hide from me either.” His eyes harden. “And don’t tell me you’re fine.”

I tangle my fingers in my lap. The least I can do is try to give him answers. “I wanted to come to the office and help, but I was too scared. I know the wither is so much more important, but I couldn’t bring myself to leave the wards…”

“I understand. Keep going.”

“I thought I could use an oraculi to find out who he is.” I take a shuddering breath. “But it didn’t show me him. Well, it did, but only after… other things.”

I put my hand to my forehead. Every time I touch on a piece of what I saw, the larger picture scatters.

He studies me. “What did you see?”

In scrambled starts, I tell him about waking up afraid after my birthday. About making different choices in the months that followed. The things I did—or could have done—instead of going on the river to Delvos.

Each time, ending in the masked man’s arrival. In death.

I tell him about waking up and demanding help from Rinalda, leading to my incarceration in the stone tower. I can still feel the leather strap pulled tight around my throat, the edges biting into my skin, my heels scraping the floor as I tried to kick free.

The gagging sensation that follows makes me glad I’ve only had soup.

I tell him about my desperate push to rush into marriage, and my trip to Nyvos. I touch the place where the blade went between my ribs. The skin is whole, but I can feel the cold point pushing through muscle, the ground coming up fast as I collapsed on the embers.

And I tell him about losing myself in drink, and my fall from the balcony. My stomach rolls with the thought of that terrible drop.

“Is this what oraculi usually do?” I ask. Did the oraculi spin Alaris into days of dreaming, to learn about the wither?

The extended quiet makes me look up at him. His knuckles are white, his fingers threaded in front of his mouth. He stares into nothing. He doesn’t even blink.

“Alaris?”

He lowers his hands. “No.” He pauses again. “No, I’ve never heard of an oraculi having this effect.”

He’s silent so long, my heavy eyelids droop.

“Do you have power over the flame?”

My breath catches, and my eyes spring open. “What?”

“Do you have power over the flame? Do you command any powers of Ignar?”

“I…” The familiar answer rises before I can stop it. “It’s not always reliable. When I’m afraid, or under stress, it doesn’t…”

“Is that true? Tell me the truth, Ly.”

“I am.” I squirm. “You’re spending far too much time worrying about me.” I pull the fur higher, like it can shield me from his questions. “I only used the oraculi so I can help. I never meant to distract you…”

“If you lie to me, I’ll spend even more time and resources figuring out the truth myself. Ly, I beg you. For my sake and for yours, give me an answer I can believe.” He tips his head back, his expression cold. “If you don’t, the wither will have to wait, because I’m going to do whatever I need to make sure this never happens to you again.”

I suck in a breath. It’s my biggest secret, but there are so many strange and dangerous secrets between us now.

“No,” I say finally. “I’ve never called the flame. My siblings all command it. I am the only one who can’t.”

He goes quiet. His gaze is on the middle distance, fixed on something I can’t see.

“Alaris?”

“I’m thinking,” he says without moving.

My eyelids are losing the fight. Each blink lasts longer than the one before.

“Don’t.” His voice cuts through the fog. “Don’t go under again. Stay here with me.”

“I’m just tired.” My words are thick. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.” The spinning shapes and colors felt different.

He doesn’t look convinced, his grip tight on his knees.

“I promise. This is just…” I yawn so wide my jaw cracks. “This is just sleep.”

He exhales through his nose. His jaw works once. Then he reaches across and pulls the fur around my shoulders, his fingers brushing my collarbone. “I’m going to wake you every few hours to check.”

“Fine. Give me four hours.”

“Three hours.”

I close my eyes. The last thing I register is him standing and the quiet scrape of a book being pulled from the shelf.

38

I surface slowly. There is no blood, no scent of roses. Just the crackle of a fire and the weight of the fur and the smell of cloves.

Through the open curtains, I spy Alaris on the couch, a massive book open across his lap. He's leaning over it, one hand braced against the page, the other pressed to his mouth.

"How long was I out?"

His eyes lift to mine. "Just under three hours, with a few minutes to spare. How do you feel?"

"Better." I push myself up against the pillows. My head is the clearest it's been since I used the oraculi. "What are you reading?"

He tilts his head at the book in his lap. "I want to show you something."

I pull off the fur and shift to stand. He rises from the couch, but I wave him off.

He stays where he is, the book under one arm, and watches me cross the room. I can feel his eyes on every unsteady step and the hand I rest briefly on the bedpost. I make it to the couch on my own and sit down harder than I mean to.

He retakes a seat beside me, his rings glinting as his long and elegant fingers play over the leather cover. "Have you ever considered you might not be a child of the flame?"

"Yes," I admit. "I've wondered many times if I am just…mortal."

Despite the assurances of the sophirian priests, many nights since my blood came and my power did not, I have wondered. A union between a

divinial and a mortal is always thought to produce a divinial—but what if I only inherited from the emperor's mortal half, and my mother and father produced a child with no power at all? There are no stories of it, but just like with me, it is not something powerful families were likely to report.

Alaris shakes his head. "I'm arastorian. Mortals have a void within them. An emptiness. I can see it." He touches the crystal at his ear, playing with it. His eyes flash bright silver. "I checked while you were sleeping. You do not have that void, Ly. You are of one divine line or another. And if not Ignar's, the question is which?"

His words set my heart racing, but before I come up with a response he sets the large book on my lap. The cover is so worn there is no legible title, the gold paint reduced to flecks.

He opens it to the first page. "This is a book of the gods, and their lives before sending the incarnials to this world."

A colorful illustration depicts ten figures, arranged in the order of creation: Ignar, god of sun and consumptive flame, painted in gold and crimson. Marith, Nyvorn, and Mordyn, representing sea, air, and earth. Vernalia, goddess of life and growing things. Thanovar, god of death and decaying things. Cyralia, goddess of seasons, time, and cycles. Sophiri, goddess of wisdom, clarity, and memory. Delvara, goddess of dreams, chaos, and prophecy. And at the far edge of the page, Arastor, god of night and the eternal void.

Their identities are easy enough to figure out, even though this artist didn't render them like the standard depictions in the capital. My eyes run over the image once, then again, landing on the god-touched traits divinials wear so proudly: Marith's blue hair. Sophiri's golden eyes. Mordyn's dark fingertips. It's impossible to imagine I could carry some other god's blood, when I don't even bear Ignar's red hair.

"Imagine that's true…" I can't fully believe Alaris's claims, but I decide to play along. "Do you already have an answer in mind?"

He nods. "I've had the last few hours to consider the options, but you lived it. I want to hear what feels true to you first."

"Is it possible…" My eyes pause on Delvara. "That I'm seeing prophecies? Versions of potential futures, if only I made different choices?"

"It's possible," Alaris murmurs, running a finger along the bottom of the page.

The illustration of Thanovar makes my skin prickle. Ever since my birthday, it has felt like death was chasing me. Since the divinials of death aren't actually behind the wither, I should let go of old biases. "Or Thanovar? Am I having visions of death?"

"It could be. What do the visions feel like?"

"They feel…real. Like I lived them." I can still taste the smoke from the fire in Nyvos on my tongue and feel the pressure of Rinalda's grip on my arm. These aren't like dreams, fading into the morning light. They are more like…"Like memories."

"Sophiri is the goddess of wisdom and memory." He drags his finger to the golden-eyed goddess. "The oraculi is hers, and it did trigger this. But her blood can only reveal what's already true. It can't be the cause."

"Vernalia then?" I let out a choked laugh, indulging in the absurdity of this whole conversation. "Did I…come back to life?"

"I will not rule anything out, but to my knowledge, even Vernalia's incarnial never brought back the dead."

"What then?"

He taps the page twice and cants his head. He flips through the book, skimming over illustrated chapters devoted to each of the gods. Past the halfway point, he stops on an intricately painted figure: a woman cloaked in white, with white hair and eyes, pale and radiant. Above her head, the sky is split into four, with one segment for each season.

Her picture looks exactly like the ones in the capital: Cyralia, goddess of seasons, time, and cycles.

"I don't understand." My eyes lock on his. "You think I'm cyralian?"

"You said they feel like memories, and the oraculi only show truth. What you saw is real. Meaning you lived the same stretch of time, multiple times."

"Multiple times? Then I lived, and died, and lived it again? But cyralians don't control…" *Time*. My bones hum, the vibration from my sternum so strong I feel it in my teeth. I press my hand to my chest as it spreads, thrumming through my head and clouding my vision. "Whoa."

I feel the truth of it. I lived all these months and moments, lived them, and then relived them. Each time, my death reset me back to the night of my twenty-first birthday.

"…Ly? Are you…?"

Alaris might have said something else, but I'm still too stuck in the resonance of the word. I open and close my mouth a few times. *It's true.* It's too strange to say out loud.

He lifts a hand toward my face, then drops it, and takes the book off my lap.

I shake my head as the leather slides through my fingers. "But I've never heard of cyralians having this kind of power."

Cyralians at court have only ever performed weak seasonal magic, their displays with snow or autumn leaves stunted in the blaze of my father's eternal summer. "Why haven't I heard of any of them manipulating time itself?"

"There are good reasons to hide power that would be seen as a threat," he says, still watching me closely. "It wouldn't be the first forgotten truth in this continent's history."

Like Alaris's shadowgates. No one knows the arastorian line has such a power. Control over time is even more dangerous.

But I don't have control. This power, if it is really mine, hasn't saved me. I only repeated the cycle, dying three times. The other night almost made it four.

"If that's true then, I…I really died." My voice catches. "I didn't escape him. He is going to keep finding me."

"Ly, he won't reach you here—"

"I don't want to die again." My breaths are coming faster. "It's horrible."

"You're not going to."

"I can't. I can't…"

"Breathe with me." Calming cold radiates from him, enveloping me. The room suddenly smells of night air, a soothing, fresh scent, like blackberry brambles. "I promise, Ly. Nothing will harm you while I'm here. No divinial. No emperor. No one hiding in shadows."

I nod, my chest tight. "Okay, okay. This will just take…a little processing. I'm fine."

"I told you to stop telling me you are fine." His eyes rove my face. "You're not fine. But you will be."

He stands and moves away. I want to ask him to stay near, but he returns a moment later with a glass of water, which I gratefully accept. "Do you want to eat more?"

I shake my head. My eyelids are heavy. “I know I was unconscious for a long time, but it feels like I was awake. I think I”—I yawn—“need to sleep again.”

He looks like he’s going to object. But he takes the glass from my hand and puts out his arm. “Come on, then. I’ll help you.”

I slide my hand into the crook of his elbow. Being close to him is so comforting, I almost wish he was walking me back to his bed instead of my own. All too soon, I’m on the other side of the curtains. He stays at the entrance.

“No more reckless attempts to solve this yourself,” he says, voice gruff. “We’ll make a plan. For now, rest.”

His eyes linger on me until the velvet shuts.

All this time I called the certainty that drove me from the palace a premonition. I thought it was a warning of what was yet to come. But it’s not. It’s an echo of what already was.

I didn’t learn who the masked man is, but I learned how I know he’s coming. He already came for me. He found me when I was locked away, guarded, and watched, and he found me here, on the most distant edge of the continent, disguised and under a different name.

He will hunt me until I find a way to stop it.

Or *we* stop it.

Maybe this life, with Alaris’s help, I can survive.

39

I wake the next morning to light streaming in through the window. I inhale deeply, seeking the scent of roses, but only catch a hint of lavender. I'm still here, in the present.

There's frost on the windowpane, white creeping at the corners of the glass. It wasn't there before the oraculi. I lost days to my memories. Winter has begun.

I ring the bell for Flora. "Can you bring me some charcoal? And some scissors."

While Flora steps out to fetch the charcoal, I make my way into the bathing room. I stand at the mirror. My familiar, rose gold hair grew back in a matter of days, as if my body wanted to match my remembered versions of myself. Or as if a year really had passed while I lay in bed.

I pick at the wavy strands. How long have I viewed this hair as proof of weakness? The lack of fiery color a living symbol of failed power?

Years spent holding my hand over candles and willing the flames to bend. Pressing my palms together until the skin went white, waiting for heat that never came. Watching my siblings and their children summon fire like breathing, while I was terrified to go out in public in case any situation ever required a spark.

All of it was a futile attempt to call on the blood of the wrong god.

I am not a failed divinial of Ignar. I'm a divinial of Cyralia.

Which means there's something about my lineage I don't know.

Flora returns with the supplies I need, and I rush through the process of spreading charcoal on my head. She's already seen my hair's true shade, so there is no point in hiding how I color it. She makes no comment, lending her hands to help me grind in the gritty paste and snip the length back above my shoulders.

I shower to rinse off the residue, as she fetches me some bread and water.

"Thank you," I say as she delivers the food. "Do you know where the lord is?"

"In the office, Lady, for his daily territory update."

Then he'll be with Karns and Dashol. With everything I just learned, there's a very good argument for staying in bed all day and staring at the ceiling. But I can't. I'm here to help with the wither. The truth of my blood will still be there to mull over later. The least I can do is make it down the hallway to share the knowledge my years in the Citadel bought me.

My disguise back in place, I dress as quickly as I can and tuck the voidstone beneath my clothes. I pull on my boots and cross the room. I grip the handle and take a breath, tensing my legs to run to the office. I throw open the door.

"Ack!"

A smirking lord is leaning against the corridor wall, waiting for me. "Flora told me you were on the move." His eyes flick to my hair, then back to my face. "I thought you might like an escort."

I purse my lips. It seems he remembers my confession that I'm afraid to leave the wards. "Are you still meeting?"

He nods.

I breeze past him. "Then let's go."

"Lyra!" Dashol smiles as soon as I enter the office. "Happy to see you up and about. We were just using one of the maps you helped me with."

I give him a nod and a small smile. So much has changed since we worked together on the maps.

Karns's expression is weary. He watches with calculating eyes as I take the seat Alaris offers. They dart from me to Alaris, then back to me. I can't blame him for finding the situation strange. I was just escorted to their secret meeting directly from the lord's bedroom.

Alaris doesn't leave space for comments. "Where were we?"

“Discussing Lord Jorbyl,” Karns says, straightening his vest. “He’s due at the palace for the winter solstice. He could bring some of our men in as guards and extend his stay to overlap with us.”

“Jorbyl will be quartered in the windward guest halls,” Dashol says. “Those men would be on the far side of the complex from the main force.”

“But they could hold this entry.” Karns points to the map. “The main force takes the first checkpoint with that side already covered.”

“And if the rotation catches them there? They’re only four men, with no backup,” Dashol says.

“At least the alarm would go up in the wrong place. Advance teams accept that possibility.”

“We aren’t talking about possibilities, Karns. We’re talking about people.”

I can’t tell whose side Alaris is on as he leans forward. “What’s the rotation schedule?”

I sit back as they shuffle through papers and argue options. Most of their references are unintelligible to me, their plans discussed so many times they’ve been reduced to a shorthand. Unfortunately, the discussion makes it clear they still don’t have a plan they are all happy with.

I listen for an hour before I catch something on a map that might be useful, as they debate how to get small groups to converge without detection.

“You’re missing a hiding place in this plaza,” I say. I may not understand all their words, but I know the color coding and symbols on the maps at least. “Here. There’s a drainage tunnel beneath the Granato fountain. You can remove the grate and climb inside.”

Karns walks closer to the desk, eyeing the part of the map I indicate, brows raised. “How do you know that?”

If Alaris trusts these people, so should I. I take a deep breath. “Because I crawled inside it when I was seven.”

I glance at Alaris, whose dark eyes are even. There’s no warning there, just openness, or curiosity maybe, over how much I want to reveal.

“Useful delinquency.” Karns adjusts his glasses. “How many people could it hide?”

“Three, I think. Maybe four, if they squeeze.”

I wait for him to ask me something else about why I was hiding anywhere in the Citadel as a child, but instead, he holds out a pen. “Mark it,

since you're our cartographer."

I grip the pen harder than necessary under Karns's scrutinizing gaze, but I draw clean lines on the first try. I've seen Dashol do it enough to know when to use a dotted line, and which symbols indicate an entrance and a hiding place.

For the rest of the meeting, I listen, adding a few comments about which footpaths are covered and which are exposed to windows above.

"We'll resume tomorrow," Alaris says. Karns nods and leaves through the front, while Dashol gathers the maps and turns toward the mirror.

Before I uncurl myself from the chair, Alaris is before me. "If you're up for an outing, there are some hawks that would love to see you."

I half-walk, half-run to the aviary, letting Alaris trail behind me for once.

I throw open the door and squeal at the sight of the dark shapes high on their perches. The whole stone tower erupts in a cacophony of cries, and the hawks descend. I can't track individuals as wings swirl around me. I pick my way toward the bench so I can pet them, their claws too sharp to rest on my arms.

I settle in as I'm surrounded by jostling feathers and beaks. Head after head finds the palms of my hands, my outstretched fingers grazing over wing after wing. I recognize the one who fell into the water, his beak a little wider. He chirps and bullies others out of the way so he can climb onto my lap, his claws snagging my skirt. My eyes well.

"I'm so glad to see you all," I whisper, beaming even as my vision gets blurry. I don't trust my voice to say more.

"It's good to see your smile again." Alaris's dark eyes glint. With that focused gaze and onyx hair, he looks so much like these birds of prey. "Would you like to stay with them a while?"

"Of course." I don't want to sit in bed feeling useless until tomorrow's meeting. The sea of round eyes implore me to stay. "But you're busy. I think I should just go back to the rooms."

I don't say the rest: that I can't stand the idea of staying outside the wards alone.

Alaris clears his throat. "I need to show you something." His earring swings as he turns his back. "Do something."

"What?"

"Do something. Anything I wouldn't expect you to do."

I hesitate. Then I hold up three fingers.

"Three fingers," he says without turning. "Something else."

I open my hand to four, then five.

"Numbers won't surprise me, Ly. Try again."

The back of my neck heats. He is not joking. I glance at the hawks around me. Some are preening. Others press against me with their eyes closed. One is perched on the crossbeam of the door, watching me, its black stare steady. I blink at it.

I lift my hand again and make the rudest gesture I know.

Alaris laughs, low and short. "Charming."

He turns. There is silver in his eyes, a bright ring of it around each pupil. After a breath, it fades.

"I can see what they see," he says. "They can be my eyes on you when we are not together."

Divinials of Mordyn, Marith, and Nyvorn can communicate with living things, but I've never heard of arastorians having a similar connection. He did say the hawks were specially bred by the lords of night, and I sensed they were more than ordinary birds. Could having them keep watch be enough?

The masked man flashes across my mind, flipping his dagger and raising his arm to throw it.

I look down. "Sometimes, I don't think anything will be enough to save me. It feels like he could be in any shadow."

"No one can get near this castle now without me knowing." His voice is sure. "The hawks have been monitoring the grounds since the moment they recovered."

"But the forest—"

"They can spot a mouse in the grass at midnight. And besides…"

I barely blink, and he's gone. His next words come from behind me, low and vibrating over the shell of my ear. "My shadowgates are working again. If danger appears, I can be with you in an instant."

I force myself not to shudder as tingles spread. I blink again, and he is back in front of me, the crackle in the air the only evidence that he used any magic at all.

I try to wrangle down the lump in my throat.

"You see?" His lips quirk. "I have eyes on you everywhere."

Everywhere. Everywhere…?

“Hey.” I straighten so fast the hawk in my lap startles. “I’ve changed in here. Just how often have you looked?”

Several hawks squawk at that, swiveling their heads to Alaris. I choose to believe they are indignant on my behalf.

“Only when you gave me reason to worry.” He pauses, a sly smile growing. “Which, admittedly, has been often. I might have caught a few choice words directed at me in those early weeks.”

“And you earned every one of them!”

“Have I? Now you understand the restraint I showed when I didn’t interfere the night you decided to sleep on that bench. I very nearly scooped you up and threw you straight in the bath.”

“You call watching me restraint?”

“Tremendous restraint. Truly, terrifying control.”

I want to scold him more, but instead, a laugh breaks through.

The light coming through the high windows catches silver in his gaze. “A smile *and* a laugh. What a day.”

The lump I was keeping down comes up. I turn back to petting the nearest hawk. The bed, the curtained room, the wards, and now the hawks. He is pouring resources into my survival when he has more important things to focus on, and I have given him little in return except sleepless nights.

“Stay with the hawks as long as you like, Ly. I’ll have Dashol come get you later.”

The door swings open and shuts behind him.

I lean toward the hawks arranged on the ground before me. “You like me more than him, don’t you? You’re on my side? Next time you see him, give him a good peck.”

Hawks don’t nod, but the cocked heads and attentive gleaming eyes tell me *yes, we will*. Alaris’s laugh reaches me, even through the door.

40

Every morning when I open the bedroom door, Alaris is waiting there with one shoulder against the wall. It reminds me he was up earlier than me, which would be fine if he didn't also come back to the room later than me. The last few nights, I didn't hear him return to the bedroom at all.

"You look terrible," I tell him, taking in the pale lavender shadow under his eyes. It's not true, of course; his handsome face and artfully curled hair are still perfect. But I can't stand that one sign of strain.

"Good morning to you too," he says, offering me his arm.

I hold up the potted lobell from beside my bed as an excuse for not accepting it. "When did you last sleep?"

"There will be plenty of time for that when this is finished." He tilts his head at my pot as he falls in step beside me. "Is that a lobell bush coming between us?"

"Yes. I brought some seeds with me."

"So this is the source of your wondrous ointment." He curves a finger under one of the stems, the head already bulging into what will eventually become a bud. "Not a gift from a 'former employer' then? You grow it yourself?"

"Yes." I flush at being caught in yet another lie. "The rest are with Siro. If they grew as well as this, there should be enough for the whole castle soon."

"What a gift." His obsidian eyes gleam as he looks down at me. "Do you need an escort to the greenhouse?"

My fingers squeeze the ceramic, already strained by the roots from within. “I’m fine to go on my own. The ceiling is glass, after all.”

I can tell he gets my meaning. *The hawks can see me.*

As we reach the office door, my steps slow. I hate that this will be the whole of our conversation for the day, outside of battle plans. But he is already losing sleep because I used the oraculi. I can’t take another second of his time.

I force myself to swing through the door and head straight for the table by the window without a backward glance. I set the lobell on the sill, and nod to Dashol as he dumps an armload of maps in front of me. I get to work reviewing them, drawing lines where there are gaps or corrections. I keep an ear on the room in case I have something to add about the Citadel.

“Useful,” Karns says, when I mention a servants’ stair on the fourth floor of the Central Palace.

High praise, from Karns. Sometimes, when I have nothing to offer, all I get is a sidelong stare from behind his glasses. But occasionally, when I have a tidbit to contribute, I get a nod.

Over the course of these meetings, I’ve learned the deadline we are working against: the Flame is weakest between Noctus—the winter solstice, Arastor’s high holiday—and the deepest cold at midwinter. After that, the cold eases, and the Flame strengthens by the day.

With only weeks until solstice, there is no time to waste.

“Going to the greenhouse?” Dashol asks as the meeting ends, bobbing his head toward the lobell. “I’ll go with you.”

Even though I feel safe enough crossing the grounds, I don’t refuse Dashol’s company. Hawks circle overhead, trailing our path as we cross the grounds to the glass building. The cold chills my fingers as I clutch the rough clay. I meant to visit Siro sooner, but it took longer than I expected to recover my strength. This plant decided it’s time to return to the greenhouse for me. The roots are about to break through the ceramic if I don’t move it to a larger pot. The rest of the seedlings must be ready as well.

I pause at the door, warmth leaking white through the cracks. “Does Siro know? About…everything?”

Dashol bobs his head from side to side. “She knows enough. But Karns doesn’t let her get involved in the details. He came here specifically to keep her safe.”

As Dashol said, everyone has their reason for being in this fight. I want to ask more, but I just nod. We can't discuss it in the open.

Balmy air hits my face. Siro is wedged between beds with her sleeves shoved past her elbows, picking something off the underside of a leaf.

"Lyra." She looks at me, then past me. "And the commander. Long time no see, Dash. Aren't you too busy playing with your own wooden sticks to visit me?"

"You were on my way," he says, clearing his throat. "But I can't stay."

Something about his tone makes me slide my eyes over to him. He's standing up a little straighter, his lips parted, his eyes locked on the woman crouched in the dirt.

Interesting.

"Well, since you found yourself with a little extra time, there's a barrel that's probably going to freeze if I leave it out overnight, if you could put it closer to the stove."

"Where?"

"Just there." Siro barely extends a finger, and Dashol is out the door.

Dashol is helpful. He's always helpful. But I don't think I've seen the man move that fast before.

"What is that?" Siro asks, coming closer, her black-lined eyes wide.

"The seedling you sent me." I hold up the pot, dense leaves spilling over the edge. "Sorry I didn't come sooner."

"You really have been holding out on me. You clearly have some tricks." She points to the rows of lobell that have been growing here.

Half the sprouts are a few inches high, the first pale leaves curling free. I recognize them as the ones she planted. The other half, the ones I stuck in the dirt, are about three times as big. They all stand in contrast to the plant in my hands, which looks like it has been growing for weeks longer. With the lost days and all that's happened, I didn't notice how unusual it was. It feels like I've lived months and months since I planted this seed.

My hands tingle. *Is this my power?*

Have I always grown lobell faster? Have I been cycling through seeds, sprouts, and flowers at an unnatural pace? Is that part of why I've been able to grow a new variety, with more buds, and seven clear petals instead of the usual five green ones?

And has my ointment lasted longer because I tested all the possible varieties, or is that my power too? The ointment made from the buds

spoiled slower for Siro. But would a jar she made really last seasons, as mine do?

I clear my throat. “Well, they do seem to be taking to this soil.”

She wipes her palms down her thighs. “We should get a more permanent place ready for them, if they’re all going to do that soon.”

Siro and I clear old planter boxes, digging out worms and rotted roots and replacing them with fresh soil. She shows me how to ready each box for a shoot, pressing an empty pot into the dirt, leaving a hollow the exact size she needs.

Siro plants the first. The loose dirt and roots fall into her waiting palm, while I have to dig mine out of the pot with the trowel. I leverage the root ball free and slide it into the waiting spot.

Grow these buds quickly. All of them.

Whatever happens this winter, I want to make sure there is more lobellum on hand. No matter which way into the palace Alaris takes, there will be fire and blood. And he is going to be at the center of it.

I glance up at the hawks, their talons scratching the glass overhead.

The shadowgates. The wings. Now the hawks. I’ve heard of arastorians darkening rooms, calling cold, and opening voids. I’ve heard their eyes turn pure black. But I’ve never heard of one flying.

There are good reasons to hide power that would be seen as a threat. Are the arastorians hiding their true power from the emperor, just like the cyralians? Or is Alaris just strong?

“What generation is the lord again?” I ask Siro.

She picks a long worm out of the dirt and adds it to her bucket of rotted roots. “Fifth, I think?”

“Hmm.” That’s what I remembered. “Did you work under the previous lord?”

She shakes her head. “We moved here a few years after Alaris took the seat. I never met Lord Staburn.”

With Alaris being as powerful as he is, I can’t fathom what his father is capable of. Then again, Elva’s eyes were brighter than Norville’s. Sometimes, a later generation can have a stronger affinity for magic. Maybe that’s why Alaris took the seat from his father so early.

But I can’t help pressing. “I heard…I heard a rumor that his blood seemed more potent than that.”

“There are a lot of rumors about him.” She meets my eyes. “All I really know is there is a reason Karns chose to support Alaris. He believed this lord could achieve what needs to be done.”

We hold each other’s gaze.

Then, she breaks it. She dumps another seedling into her hand and pats it into the dirt. “What’s up with you and him anyway?”

Her unbothered tone disarms what would otherwise be an uncomfortable question. I consider deflecting it.

“He’s helping me with something.” The words sneak out of my mouth before I fully decide on them, part of me wanting to share the thoughts torturing me every morning he offers me his arm. “He’s done a lot for me. Too much.”

“Too much?”

“He has more important things to worry about. I want to repay him. But…” I tug on the next plant that won’t come out of its pot, trying not to break the fragile stems. “I don’t feel like I’m doing enough.”

I’ve filled in maps, but I haven’t cracked any new way to the Flame. Every path we’ve discussed, every plan, is still dangerous. Even now, I’m growing flowers with half a mind on the invasion and half a mind on the wither’s spread if we fail.

He’s kept me safe, and what have I done?

“If your debt to him is how I came by all these lobell bushes, I won’t complain too much.” She pats the soil. “But I’m sure he’s doing exactly what he wants to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean…” She stares ahead, her black-lined eyes pensive. “Maybe he likes helping you.”

“What? Why?”

She shrugs. “I take care of these plants all day, and they don’t do anything for me.”

I blink. “Are you saying I’m like a…plant? Or useless?”

“I’m trying to say you don’t have to be useful to be liked.” She pats another shoot into the planter. “Do you only like him because he’s useful to you?”

“No!” If anything, him doing so much for me makes tolerating his presence more difficult. I blush, realizing I just admitted I like Alaris. *As a friend and ally,* I clarify to myself.

“Well, maybe it’s the same for him.” She pauses. “You are going to remember that I compared you to a plant, aren’t you?”

“I very much am,” I say, pawing the stubborn roots for a better grip. “I’m going to think about it a lot, actually.”

“This is why I can only talk to you,” she mutters to the leaf in front of her.

We both dig back into the dirt.

Despite Siro’s words, I only feel worse morning after morning as Alaris greets me. Even though his smile remains light, his eyes grow a little harder each day.

I still don’t know how Alaris plans to destroy the Eternal Flame, but against an already impossible task, every advantage matters. He needs all his strength. All his focus. He doesn’t need me distracting him or delaying his sleep. When I hear that door open well past midnight, I hold my breath, just to make sure he doesn’t come check on me. Even when I hear a soft “Ly?” in the dark, I don’t answer.

Solstice isn’t far. Lives are at risk. I need to make up for the time I cost him.

So I start keeping my own late hours. In the evenings, I head to the basement through the mirror in the closet. No one else comes down here at night, and I’m able to peruse the maps uninterrupted in the candlelight. I revisit every single one I worked on with Dashol before my memories came.

I mark corridors and pathways I never walked in this life. The images rise as my pencil moves: a maid ahead of me on a back stair, a stolen bottle cold against my ribs. A lord I flirted with lifetimes ago walking me through a private garden. The details come faster than I can sort them, layering one over the other until I can’t tell which life I’m pulling from. Every time I delve into memories, I’m racing a headache building behind my eyes. But the tidbits are worth it, so I write each one down, as tension spreads along my jaw.

Even with the late-night mapmaking, I’m still always upstairs and behind the curtains before Alaris gets back.

When does the man sleep?

I split my daylight hours between the meetings, the aviary, and a few visits to the greenhouse. With the hawks flying above me, I can safely cross the grounds. They perch on the frame of the glass building as I work with

Siro. We make quick progress with the lobell, the other seedlings exploding into leaves and the hint of buds.

No one else asks me about my rooming arrangement, but more eyes follow me than usual as Dashol escorts me through the castle. I spy Drina in a corridor once, and she gives a little wave, coming closer as if she wants to talk. I nudge Dashol's elbow, and he quickly steers us away. If Captain Orso didn't hear about the new hawk keeper in Drina's last report, I'm sure I'll get a mention in the next one as the lord's new paramour.

Two more of Alaris's "lovers" arrive with information. The gowns and jewels and carriages now look like clever costumes, not genuine attempts to attract and seduce. The women swan through the halls, making a show of their presence as they wait for Alaris to receive them. It's clear now why I always noticed their arrival; they want all the servants to spread the gossip of Alaris's affairs.

I wonder if the rest of the staff pities me, his newfound lover, who tolerates him meeting with other women. The servant who rooms with a sovereign but can't keep him for herself.

Even though I know it's just a story, it turns my stomach. He isn't really meeting with visiting women for sex. He implied he hasn't been with anyone for a very long time.

My toes curl when the thought comes unbidden: *except me. Almost.*

On both visits, Alaris has me listen from behind my curtained area in his room.

"The fewer people who could recognize your face, the better," he says, swinging the velvet shut between us.

I stare up at the crystals as the informants share their news. The somber voices discussing alliances and trade routes sound nothing like the passionate encounters I imagined with every arriving carriage.

The first time, I emerge from the curtains with nothing to add to the report. But the second, I offer a contradictory detail.

"She said Lady Owens can convince her husband to join our side, but… that's risky. Lord Owens isn't loyal to his wife." I root around in my own mind, wondering how I know that, before I realize it's not a memory from this life. It's from the life where I was thrown off a balcony, when I spent most of my time drunk. Lord Owens brought his mistress to a late-night gathering, and her presence became the talk of the party. I lock eyes with

Alaris as I swim my way back to the present. “He has a mistress his wife doesn’t know about yet.”

Alaris nods, eyeing my brow. I clench my teeth as the headache that accompanies sifting through my memories pangs once. I make an excuse and retreat behind the curtains to lie down.

That night, as I stare at the maps before me by flickering candlelight, I dare to touch on the memories of my deaths.

If I can remember gossip I didn’t care about at a party I attended half-drunk, maybe I can remember some additional detail about the masked man. I picture him on the balcony, stalking toward me with those even steps, and a second later my body jolts, rocked with pain as I crash to the stone. I shake my head and clench my teeth.

Even if I force myself to relive them, I don’t think I’ll learn anything useful. The chest of oraculi catches in the corner of my eye, but I turn my head away. I want to know, but touching one of those again is too great a risk. I can’t spin into memories for days. I can’t do that to Alaris.

Still, the map in front of me blurs. So I pull out a clean piece of paper and switch to reviewing names instead.

Before the oraculi, the only name I could put to a pursuer was Norville. But I never set foot in Norville’s manor in my other three lives. I still can’t be sure whether the masked man wants me dead himself or was sent by another, but it’s clear it’s the same man every time. That means the same motive.

And I know something new about myself: I’m not ignarian. With that truth on the table, I can think of several people who might want me dead.

I write down the first name: *Hilaria Ignaros.*

The empress. My mother. I follow it with a curling question mark.

If the emperor isn’t my father, she would at least suspect it. She famously got pregnant faster than any other empress. She could have gotten married while it was still too early to tell she was with someone else’s child. Or, she could have lain with a cyralian man in those early days at the palace.

It is also possible that my mother has no idea something is amiss, because she herself is cyralian. All of the red-haired empresses had their lineages scrutinized to ensure no other divinial blood could show up in the royal line. Her mortal lineage would have been verified. If there was a mistake, anyone involved could face execution.

I write down: *Advisors? Archivists?*

Then: *Emperor Belzas?*

He could have also sent an assassin. My father acts with fire and violence, but if he ever found out about my cyralian blood, he might choose to deal with me privately rather than publicly name himself the fool.

I start listing my siblings but decide to save the ink; they wouldn't bother coming after me if they knew. My brothers are only concerned with each other, and my sisters are all in distant lands except Rinalda. I was always at the bottom of the succession, and with the truth of my blood, I'm even less of a risk to their inheritance.

Seran? He has been at my mother's elbow since she was selected to become empress. When my blood came and the power of the flame did not, Seran facilitated a meeting with sophirian priests. They all insisted I could bear ignarian heirs, and that I just had some personal blocker on reaching Ignar's power.

Clearly, they were either fooled or coerced into lying.

Seran didn't help me out of affection. The trajectory of his power followed the empress's, and therefore mine. But would he have vouched for me if he knew the truth?

My jaw tightens a notch with each new name. I press my thumbs into the hinges and rub, trying to work out the tension. When the names run out, I feed the edge of the paper to the fire, letting it burn to ash before blowing out the candle.

I greet Alaris with a somber nod the following morning, and he's generous not to throw my own words about looking terrible back at me.

Not getting enough sleep makes it harder to stay in the moment as Dashol and Karns argue about an approach from the river. I try to focus, applying the pencil harder than needed to the map in front of me.

"We can't wait until the day to test the entrance," Dashol says. "We need to send someone without armor first to make sure they don't drown."

"If we test it first, we lose the advantage," Karns replies. "It's a risk, but…"

Then the window next to me is the warm marble of the banquet hall. A lord from Marithos is at my ear. I'm laughing, tilting toward him, letting him believe I'd make an amiable bride. The wine is sweet and I keep drinking it, until the floor tips and a maid's hands slide under my arms,

helping me to bed. Then my feet are bare and bleeding on stone, and I'm kicking at the guards who drag me toward the tower.

"Lyra?" Dashol jerks me out of my visions. "Ready to go?"

I nod, reorienting myself in the jaw pain that belongs only to this life. I don't miss Alaris's eyes boring into me as I follow Dashol out the door.

Dashol comes back for me not too long after lunch. "Alaris said you should get back to the rooms early."

I glance at the gleaming eyes surrounding me, wondering if Alaris noticed how tired I was earlier, or used the hawks to spy on my dragging feet. Either way, he's right: as soon as I'm back in the room, I head straight for the curtained area and lie down. Indulging in my memories each night is not without a cost. The tension makes its home in my body. My jaw locks so tight I can't loosen it. My temples pulse.

"Ly?" Alaris calls from the doorway. "It's me."

He's come back far earlier than usual. I sit up.

"I brought some food in case you're hungry." He sets down a tray by the couches. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," I say, standing quickly. Talking to him from the bed feels too intimate. "I'm not hungry. Did you eat?"

He doesn't answer me at first. After a long silence, I look up. His arms are crossed.

"You're in pain," he says. "Your head?"

I don't understand how he sees it from across the room.

"My jaw," I admit, reaching for it, then letting my hand drop. "But it's fine. I'll sleep it off."

"Difficult Ly, you've been letting this pain go for too long."

"It's alright." I fidget. "It's not an injury."

"Pain is pain. And this is preventable. Why don't you ask for a healer?"

I don't answer. I don't say I can't stand letting strangers near—that I trace the silhouette of everyone I pass, comparing them against the masked man. That healers wear looser robes, making them harder to match up with my memories.

And I don't say that I can't bear to ask him for anything else. "It's really fine."

"Only if you stop." He walks closer, reaching a hand up toward my jaw. "Stop."

“Stop what?” I scowl. He doesn’t deserve my ire, but now that he’s drawn attention to it, I can’t ignore the ache in the back of my teeth.

“You’re clenching.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.” His fingers hover near my face. “If you’re not, then I should be able to tell. May I?”

I nod in defiance, gritting my teeth even harder.

His thumb finds my chin, then his cool fingers cradle the side of my jaw. He presses, gently, at the hinge beneath my cheekbone.

That tiny bit of pressure radiates through my tense muscles with a mind-numbing pulse. It feels so good I twitch. It aches. He moves down the tiniest fraction, and I can’t suppress the sound I make. I brace one hand on his arm and gasp.

“That’s…” I breathe. “That’s unfair.”

He chuckles. “It’s not fair or unfair, it just is.”

He puts both hands on my jaw and kneads. His touch should be enough to coax the tension loose, but if anything, it just emphasizes how deep the ache goes. I could let him circle this spot for hours.

His dark eyes are fixed on me. A ring of silver flashes in them.

He clears his throat.

He takes my hands and lifts them, placing them where his fingers just were. “Rub here. It will help.”

I circle my fingers there, pushing hard, trying to emulate the feeling he gave me. I press until I can barely stand it. It’s not enough. I push until my hands shake.

“Alright, alright,” he says, pulling my wrists away. “There is another spot. Can I show you? I have to…inside.”

He hovers his fingers in front of my mouth, indicating he wants to put them in.

Maybe he likes helping you.

I swallow, pain and curiosity overcoming any better judgment. I let my lips soften and part.

A ring of silver surrounds his pupils.

He slips his first two fingers into my mouth. Deep. All the way to the second knuckle. He wraps one hand around my shoulders to hold me still. My tongue flicks against them as I stare up at him, mortified I agreed to this.

And then, he presses.

My head empties.

I whimper now, the exquisite pleasure-pain replacing every other thought. I can't speak, or breathe, as he circles the muscles I didn't know I had on the inside of my cheek. I want to pull away. I want to move closer. But I'm frozen, desperate for every movement.

It's wet. And intimate. And so embarrassing, I don't want to imagine what I look like. But the tension eases, the pain I never thought I could release giving, just a little.

I open my eyes, not realizing I closed them, and find his gaze solid silver.

He pulls his fingers out.

I'm panting, lips wet. I want his fingers back in my mouth. I want to lick them. I want his mouth on my mouth. Warmth pulses between my legs. I want him to touch me there too. I can't help but picture the things he would do to me with just as much intensity and focus, with just as much skill, to achieve any outcome he desired.

"Better?" he asks, his own jaw popping with tension.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

"Alright. Then go to sleep, stubborn Ly."

Before I can say another word, he steps back, and the curtain swings shut between us.

Neither of us moves. He's still on the other side. I'm in dangerous territory. My blood is on fire. I don't know if I can ignore this new ache.

His steps move away, then the door to the bedroom opens and closes. I collapse against the bed.

I'm in trouble. I promised myself I wouldn't take another moment of his time. I know I shouldn't want anything more from him. He's already letting me stay in his room. He's already given me his protection.

I have spent twenty-one years learning to push everything down. Fear, want, anger, hope. I buried all of it.

But in this moment, if he opened those curtains, I don't think I could find a single wall left standing.

41

I try not to spend extra time fussing with my charcoaled hair before meeting Alaris in the hallway as usual. I'm so distracted by him, and the distance between our shoulders, that it takes me a moment to notice a new figure in the office with Dashol and Karns.

"Ly," Alaris says as he sits behind his desk. "This is Nykiri. Nykiri, Ly."

Unlike Alaris's other guests, Nykiri doesn't strike me as a noble. Her cropped hair is not in fashion, her clothes leaning toward practical rather than ornate. Plus, she's here in the office, not meeting Alaris in his bedroom. And she's sitting on the windowsill with her boot up.

Karns straightens his glasses. "Officially, Nykiri helps move goods between Arastos and other provinces as an independent operator."

"I'm a smuggler," she says, her tone as bored as her eyes.

"Unofficially, she is also a traitor," Dashol adds, plopping maps on my table. "Like us!"

I give Nykiri a small smile as I take my seat at the table near her.

She doesn't return it. "And what about her?"

"Ly is our hawk keeper and cartographer," Karns answers. "Who happens to specialize in maps of the Citadel."

Nykiri snorts, but her eyebrows go up. "And she is staying in Alaris's room because…?"

Dashol coughs, choking.

My shoulders tense. Apparently, Nykiri isn't one to avoid awkward questions. Karns's eyes flip between me and Alaris over his glasses, but he

doesn't say a word.

The memory of Alaris's fingers in my mouth last night flashes across my mind unbidden. "I am…we're not…"

"There are some extraordinary circumstances that require it," Alaris says, his tone smooth. "And it makes for a short walk to work each morning."

I'm glad for the cover his easy answer provides, but I still wish I wasn't the only one flustered for once.

Nykiri's mouth opens like she wants to say more.

Alaris continues. "We've waited months for your return, Nykiri. Your report."

She grunts but begins catching the office up on her reconnaissance.

I tune out most of the conversation, the supply lines and trade routes and people involved going over my head. I don't know much about the world outside the palace, so I have nothing to offer about shipments of lobellum, marble, and rare minerals.

I catch myself cataloging the slope of Alaris's shoulders, the black silk bunched around his forearms, the way his voice dips low on certain words. Heat climbs my neck. What is wrong with me? We are planning a coup, and I am thinking about whether I can find a good enough excuse to cross the distance between my bed and his tonight.

I almost miss when Nykiri mentions wagons.

"…wagons bring feathers from Nyvos every few months for the fans in the throne room. The white plumes are so delicate, the boxes can't be opened on the road."

She has delivered most of her report with crude efficiency, but now her eyes are alight. It's clear that this is a discovery she's excited about as she rises from the window and walks straight for the desk. "We have Lady Bira's support. We can replace the crew and hide soldiers in the boxes with the feathers. They won't be opened until they are in the throne room. The next shipment is due to arrive in time for solstice."

Something about it sounds familiar. Feathers for solstice. Intruders hidden in wagons…

"No!" I say, straightening.

Nykiri whips her attention to me. "No what?"

Everyone's eyes are on me now.

I swallow. "That won't work. They'll search the wagons."

“How would you know?” Nykiri snaps. “I’ve been researching this for months. This is the perfect shipment, the only shipment, that will go deep inside the Central Palace.”

“I know because…” My head pangs briefly. I smelled the smoke that day. I heard about it from the maids, then again at a party, too drunk to care, only thinking about how to end the conversation with an overeager lord and refill my glass of wine. But he carried on, drawing my attention to the charred tang in the air. *Burned feathers,* he said. *Intruders breached the palace in carts. They were incinerated inside. Pity about the plumes.*

It was there in my fuzzy memories, but I didn’t connect it to the coup. I didn’t realize the gossip of that day related to one of Alaris’s attempts to get his people inside.

“It won’t make it through,” I say. “The people in the wagons will be caught and burned.”

“Are you delvarian?” Nykiri looks between Dashol and Karns, then back to me. “Because that’s an incredibly quick prophecy for an idea you just heard two seconds ago.”

“No, but I…have a very strong feeling this will not work.”

“A *feeling*?” she sputters.

I lock eyes with Alaris, lips pressed together, hoping he understands my silent warning.

“The wagons will not work,” Alaris says, calm and even.

Her mouth opens, then she snaps it shut. “You believe her? Did you have her working the trade routes too?”

“No, and I trust you explored every possible detail, Nykiri. But if Ly says it won’t, it won’t.”

“How could she possibly know?” Nykiri steps forward, the gold ring in her eyes catching the light.

“Listen to her as you would to me.” His gaze moves around the room. “I expect everyone here to do the same.”

A flush rises to my cheeks.

Karns pulls his glasses off, wipes them, then slides them back on. “The wagons are out, then. What else do we have?”

The meeting continues. I sit back in my chair, quiet, not wanting to draw any more attention to myself.

In all my evenings reviewing maps in the basement, I figured out that I experienced my lives backward. It was my most recent birthday when I

ended up in the tower, then one further back when I went to Nyvos, and the earliest when I indulged in drink and parties. That's when I heard about the wagons.

Even after I woke up in the present, I didn't think of it as the coup—just a strange event that winter. But that was because it didn't succeed. Life in the palace continued as usual.

Were there any similar events I could remember and draw on to help? Something I dismissed, which might have been a sign of unrest? I rack my memory, rubbing my forehead. When I traveled off to Nyvos to be married, I missed winter in the palace. And in my most recent life, I was shut away in the tower, cut off from any news.

My breath catches as I feel the strap tightening around my throat…

"That's enough," Alaris says, pulling me out of my thoughts. I look up to find his eyes on me. "We'll reconvene tomorrow. Thank you, everyone."

Nykiri storms out, followed by Dashol, then Karns, then me, each of us shedding our role as rebel and donning a mask as a regular member of the staff.

I step into the corridor, only to find Nykiri standing there. I glance down the hall to where Dashol has his back to us, chatting with Karns.

Nykiri crowds me back against the office door. "Who are you?"

I draw myself up tall. "Why does that matter?"

"Six months of work dismissed in seconds, and I'm just supposed to take a stranger's word for it?"

"Don't take my word. Take his."

"No." She crosses her arms. "I want to know exactly why you think the best route to the throne room any of us has at this point won't work."

We are in the hallway. We never speak of the plans outside of Alaris's office or bedroom. Even though we are still in his wing, maids could come by. Drina could come by. "Stop. Talking," I hiss. "If you want to say anything else, come back into the office."

"So you can hide behind him? I don't think so." She holds up her arm, flashing a wooden charm on a woven bracelet, the thread and medallion blending in with her brown wrist. "This keeps the conversation just between us."

I assume it's a muffling charm, a mobile alternative to warding fixed spaces against prying ears. Banned, of course, but common enough that I've heard of them being used at court.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised to see one on a smuggler and a spy.

It's better than nothing, but I still scowl. "If you have questions, Alaris can—"

She leans in close, and I shudder. She could pull a knife, or drive a fist into my stomach, and I could not stop her. She is slight but wiry, and I have never been in a fight. "The woman who investigated the supply lines before me burned alive getting this information. So while Alaris might accept your magical answers, I'll trust hers instead."

"Lyra?" Dashol calls, starting down the hall toward us.

The charm must be working because he doesn't seem to have overheard any of our conversation. In fact, he looks surprised to see Nykiri and me standing so close together.

"Relax, Commander, we're just having a chat." Nykiri pushes past him. "See you at the next meeting."

Dashol glances between my face and her retreating back. "Alright?"

I nod, gritting my teeth. I roll out my shoulder, shaking off the feeling of her getting so close. "Is she…staying?"

"Now that she's done with her mission, yes. Nykiri can be a bit intense about setbacks. What did she say to you?"

"Nothing." I fall into step beside him. My skin pricks at her accusations. "She just wasn't very impressed with my magical answers."

Dashol glances at me. "Your information is so valuable, Lyra."

"It's fine."

"No, it's not fine. Solstice is coming soon. If we don't have a sure plan by then…" He shakes his head. "You are going to be the reason we succeed. I know it."

His words make my chest swell, but just as quickly, it deflates. I didn't do anything special to gain this knowledge except stumble into the oraculi. Nykiri spent six months on the ground gathering information.

For all I know I'm wrong, and with a few adjustments, the feather plot could work. Just because it failed once before doesn't mean the whole idea should be thrown away. Especially considering…

"Nykiri mentioned someone who died."

Dashol nods. "Her aunt. They worked together."

Her aunt burned. Nykiri presented the work her aunt died for. To have it suddenly dismissed, and by a stranger no less…no wonder she is angry.

I've seen ladies in silk passing information to Alaris. I haven't seen the soldiers and spies who have bled, burned, and given up their families to stop the wither. I never met the men Alaris took to test the shadowgates, who are now dead and injured.

I'm trying to help, but I'm still so protected in this fight. However terrified I am about the idea of moving forward with the wrong plan, I won't be the one carrying the sword.

I keep my words vague, even though we are getting close to the aviary. "Is getting in really the only problem?"

Dashol nods. "Alaris can do it…as long as we get him close enough."

I cringe at that. I knew Dashol and others would be risking their lives, but it's Alaris who has to go straight to the center. Alaris who will fail, and fall, if there isn't a safe way in and out.

Solstice is less than a week away. After that, it's only two weeks until the deepest cold at the midpoint of winter.

"What if midwinter comes," I say at the door of the aviary, "and we still don't know which plan is safe?"

"Then Alaris will try anyway," Dashol says firmly. "No matter what, he will still try."

42

The next few meetings are tense. I don't know if it's Nykiri's return, or the fact that we are less than a week from solstice, but I bundle up next to the cold draft from the window, trying to be as quiet as possible as I scratch new lines onto maps. Karns slashes down ideas, wielding his tongue like a knife. Nykiri is prickly with not just me, but everyone. She can be as snippy as she wants, but it's Dashol's growing frown that bothers me. He usually tries to keep the mood up, but he's not hiding his concern.

And Alaris is only getting quieter. Today, he's at the window, the set of his brow serious in the frosted light. I don't think he's even breathing, as Karns and Dashol talk in circles behind him.

I return my attention to the map pulled from the feathered handbag of the most recent informant. It's of a private garden at the back of the Central Palace. Just like with the wagons, I know this garden from a party I attended in my earliest life. I explored a lot more in those months, attending events and sneaking alcohol. I was trying to soothe that uncomfortable grip in my chest that just wouldn't loosen.

Even in that life, I knew something bad was coming.

My pen stills.

My premonitions were never premonitions…they were memories of what happened to me before.

If that was really my first life, if I'd never died before, why did I wake up afraid?

I didn't think of it as fear at the time, but now I recognize it. I went from acting normal on my twenty-first birthday to a drunken mess in a matter of months. It wasn't as strong as it was in this life, which sent me over the balcony and straight to the river. Or the life in the tower, when I begged for help, then ran. Or the life when I flirted with lords, trying to convince them to take me away.

But under the wine, it was still there.

If I lived an earlier life, I was probably at the palace through winter. I might have seen another version of the coup. I might be able to tell Alaris what worked, or what didn't.

I spend the rest of the meeting spinning at the dizzying edge of memories, sampling that anxious feeling, separating it from the buzz and illness of overindulgence.

The more I dwell on it, the more sure I am: *something in me already knew.*

I sidle up to Alaris at the window as soon as the meeting is done. "Can we talk tonight?"

He takes a moment to respond, turning to me as if noticing me for the first time. "What was that?"

His faraway expression concerns me more than it should. He is nothing if not focused, confident, and present at all times.

He must be really worried. It steels my nerves. "I need to talk to you tonight. It's important."

He nods. "I will be late, but I'll come."

I pace the room that night, determined not to fall asleep before he arrives. I already spent all day reviewing what I have to say, and I don't want to work up the courage to try again tomorrow. He has to listen.

He has to.

I pace until I hear his steps in the corridor. As soon as the door opens, my attention zeros in.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he says, shedding his jacket. His eyes flick over me. "What dangerous thoughts have you been stewing on, Ly?"

"I realized something important." I twist my fingers in front of my stomach. "About the life when I learned about the wagons and feathers."

"Did you remember something else from that time?"

I shake my head. "But I think I have a way I can get more information."

His brow lifts. He sets his jacket over a chair and leans on the back. “Go on.”

“I’ve been thinking of the life when I was thrown from the balcony as the first. My first time living those months. My first death. But if that was my first, why did I wake up after my birthday afraid?”

“Were you afraid?”

“I didn’t think of it that way at the time, but yes.” I take a deep breath. “That’s why…I want to use the oraculi again.”

His expression darkens. “No.”

“There has to be at least one earlier life, Alaris. One previous time when I lived, and died, that told me what was coming.” I start pacing again. “An earlier me would have likely stayed at the palace. I would have been there through winter. If I was in a different room or wing, I might have seen exactly what happens…”

“Or you could have been across the complex and not seen a single thing.”

“It’s worth it to try.”

“It’s not.” His voice is low and rough. “I’m not going to risk your life for another map, Ly.”

“They are my memories. It’s my power. And I’m better prepared this time…”

“Are your siblings immune to fire?” He pushes off the chair and stalks toward me. “Or does their flesh singe and burn just as readily as anyone else’s? If you aren’t in control of your power, it can still kill you.”

I open my mouth.

“You didn’t even wield it on your own,” he continues. “You used Sophiri’s power to rip your mind open. You think you were in control? I was the one watching you. You weren’t here. You were gone.”

Worry shines through his eyes. It only echoes how I feel for him.

I straighten my back. “Are you going to wait until next year to try to stop the wither? Or are you going to charge straight to the heart of the palace, even if there is no safe route? You, Alaris. Not your soldiers. You.”

“I’m the only one who can end it.”

“Then let me do what only I can do.” I open my hands. “Let me try to give you the best chance possible.”

He grits his teeth. “I’m the one who is going to find you not breathing. I’m the one who is going to have to keep vigil.”

I swallow. “I’m not asking you to do that. One of the healers can stay with me, behind the wards…”

“You’ll never have to ask, because you’re not going to do that to yourself again.”

“This isn’t about me.” *But it is about him.* I can’t let solstice come and see Alaris ride off to attack the Citadel. I can’t repeat that week in the basement, waiting to find out if he’ll ever return. I can’t. I won’t. “Solstice is coming, and you don’t have a way in. I can either sit back, or I can…”

“What? Die?” he growls, stepping even closer. “Fall into a sleep you never wake up from? Destroy your mind so you become a vacant shell? Why would I allow that?”

At those words, my lip curls. “You don’t have to *allow* it.” I step forward too. “I’m doing this, Alaris. I’m not asking for your permission.”

He smirks, infuriating and gorgeous. “But you need my permission. My oraculi, my call.”

Hot anger flashes through me. “Your call?”

“Mine.”

I consider yelling, screaming, begging him, but instead, I settle into a smirk of my own. “Then I guess I have no choice.”

His eyes flick to my mouth. “No choice in what?”

“I’ll have to get one myself.” I step closer. “I think I need to remind you I’m an excellent thief.”

His gaze darkens, and he bends over me, until there isn’t even a breath between our mouths. “And I think I need to remind you what I do with thieves.”

Defiance is burning in my blood, along with something else. My gaze sticks to his full lower lip. I want to lick it. I want to bite it.

My skin buzzes. When I find words again, they come out softly: “Remind me.”

One of his hands whips around my waist, pulling me to him, and I gasp. His grip is firm, and my heartbeat explodes. My breasts press into his chest, every point of contact between us lighting me on fire.

His eyes flood silver, but his tone is calm. “Tell me you won’t try to take one from me.”

“Now you’re just asking me to lie.”

A single line cuts between his brows. “All this time, I have waited for you to tell me what you want. To demand it of the world—”

“Give me an oraculi and send a healer to my bedside.”

“—but not this.”

I lift my chin. “Then I know what I have to do.”

He walks me backward, until my calves hit the edge of my bed. The crystal at his ear swings forward as he arches over me. His other hand slides down and grips my ass through my skirt, spreading me in a way that teases my center.

“Keep testing me, Ly.” His hand flexes. “And I’ll treat you like a thief.”

I can’t take my eyes off his mouth. Mine is burning, burning to kiss him, to feel his tongue. His grasp adjusts closer to my core, sending a pulse through me. I clutch his collar. I’m throbbing where his hold tugs on my skin. Slickness spreads to my thighs beneath my skirt.

I’m so ready for more of what I started when I took the voidstone, ready to fall backward onto this bed and have him touch me.

His eyes flare bright, solid silver. They’re so beautiful, I lift a hand and graze it along his cheek.

He inhales deeply and closes his eyes. His jaw tightens.

“Alaris…”

In a crack of shadow, my arms are empty, and I fall back onto the bed. He appears outside the curtain, thick velvet bunched in his fist.

I blink a few times, the distance a loss my whole body screams at.

“Hide away. Rage at me. Do whatever you like. But I won’t let you meddle in your mind in the hopes of uncovering something useful. And if that makes you hate me, I’ll live with it. Because you’ll live too. Goodnight, Ly.”

He throws the velvet shut between us.

I gape at the blue fabric, still panting. I almost call out to him but bite it back just in time.

I consider screaming. Running out. Running away. Demanding he listen, demanding he finish what he started. I’m so turned on and humiliated. And furious.

My center throbs, my lips and flushed skin still aching for his touch.

I drag a shuddering breath in through my teeth and let it out slowly.

I’ll show him a thief.

43

As soon as I crack my eyelids, I spring out of bed. I peek out of the curtains. Even though it's early, Alaris is already gone. I didn't hear him move at all last night, while I tossed for hours, frustration and heat keeping me awake.

I slip into the dressing room, press my palm against the mirror, and step through the shimmering surface. There are no noises but my own soft footsteps as I pad down the stairs into the dark basement.

I pause at the bottom, just in case Karns or Dashol are down here looking for something. The silence tells me I'm alone.

I creep to the far corner of the room and find…nothing. Only a blank spot where the banded wood chest usually sits.

Unsurprising. He wouldn't make taking one that easy, but I had to check.

"You can't hide your secrets from me," I mutter.

As usual, when I step into the corridor, Alaris is already there, leaning against the wall. He smirks and shakes his head slightly, like he knows exactly what I just tried. His posture is casual, but his brows are low, his dark eyes intense compared to their usual calm. They fall to my lips, linger, then lift.

I flush, but cover it in a scowl. I stalk down the hall, letting him follow. I'm going to get what I need. I'm not just a pale imitation of the flame. I am a different type of divinial. One with power. And whether he likes it or not, I'm going to use it.

I keep my head low over my maps as I consider where he's moved the chest. This castle would be too big to search if I were starting today, but Alaris doesn't know I spent over a month scouring most of it. There are only a few good hiding places where a chest that size could fit—the compartment under the rug, the closet with the false back, the hollow column in the gallery…

Alaris would never guess I'd have come across any of them. I can check them all today if I hurry.

After the meeting, I don't even look at Alaris. The back of my neck prickles until I close the door behind me.

"Escort to the aviary?" Dashol asks, waiting at the end of the corridor as usual.

It's hard to lie to Dashol, his open face guileless. "I think I'll take myself there today."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

He gives me a longer look, but in typical Dashol fashion, he accepts my answer. "Alright. A pickup then?"

I nod. As soon as Dashol's out of sight, I head straight for the gallery, turning down a corridor I haven't walked in what feels like forever. Servants bustle past, carrying linens and trays. The next hallway is quieter, with only one maid dusting. The third is empty, the only sound my echoing footsteps.

I slow to a stop. My eyes dart from door to door. The masked man could be behind any one of them. My throat tightens around each breath.

He could not have gotten near the castle without the hawks seeing him, I remind myself. I'm safe. I just need to keep moving.

I make myself take a step. Then another. The gallery is just at the end of the hall.

But then…no one knows what he looks like. What if the hawks don't recognize the threat?

I feel the phantom sensation of the slash across my arm. The garrote around my throat. The sickening feeling of falling. My mouth fills with the taste of iron.

Dying hurts. Tears prickle in the corners of my eyes. I don't want to die again.

Something creaks behind me. I whip around, pulse pounding. It might be a footstep, or a hinge, or nothing at all.

But it's enough to break my nerve. I run back the way I came, taking the nearest turn toward the aviary. I race past my old rooms, picking up speed as if he's on my heels. I scramble down the stairs and shove through the doors out into the cold.

I gasp in the icy air, but I don't stop running. Hawks cry and circle above me, following as my boots pound in the dirt.

I don't slow until I reach the aviary, scurrying inside and slamming the door shut behind me. I slide down its wood surface, settling into the hay. I drop my head into my hands, waiting for my breath to slow.

A hawk swoops to the ground beside me, giving me a soft whistle.

"I'm fine. I'm just fine," I say, trying to catch my breath. "I was just scared. Don't…don't tell him I was running from nothing, okay?"

I'm not even sure if the hawks can tell him things like that. This one clicks its beak and preens a feather back into place. I take that as a yes.

I stay in the aviary until Dashol comes, then let him escort me back to the castle with my head hanging. I hoped to cross off the most likely hiding places today, but I can't bring myself to search alone. The masked man found me here, against all odds. He could slip through these defenses, and if he catches me alone, it's over.

Alaris is winning because I'm blocked by my own fear.

Alaris is winning, and that makes it so much more likely he is going to lose.

If I can't search the castle myself, my only choice is to enlist help.

At the next morning meeting, as subtly as I can, I bounce my eyes between Dashol, Karns, and Nykiri. They've all known Alaris far longer than me. They probably know where he hides things.

Dashol has always been kind to me. I think I could get him to bend the rules, and he might even have fun doing it. But if Dashol learns Alaris doesn't want me to find the oraculi, or that they might hurt me, he won't help. He trusts Alaris will find a way. He won't see the necessity of what I need to do.

Karns, on the other hand, is a realist, and he has a certain cold-blooded practicality. I think he would agree to let me use the oraculi on the chance it could get us answers. But he's also a stickler for the rules. He will be the first one to run to Alaris if I even ask.

I accidentally catch Alaris's eye and he gives me an infuriating smirk. I flick my chin away, looking out the window.

The glass is frosted, obscuring the grounds. Solstice is two days away. There is no time to be cautious. I have to use the best option available to me: Nykiri.

After Alaris dismisses us, I make sure to leave first.

"I'll walk again by myself today," I tell Dashol.

I wait another moment for Nykiri to stalk out into the hall. As soon as her eyes land on me, her face twists in disdain. That's fine, as long as she lets me speak.

"I need to talk to you," I mutter to her. "But not here."

She wrinkles her nose. "Why would I…"

"If you care about this mission succeeding, and I know you do, you need to hear this. Meet me in the wine cellar in ten minutes."

I march away before Karns comes out. I know Alaris will interfere if he catches any hint of my plans, and at this point, I only have one.

I stick to the largest, most populated corridors. They're light and bright, with plenty of people in view. But I can't shake the feeling that the masked man could be watching. I speed my steps past every doorway and window.

I wait until the hallway alongside the kitchens is clear, then sneak into the wine cellar and shut the door.

I hold my breath in the dark. Luckily, I don't have to wait long.

Dust stirs when the door opens again, the stale smell briefly broken by fresh air as Nykiri enters the cellar. Everything about her posture is aggressive, as she takes a wide stance on the stair and crosses her arms.

"You have two seconds," she says as a greeting.

"I need your help."

She lifts a brow. "Why would you think I would be the person to help you?"

"I know you put your life on the line to gather the intel you brought. And I know you don't like me because I shot it down—"

"That's not true." She studies me with that piercing gaze. "There are plenty of reasons I don't like you."

I drag in a breath. "Fine. But you care about stopping the wither. You're willing to do what's necessary."

She raises her chin but doesn't respond.

I take that as an invitation. “I grew up in the palace. But there are things that happened to me there I can’t remember. They could tell us exactly what we need to know. I need an oraculi to help me fill in those gaps.”

“Then go get one. If Alaris trusts you at all, you should know where he keeps them.”

“Behind the mirror in a chest. I know.” I let out a long breath. “He moved them.”

“Then it’s clear that he doesn’t want you to have one. Matter settled.”

She reaches for the door, and I step forward.

“Do you get the sense we are close to a successful plan? Because from what I’ve seen, failure is a very real risk.”

She doesn’t confirm it, but she doesn’t move to leave either.

So I keep going. “Alaris is worried about what using an oraculi might do to me. The last time I used one, I had a bad reaction.”

She tilts her head, her face stone.

“I’m not trying to look into anything I shouldn’t,” I blurt. “It’s my own memory. He’s only stopping me because he thinks I’ll get hurt—”

“I’ll give you this,” she interrupts. “I’ve gotten the sense he is not thinking clearly when it comes to you.”

She says it like an insult, like only impaired judgment could explain his concern for me.

I grit my teeth. “Then help me. You don’t care if using an oraculi hurts me. It’s worth it to try to remember something we can use.”

Her mouth loosens a fraction.

I push. “You’ve known him longer. You would know where he would hide them.”

“You’re right about all that, but he couldn’t hide them from me if he tried.” Her irises catch the low light. A faint golden ring flares around them. “Who do you think collected half of them for him?”

“Sophirian,” I whisper. I noticed the yellow in her eyes but didn’t put it together. No wonder she makes a good spy—she’s a divinial of the goddess of truth. “You’re noble?”

She smirks. “A forgotten bastard, but sophirian nonetheless. I can sense oraculi. I can also sense truth.” She leans closer, our positions on the stairs giving her the height advantage. “Which is why I don’t like you.” She sniffs, and I work hard not to flinch. “You reek of lies. Even your name. Lyra. *Lie*.”

“Then am I telling the truth now?” I hold her gaze. “I want an oraculi, despite the danger to myself, solely to help Alaris’s plan succeed.”

Her mouth presses into a hard line. “Right now, it seems that way. That’s why I’m still standing here.” She settles into one hip. “Alright. I’ll get you one.”

I can’t hold back my smile. I know this isn’t a game. It will hurt to remember…to die again. But I can’t deny that it would feel really, really good to best Alaris.

She glares at my smile, so I clear my throat.

“We’ll have to be discreet. Alaris will stop me if he finds out.” I don’t know if she knows the connection between Alaris and the hawks. “Don’t hand one to me in the open, okay? Especially near the aviary.”

“Where you play with birds all day?” She clicks her tongue. “You do your job, hawk keeper. I don’t need to be told how to do mine. I know how to do a handoff.”

“It’s just…not private.” I pause a moment, feeling obliged to offer a warning. “I don’t think Alaris will be happy with you if he finds out you helped me with this.”

Her eyes drag down my frame, assessing. “I’ve only been back a few days, and I’m pretty confident that if you die because of this, he’ll kill me.”

That causes an unwelcome pang in my chest.

“I won’t die,” I say, swallowing the emotion. “I think.”

“Fine by me if you do.” She shrugs, opening the cellar door. “Just deliver answers first.”

44

The day before solstice, the meeting is tense. Karns and Dashol trade words, moving soldiers down different routes, deciding fates. I take in none of it, all my attention focused on Nykiri.

She hasn't spoken to me since the wine cellar. I catch her eye twice across the maps, searching for a sign she found the oraculi, or at least a nod to confirm she's working on it. But her face stays closed, her gaze indifferent.

When the meeting ends, the others file out. I start after Nykiri, hoping to get an update in the hall.

"Ly. Stay a moment," Alaris says, standing.

I pause my steps but don't meet his eyes.

"I've been meaning to give you this." He holds out a black sheath with leather ties dangling off one corner. "For the moonstone dagger."

I frown. Solstice is tomorrow, and he's still finding time to think of me. I walk over to his desk and close my fingers around it. But he doesn't let go.

I look up.

The moment our eyes meet, he releases his end of it.

He sighs. "This feels familiar."

"What does?"

"You ignoring me. Not looking at me. Not talking to me. Like your early days here."

My chest squeezes. "I'm not doing anything."

He looks worn. His stillness no longer feels calm; it feels strained. His eyes are shadowed.

They flash silver, then fade.

"Your eyes," I say, "keep doing that."

He reaches a hand toward them. "It's the solstice. It makes it harder to control."

I swallow. I hate this tension. "Alaris, you know what I want."

His jaw works. "And it's not going to happen."

"Then we don't have much to talk about." I turn and start for the door. My grip is on the handle when he speaks again.

"There isn't much time left before I leave," he says softly.

That stops me. Alaris has helped me, protected me, and forgiven me when I didn't deserve it. He showed me truths no one else has. The idea of him leaving in the next two weeks and never coming back rocks me with a pang of panic I can barely stand through. I squeeze the sheath to my chest.

I can't think about failing. I need to focus on remembering.

Because if I don't figure out a way for him to succeed, he's going to march on the emperor and die.

So I arrange my face into a mask of bland politeness. I look over my shoulder at him. "Then I don't have any time to waste."

The aviary is too quiet, the hawks a constant reminder of Alaris and our standoff. So I leave earlier than usual and go to help Siro in the greenhouse. The lobell bushes are flourishing, the first buds bulging beneath twisted leaves, even though it's far too early. After a bit of watering, I help Siro with the other plants. I throw myself into the work, attacking the beds she points me to, clipping and pruning and yanking weeds.

We often work in companionable silence, but she comes over as I stab my trowel into packed dirt with a little more force than necessary.

"Something the matter?" Siro asks, her gloved hands dark with mulch.

"Nothing," I say, gritting my teeth. Alaris lost three people on his last trip to the Citadel. He knows risks are worth it to get information, even deadly ones. So why won't he see the wisdom in this? I strike the dried dirt and roots. "Just…suffering…fools."

She watches me another second, then clears her throat. "Totally unrelated, but my poisons section doesn't only have plants that will kill or grievously injure. Some just cause stomach aches. In case the person in need of poisoning is a certain lord we can't afford to lose."

That forces a corner of my mouth up, and my hand on the trowel loosens. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“What do we need poisons for?” Dashol asks, appearing in the greenhouse door. The light is low. He’s already here to collect me.

“Nothing. Probably.”

“Fools, maybe,” Siro supplies.

We share a smile. I doubt Siro knows where Alaris hid the oraculi, but if she did, I feel certain she would help me.

Dashol stands in the entrance, like he always does when I stay too late and don’t make it back to the aviary, but I follow his gaze to Siro. She’s already drifted back to her planters and is wrist deep in soil. With all the time Dashol spends on me, I don’t believe he’s too busy to come in and chat for a few minutes. But all he does is linger and sneak glances.

“Dash,” Siro says, and it’s like a rod shoots up his back. “If you’re waiting for Lyra, can you help us switch these planters? These need more light.”

He darts across the space like he’s diving into battle. He hoists a planter that must weigh at least one hundred pounds and slings it where Siro points.

The look of determination on his face is something else.

I would have preferred to ask Siro about it first, but I can’t resist asking Dashol as he escorts me back to Alaris’s wing.

“Dashol.” I try to keep my tone casual. “Can I ask…is there something between you and Siro?”

He chokes on nothing, a flush blooming under his freckles. “Ah…no. No, nothing special between us. We used to be close friends.”

His eyes find the ceiling, then the wall, and my grin grows.

“I see.” I’m in no position to push. I’ve known Dashol and Siro far less time than they’ve known each other, and I can’t imagine the complexity that Karns adds to the equation. Under her brother’s sharp eyes, it’s possible Dashol is terrified of the feelings he is doing a horrible job of keeping off his face.

He sags, perhaps realizing he lost from the moment he opened his mouth. “Please don’t tell her. We’ll be leaving soon. I wasn’t going to say anything unless…until I get back.”

My heart cracks as I realize what Dashol is saying. He feels something for Siro. It’s been plain in his sad eyes, made clear every time he’s in that

doorway, watching her dig in the dirt. But he hasn't said anything because he's going to leave to march on the Citadel.

Even bright-eyed, hopeful Dashol is worried he might die. Too worried to burden the woman he can't keep his eyes off of.

"I haven't known her long," I say carefully. "But I don't know if that's what Siro would want. She strikes me as someone who would choose to live with the best of what she has now."

Dashol sucks in air through his teeth, his muscled shoulders tensing, then releasing. "You might be right about that, but…" He shakes his head. "I'll spare her from any more grief. Please, Lyra, don't say anything. Not when it's so close."

I nod my assent. It won't be today, and it won't be tomorrow, but in the next two weeks, Dashol will leave.

Alone in the bedroom, I pace, twisting the moonstone dagger. I don't know whether I can trust Nykiri's confidence. If she can't find an oraculi, or simply never tried, I've wasted all this time.

Unless I don't need her at all. The oraculi opened my mind, but the memories are mine. I'm sure I lived another life. Maybe I can see it without Sophiri's magic.

I've always seen cyralians call magic like breathing, a twirl of a wrist turning leaves yellow as easily as ignarians produce a lick of flame. My powers seem to be having an influence on the lobell without much effort. And the time resets were violent, but involuntary.

But with my memories, there is no candle or plant for me to hover my hands over. I'm not trying to use my powers exactly…I'm digging inside of myself. If it was as easy as willing these memories to the surface, I would have done it by now.

I wish there were a cyralian here to ask, but there is one thing in this room that might help me understand more about the goddess of seasons, time, and cycles.

I go to the overcrowded bookshelf, cluttered with gilt spines and objects stowed between them. It doesn't take long to find what I'm searching for; the cracked-leather tome is the tallest on the shelf.

I pull the book free and seal myself back behind the blue velvet curtains.

I sit cross-legged on the bed and leaf through it to Cyralia's chapter. Unfortunately, my hopes of getting more information about cyralian power

are quickly dashed…the words are all in a language my tutors never taught me. But the illustrations are beautiful, so I spend time examining them instead.

Cyralia stands on a hill, watching the world cycle beneath her. Beside Vernalia, she kneels as green things push through soil. Her hands settle on Thanovar's shoulders, while something dead lies at their feet.

I flip to the next page and my lips part.

It's a full-page picture of Cyralia in profile, white-haired, standing on a hill. Her hands are clasped with a figure I can tell is meant to be Arastor, the sky behind them full of stars. Cyralia and Arastor were famously lovers.

The gods never had physical bodies, but *love* was the closest word the prophets could offer for the entanglements between them. Vernalia and Thanovar. Cyralia and Arastor…somehow, cosmically, they entwined. They fit.

I've seen images like this in the capital depicting their relationship, but this version of Arastor doesn't look like any I've seen before. He's usually portrayed with four wings, short dark hair flying up, and eyes that are black from edge to edge. Every image of every god is an artist's invention. The older representations came from pure imagination and varied widely, while more recent paintings and statues have converged around traits of the incarnials and their divinial bloodlines. This version of Arastor looks a lot more like…

Alaris. Not as he is day to day, but as he was that night, the night he flew down and saved me from the masked man.

It's not a perfect copy of his features, of course, but this Arastor has long dark hair, silver eyes, and black feathered wings swooping up behind him.

Cold jealousy prickles over me. If I squint, it looks like a painting of Alaris and another woman on a hill, gazing into each other's eyes.

I flick through to the final chapter of the book: Arastor's chapter. I trace the first picture of this long-haired god of night, soaring above the world through an endless starry sky. On the next page, he's looking down on the mortal world from a mountain, his long dark hair flying up behind him. On the next, he's in a sunny sky. A dark dagger in one hand cuts through it, opening a triangle of void.

While Cyralia is shown interacting with the other gods, in each of his images, Arastor is alone.

That reminds me of Alaris too. From what I've seen these last months, his whole life is devoted to stopping the wither. His relationships are with informants and the team he relies on. No one can get close to him except those who know the truth.

And the way Dashol made it sound, Alaris is the only one who can destroy the Flame and kill the emperor. Even if an army marches in beside him, the weight of success falls on his shoulders.

He's carrying all of this, and he won't let me help.

The door creaks open and I freeze. He's back early tonight.

I stay still, listening to him move in the dark. The soft drop of his jacket on the chair, his steps to the bathing room. The second the door closes, I stash the book under my bed and burrow under the fur.

The door opens again and there is silence for a moment. Then his voice comes softly. "Are you awake, troublesome Ly?"

I don't answer. I lie there, eyes open, staring into the dark. I don't trust myself to speak. I grip the voidstone under my nightgown.

He's only feet away. I can picture him standing on the other side of the curtains: his broad shoulders, the angled lines of his face, his dark hair curling over his brow.

I want him.

Maybe there is some pull between us that goes beyond the physical. Our patrons were lovers, after all…or their cosmic forces fit together in a way mortals interpreted as love. Maybe it lingers in us, somehow, the echo of their divine entanglement.

Not that I need a reason to want him. He's beyond beautiful, attentive, and almost annoyingly perceptive. And frustratingly clever with his words. And his tongue, that mouth, the earned part of his reputation…I want his hands on me, his mouth against my neck, his attention zeroed in. I want to feel alive, after so many lives cut short.

I've never felt so alive as when I'm with him, and I've never felt less alone. Like someone cares if I disappear in the darkness. Like I'll be able to face the thing that hunts me. Like I matter, and maybe I can help him too.

After another moment, I hear his mattress shift. I don't know how I'm going to sleep, knowing he's there, fighting myself not to call out to him. If I did, it would only be to continue what started the other night, and I'm not sure if he wants that. We are at odds, after all.

But I’m being unfairly cold, punishing him because he won’t let me take a risk. I’m not going to stop until I remember, but I should apologize for being so distant.

I’ll apologize in the morning.

45

I fall asleep, somehow, because when I wake, the room is empty. I dress quickly and tie the new sheath to my hip, sliding the moonstone dagger home. I leave it outside my skirts, a small white flag after my cold response yesterday.

I swing the door wide, my chest lifting on reflex. It drops when I take in Dashol's freckled face.

"Morning." Dashol pushes off the wall. "Alaris asked me to fetch you."

Dashol smiles as usual, but his jaw is dusted with stubble, and his usually bright eyes droop. His muscular shoulders are slumped.

"Is everything alright?"

"Eh." Dashol's shoulders pull up then down. "Noctus is hitting him a little hard this year."

I blink. "I didn't ask if Alaris is alright. Is Alaris alright?"

"Sorry, it was a long night. He's fine." He rubs his face. "He just needs…some time to adjust."

High holidays make it harder for divinials to leash their powers, flame and waves and wind following every thought, every emotion. Plenty of burned linens needed stamping, and singed flesh needed healing around the palace on Embrus.

But by the look of him, Dashol didn't sleep last night, and I can't imagine what could happen to Alaris around Noctus that would keep Dashol up.

"But why—?"

“It’s nothing serious.” He waves his hand. “I think he just wants us to have a happy solstice celebration, and he knew he would bring down the party.”

I give him a look at the obvious lie.

“Don’t worry.” Dashol smiles, a little more sincerely this time. “It’s a holiday! There is a party tonight. And hey, no meeting today. Come on. A hot drink from the kitchen, then the aviary?”

The castle hums with solstice preparations: garlands strung, fires stoked, the smell of spices thick in the halls. As if this is just another holiday, instead of the beginning of the two-week period when Alaris will time his attack.

With hot mugs in hand, we face the bite of the outside air. Flurries of tiny snowflakes whirl, stinging my cheeks, even though the ground is bare. *I hope it snows harder.* The only other time I saw anything frozen fall from the sky was on my journey to Nyvos with Cantor.

“The festival starts at sundown,” Dashol says as he drops me with the hawks. “I’ll come get you.”

All day in the aviary, I lie on the fur-lined pallet, staring up at the light coming in through the turret’s windows, greeting hawks with absent-minded fingers as they swoop down. One way or another, everything is going to change in the next two weeks. At the meeting tomorrow, Alaris is probably going to pick the route, the roles, the final pieces. If Nykiri doesn’t come through, and I can’t come up with better answers, Alaris is going to ride away based on guesses.

I flip over and hide my face in the fur. *I can’t let that happen.*

If Nykiri doesn’t deliver an oraculi by tomorrow, I’m going to have to trick Dashol into helping me search the castle. I can’t sit and wait.

Late afternoon, Dashol comes back. The sky is just hanging on to the last of the light as we cross the grounds, the hawks circling overhead. The distant sound of activity carries through the cold air. He walks me to the main courtyard, which is awash in lanterns and firelight.

The bonfire is taller than the men feeding it, throwing heat across the space. Staff and crowds I assume are from neighboring towns have gathered, filling the grounds with celebration. Carts serve food, dancers in black and white costumes whirl, and a play on stage shows a puppet Arastor flying through a night sky filled with silver cut-out stars, his typical four wings and short black hair on display.

Dashol starts toward the crowd, but I hang back. The hawks' presence is the only way I can get near this party, but I still don't want to get too close to anyone. The idea of moving through shadowed strangers, even with the hawks watching, is terrifying.

"You go ahead," I say. "I'll just stay here and watch for a while."

"Are you sure?" The look on his face is so bereft, it makes me want to change my mind. "This is the best party all year. Karns would be so disappointed."

That makes me laugh. "I doubt he'll mind."

"He can be surprisingly pouty." Dashol grins. "You've seen some of our worst moments here. You should make some good memories here too."

"I have plenty of good memories," I say truthfully, the warmth in my chest a testament to it.

"Good to hear. Then at least let's get you…one second." He trots off and I settle onto a log at the edge of the gathering. He returns a few moments later with meat on a skewer, sprinkled with black salt. "Are you sure I can't tempt you to join in?" he asks, wagging the meat under my nose like I'm a dog.

"I'm sure," I say, still smiling. I accept the food.

"I'll come get you to walk you back."

"I'll find my own way back, so don't worry." I'm fine as long as I'm outside, where the hawks can see me, and I don't want to distract Dashol on his last night of fun. I'll take a hawk on my shoulder into the castle if I have to.

"I'll be just over there," Dashol says. "Join me, if you don't want to make Karns grumpier than he already is."

I raise my skewer to him. "Have fun."

He waves and disappears into the crowd.

I clutch my cloak tighter. Snow drifts through the firelight, catching gold at the edge of the flames.

The crowd cheers the puppet god as he banks through his paper stars. It's his night, Noctus, the longest dark of the year. I grew up under the sun, raised to think Embrus was my time. But cyralians don't have a single high holiday. All the holidays belong to Cyralia. Every solstice and every equinox, every turn of the wheel is theirs. Or ours. The turning of time itself surges our power.

So tonight is my night too. Do I feel it, then? Do I feel something different?

In the capital, the seasons are so stunted, I barely noticed their passing. Every day felt practically the same.

All this past fall, I've felt alive. Awake. Ready to work, crisp morning air invigorating me. But I thought that was due to novelty…and necessity. I've been on the run, doing things I never imagined, rolling up my sleeves to step into new lives. I felt different on Somnus, wild energy coursing through me, but I thought that was because I was closer to Delvara's kin, or maybe because dreams of death made me so desperate to live.

I've spent most of this winter hurt and healing, which has pulled me toward every fur and fire I can find. Like this one, throwing heat across my face while the cold bites at my back. The cold doesn't bother me…it just makes me want to be cozy. Even now, I want the fur-lined pallet in the aviary or the cover in Alaris's bedroom wrapped around me.

Is this me being cyralian, or is this how everyone feels when they aren't locked in bright stasis?

Flakes drift past, and I think of the way cyralians swirled flurries with a twirl of a wrist. With the skewer in one hand, I try a small flick of my fingers, willing the snow to gather and spin for me.

Nothing happens. The flakes fall the way all the flakes fall.

If there weren't people nearby, I might stand and sway, and see if I could coax the winter air into a dance with me. But even if no one is paying attention, the hawks are watching, and with them, maybe Alaris. So I tuck my hand inside my cloak and just enjoy the chill.

I let my eyes drift over the crowd as I chew the steaming meat. The grounds are bustling. I watch long enough to find a few familiar faces, Flora and Walder among them. I spot Siro and Karns together, the similarity in their features only tempered by her slightly feral grin and his stern look through his glasses.

But there's one face I keep searching for, my gaze pulled to every tall figure. I don't have to look long to be sure: Alaris isn't here. Maybe the energy of the holiday is still too much for him.

Dashol appears next to Karns and slings a bulky arm around him, speaking to Siro. My chest hums at seeing them together, despite Dashol's noble efforts to keep himself at a distance. He smiles at something Siro says, then frowns when it looks like the joke might have been turned back

on him, which makes her throw her head back and laugh. It tugs my mouth up too. They look like old friends.

My lips fall. Dashol is facing death. How many of these people know what's coming in the next few weeks? How many are enjoying their last party before they pick up swords and ride for the capital to commit treason?

But if they don't act, everyone here dies anyway.

I need the oraculi.

As if summoned, a figure moves to the edge of the crowd, her dark cropped hair instantly recognizable. Nykiri.

She doesn't even glance at me, but I'm pretty sure this is my cue to approach.

I put down the skewer and make my way toward her. I glance at the sky, willing the hawks to keep a close watch, as much as I want them to look away.

I sidle up to her. Her golden eyes stay on the fire.

"Having a good solstice, Lyra?" she drawls, emphasizing the *lie* in my name.

"I've been waiting," I whisper. "Did you get it?"

"Not even a hello?" She clicks her tongue. "I'm the one taking a risk here, and the palace-born girl skips straight to business?"

"I don't think politeness will change your opinion of me. Well?"

"He did take pains to hide them. It was almost enough to make me wonder if I should reconsider taking one…" She waits a breath, just to make me sweat. "But of course I got it."

I exhale my relief.

She bumps her shoulder into mine. At the same time, she slips something into my hand. I tuck it quickly into my pocket under my cloak.

She starts to stroll away but pauses and speaks out of the side of her mouth. "If you lied to me about what you're using that for, you're dead. Otherwise, don't die. And remember: I was never involved."

She disappears into the crowd.

I back away slowly, trying to look like I was just admiring the fire. I consider telling Dashol I'm leaving, but I can't bring myself to walk into the crowd, and I'm too eager to use the oraculi. The longer I wait, the greater the risk Alaris finds out and takes it from me.

This is my chance.

I spin on my heel and hurry across the grounds to the aviary, the hawks my only escort. I feel the shape of what's inside my pocket—a silky piece of fabric, folded around a ring. Many of the rings in the chest were cracked, but when I slide the silk aside to touch it, there is an unmistakable hum of an active oraculi.

I shut the door and make my way to the pallet. The hawks shift on their high perches. My heart pounds. If he suspects me, any second, Alaris could appear.

"I need to rest a bit," I say. I now believe they understand my words quite well. "Just a small headache."

A few birds trill back, perhaps approving, although I might be imagining that. I untie my cloak and the moonstone dagger, setting both to one side, and pull the fur off half the pallet to fold it over me. I burrow into it, tugging the top all the way past my temple.

My fingers stumble over the silk, trying to free the ring under the fur. I'm afraid of what happens next. Afraid of the swirling thoughts, and the nightmare I won't be able to wake from until it ends in death. When I'm in it, I don't know there is another version of me, looking back, alive and whole.

All I know is pain and blood.

But my fear of being caught and stopped overrides any hesitation. I take the oraculi from the folds of silk and lift it to my eye.

Show me all the memories of past lives I've forgotten. *But more gently this time*, I plead, in case that helps. *Slowly*.

The oraculi shines brighter and brighter. The light swirls into sound and color.

And I fall into memory.



I wake at midnight to a room filled with roses, my heart going hard against my ribs. I lie awake the rest of the night, assigning my nerves to every worry I can name. My life changes now that I am old enough to be married off, and I cannot trust my father not to bind me to someone like Weslyn. The thought of going to bed with a man like that turns my stomach. But an actual engagement is probably years away…

I don’t know why my heart is still racing when the windows finally go gray with morning light.

I ignore invitations from lords until Somnus, when Seran insists I begin accepting. At Noctus, I steal an extra cup of wine and dance with a handsome, light-haired lord of Nyvos. Just for one fleeting moment, I pretend that I’m no one’s daughter.

The coldest day of the year approaches, but no one bothers changing out of their sandals and silks. It will be past us soon.

Winter parties are disrupted when an explosion destroys part of the Central Palace. The blast kills at least twenty guards and courtiers, rubble and clouds of dust visible across the grounds for weeks afterward. It’s explained as gas from an underground river of fire, getting too hot and reacting to my father’s power.

Winter bleeds into spring. Even though it’s the same heat, the same sunny days, something feels different. And it turns out, I’m right to think so: a maid arrives one morning with a dress and an order from my father to attend a banquet.

The dress is similarly cut to the one I wore on my twenty-first birthday, but even finer, the edges sewn with what looks like real gold. At this event, I’m not allowed to stay tucked behind a column: my father places me at the high table beside him, so close I can smell the oils in his hair and hear the low murmur of his advisors leaning in to speak.

I have never sat this close to him at a formal event, and despite the heat, my arm hairs prickle. It’s a meal, but I can’t bring myself to eat more than a bite. This is not the courtship of my sisters, where he let lords seek him out for years, a decade even, vying for his favor.

Tonight, I am on display, and all the lords take notice. One after another approaches the high table to pay their respects to me and fawn at my father’s feet. I stumble through greetings and small talk, sweating under my father’s gaze.

Out of habit, I scan the crowd for my mother as I take a sip of wine. She is seated beside the empress *pi mata*, her plate untouched.

She is glaring at us.

My cup almost slips from my grasp at her expression. Her mouth is pressed into a line, her knuckles white.

I glance at my father, certain there must be a mistress draped across his lap, some public humiliation that explains the fury on her face. But his lap

is empty, his attention on the lord in front of us.

Is she mad at me?

This should be what she wants. After a lifetime of disappointment and practical banishment, I am finally useful. Marriage is the one thing that makes me worth something to my parents. A good match should thrill her. My father placing me here should be a relief.

Does she think I'll fail? Or is she mad she isn't the one at the high table? Does she see the irony in me being seated beside the emperor, when I'm the reason she isn't?

Doesn't she know this is good for her, and I don't have a choice?

The banquet ends without incident, and the next day, Seran relays that the emperor has received multiple offers from lords worth considering. He tells me to expect an announcement of my betrothal to come by Vernus, the spring equinox.

I try to guess which of the lords who approached the high table made an offer. I need to try to catch the eye of that lord from Nyvos again, before my father makes up his mind.

With my time in the Sunrise Palace running out, I take to the gardens more often. Even though no more flowers bloom now than at any other time of year, there is still something about the garden that sings to me in spring. I skip the rose bushes, a bit overtired of their smell and familiar shape, and wander deeper to the narcissus beds. I lean down to touch the dew on a fragile petal.

Something catches in the corner of my eye.

I turn and startle to find a man right behind me. I only catch a flash of metal before a blade draws across my throat. Red sprays as I fall into the flowers, pain and shock whiting out any thoughts. I try to scream, try to gasp, but neither comes. The narcissus, my hands, the sky—they all drip red.



I can't get any air. The garden is gone. The man is gone. The blade is gone. Something heavy is on top of me.

I thrash, kicking, clawing, fighting like a wild thing until I tear free. I hit straw-covered ground and scramble to my feet.

I leap for the door in front of me and swing out into cold night air. Inhuman screeches echo as I stagger, trying to orient myself. I'm not in the gardens. I have no idea where I am, but I know I need to run.

I race across an unfamiliar landscape, with none of the hedges or flowering bushes or cypress trees I expect to see. There is a door in a wall ahead. I bolt for it, raise the bar, and shove through.

Wings flap past me as I stumble out into woods. Birds shriek and swarm, their cries egging me on as I pump my legs. I run into the trees, away from the blade, away from the man who attacked me. My throat screams in pain, but the cut he made did not kill me.

Yet. Yet. Yet. A voice in my mind chants.

I don't see the river before I skid over stones and fly into it.

Icy water steals my breath, a cold I've never felt before making me seize and gasp, water coming in with air. Unbearable pressure fills me.

I flail as the current spins me around. Light filters from above, fractured and far. I claw upward, lungs burning, mouth opening in a useless gasp.

But the river throws me down into a darkness so total I can't tell which way is up. My dress drags at my legs, and water forces into my nose and throat. I lose control of my limbs as I'm whirled into blackness.

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Hands plunge into the river and lock around my arms. They haul me through the pounding current and up into the air. I gasp. Sky. Wings. His face.

Alaris.

He carries me over to the bank, the world blurring by as I choke, unable to get in a breath.

I heave, folding over his forearm, coughing up water in a torrent. He lays me down on solid ground, as I continue to convulse and hack.

“Breathe. Just breathe.”

I drag in as much dirt as air in my first few breaths. My limbs are numb, my dress sealed to my skin with icy water.

I pry my cheek off the ground and lock onto silver eyes.

Silver eyes, bright and blazing. Brighter than stars. And wings flaring wide.

His dark brows are low, his teeth clenched.

“Reckless,” he hisses. But the hand on my back is gentle, tracing slow circles between my shoulder blades as I continue to cough. “What did you do, Ly?”

I shiver so hard my teeth crack together. He doesn’t wait for an answer. One arm slides under my knees, the other locks behind my back. His wings snap open, and the ground drops away.

The dark world rushes by below, his wings vast and soundless as they beat. I glance back at the river behind us, winding in a black ribbon through

frosted trees, narrow but fast. The castle ahead is a cluster of lit windows, the bonfire still blazing in the front courtyard.

Wind cuts through my soaked dress and I press my face into his chest to hide from its knives.

He lands on the stone terrace outside his chambers. The glass doors yield to him without a touch, and he carries me to the armchair nearest the fire. He sets me down and runs his hands over me, checking my arms, my ribs, my feet. I can barely feel his fingers on my frigid skin. My heartbeats come slowly, but each one slams into my sternum, as if doing the work of three.

"Are you hurt anywhere? Did you hit your head?"

My jaw clacks too hard for me to answer at first. "N…no."

I'm still so cold, I can't think straight. Every shuddering breath is a struggle through my numb lips.

"I need to get this off you." He rips through the buttons on my sopping dress. He throws it in a wet pile on the floor, but there is no time to worry about how see-through my shift is. In another second, he wraps me in a blanket, fast and focused.

He looks the same as he did that night he saved me in the field. His hair hangs to his waist, wet with river water. His wings flare repeatedly as he tightens the blanket around me, feathers misting when they move. The light in his eyes no longer flickers; it pours, steady and bright, bright enough that I feel caught inside it.

I've never seen him so beautiful. I've never seen him so tattered.

He looks like he's been in a fight. His white shirt is slashed, open to his muscled chest. His pants are torn, exposing a thigh, and his feet are bare. His earring is gone, as are his rings. And his wrists…

His wrists are banded in cuffs of some dark material, with broken chain links hanging from the ends.

"You…what happened…to you?" I ask, shivering.

He walks away, then returns a few seconds later and drapes the fur over the back of my chair.

"What…what are those…?" I try again, as he bundles it around me.

He lifts the wrist I'm looking at, as if he has no idea what I'm talking about. The dangling links jingle. He goes back to tucking in the heavy edges of the fur so they don't slip open. "I chained myself to a mountain."

My mouth drops open. "Wh…why?"

His jaw works once, the muscle bunching just below his ear. He turns away and stokes the fire higher, giving me a view of his folded wings and the way his muscles coil around the joints in his shoulder blades through his tattered shirt.

"Al…Alaris…?"

He faces me, his starlight stare stilling my words. "Ly, I think I am the one who is owed answers. You almost drowned. Another moment and I would have been collecting your corpse. So start by telling *me* why."

His usual calm, easy expression is strained.

I tug the fur tighter around me. "I'm sorry. It was an accident. I…I was confused."

He stalks closer, his smirk humorless, the flint in his eyes dangerous. "Imagine my confusion when the hawks, who I have trusted to alert me if there is any danger near, saw you running and didn't warn me. Apparently." He tilts his head. "You told them 'not to tell me when you were running from nothing,' and they listened. Should I go skewer every last one of them for the Noctus bonfire?"

"N…no!" I rattle the word out in pieces. I knew they were on my side. *Good little beasts.*

"Imagine my confusion, Lysandra…" His voice gets deadly soft. "When I see you about to dive into a river and an oraculi discarded in the aviary." He leans in closer. "Leaving me to make a very quick exit from my mountaintop."

I cringe down in the fur. I guess I don't have to ask if he knows about the oraculi.

I force myself to meet his blazing gaze. "I had to know."

"Do you even care if you live through this?"

"I care if *you* live through this. And I was right. There was another life."

"Whatever you found out, it wasn't worth the risk."

The line between his brows is so rare and unfamiliar. I want to smooth it. But I had to try and find out Alaris's fate…what did I learn?

I blink, trying to separate this life from the life I just saw.

"There was an explosion near the Central Palace. They blamed it on something natural." I root around in my fraying mind, but it's hard to pick out details. "There was no other disruption before I died in spring…"

The room in front of me flips to the starlit garden, the bed of narcissus. The blade touches the corner of my neck near my ear and bites in. The

horror is worse than the pain as my mind tries to catch up with what is happening.

My whole body seizes, unable to react in time as the blade cuts clean through my skin. I paw at my throat, trying to stop the blood, as my life spills hot down my front.

"…ysandra. Ly. Come back." Alaris's face swims into focus. "Don't fall into the memories. Stay here." His voice reverberates with the command. "Look at me."

I let out a few shuddering breaths, eyes darting around before I can fully obey. I blink away the image of narcissus, their place taken by the roaring hearth in front of me. And Alaris's face, strange but familiar.

Look at me.

I let my gaze wander from his dark brow to his elegant nose, to his sharp jaw. His angled top lip. His full bottom one. His long hair reflects blue-black where the light hits it. I almost reach to brush it off his face. But my arm is bundled in blankets.

"Are you here with me?" he asks.

"Yes…I…I'm fine. It was just a memory…another death."

For a second, his face is so blank, I think he's calm. That unnatural calm that makes me wonder if he's seen it all. Then his brows pull together and he drops his head.

"I couldn't watch you today. I didn't watch you, and you…" His shoulders tense.

"Alaris?" I whisper, voice hoarse.

Light flares under his skin, like the moon passing behind a cloud. He doesn't lift his head. "I should really be back…" His arms quiver, his knuckles white on the armrests around me. "…on the mountain."

I swim my hand out of the fur to reach for him. "Are you okay?"

He yanks his hands off my chair, a single beat of his wings sliding him back to a crouch.

"Stay…just stay where you are."

He presses his fists into the floor. The chill that comes off him has nothing to do with the river. It fills the room and makes the fire shrink low in the grate. Frost crackles around him, spreading across the stone. His wings won't settle. They keep flaring, too wide for the sitting area, dragging shadows over the walls.

Then the whole room plunges into darkness.

Not only my sight, but my sense of the fire, the walls, the window, is gone. I can only feel the chair under me, and the ground beneath my feet. Even in the shadowgate, I could see my own hands, Alaris's face. Now, I see nothing.

I've seen divinials swell with power on their high holidays. At Embrus, the court bows away from my father, sweating at the heat radiating off him like he's a living flame. But even though his hair stands up like a candle, even though sparks fly from his steps, I have never seen anything like this.

Like wings. And spaces sucked into darkness. And this thrumming power that fills the air.

"Alaris?" I whisper, into the inky black.

"Stay back. Stay in that chair." His voice sounds so far away. And calm. Like ice.

Something flares in me. Worry. I've never seen him look so ragged. I've never seen him look so broken. Noctus, his high holiday, is a time of connection to Arastor and to himself. A surge in his nature, his power, his feelings.

And he's overwhelmed. It calms me straight back into the present.

"Alaris?" I ask again, voice clearer.

"Stay away from me, Lysandra." His voice sounds even farther away, like he's double the distance.

Whatever Alaris is feeling, I don't want him to be alone with it. What dark place could he pull me into that I haven't visited myself all these lonely nights? I'm not sure if I'm the right person to help him through this, but I want to be. I can't deny I want to be.

I push the blankets off and slide off the chair, kneeling down on the cold floor I can't see. I crawl forward, hands out, searching in front of me. I crawl until my knees ache, an impossible distance given the size of the room. But I keep going, feeling my way ahead, until my fingertips connect with his knees.

"Alaris." It's no longer a question. My hands find the front of his tattered shirt. I climb them up, over his chest, to the cold line of his neck, to his face. "I'm here. I'm right here."

"Ly." His voice echoes from everywhere even though he's right in front of me. "Go back. I don't know where my power will take me. Stay away."

It's the easiest order I've ever refused. "No."

Wind that doesn't feel like wind blows around us, whipping my hair and dress, pulling on something deeper inside me, like it's tugging on my bones. Something is fraying at the edges of this space, like if I let go of him, everything here could disappear. The power of Arastor, god of night and the eternal void, is coursing through this room.

But I can feel Alaris quivering under my fingers, and the slight motion is more important than the not-wind and strange tug on my edges in the dark.

"I'll stay with you," I say as I stroke down his cheek, leaning forward.

And because I cannot see his face, because there is nothing to lose in a room with no light in it, and because there is something pulling me in like a spell, I sit up on my knees and press my mouth to his.

For a moment he is stone. Then his mouth moves. Just a brush of his lips, so that if I shift back a breath, we'll be apart, maybe miles apart, in the dark. His fingertips, cool and shaking, skate over my face, touching it so carefully, I'm not sure if he is breaking or I am.

Then he answers in full. One hand cups my cheek; the other settles low on my spine and gathers me in until there is no space left between us. His mouth covers mine and I fold against him.

The nip, and tug, and careful exploration are perfect, twirling my mind up in beautiful patterns in the dark. His hands slide through my hair and I grip the back of his neck as the kiss grows hungry, but still slow, deepening as our tongues find each other.

We're both breaking, and we're both holding each other here.

He separates from me, thumb grazing my lower lip, his breath close enough to mingle with mine. "Don't run away again, Lysandra." He taps his forehead against mine. "Whatever you run from, run toward me."

I nod.

The wind that is not wind dies down, and the pull on my edges eases. Slowly the room comes back, the gray of the windows, the low red of the fire, his face an inch from mine, the moon beneath his skin. We are both still here. Neither of us dissolved into the dark.

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For one more second, he holds my gaze, breathing hard. Then he goes still, locking down, his fractured control glued back in place.

He is on his feet before I can say a word, stalking away until the balcony doors block his retreat. I can only see his eyes glowing in the dark glass. His wings spread wide. His hands curl into fists, then open.

"I need to be re-chained," he says.

"Why?" I whisper from the floor. His control seems tenuous, and I'm afraid if I move too suddenly, he'll be out those doors and into the night.

"Because if I don't keep…control of myself, my powers are going to take me straight to Illios so I can kill the emperor. Tonight."

"No!" I sit up straighter. "No, Alaris, don't. Stay here with me." I hear his words echoed in my mouth.

His eyes close in the reflection before frost crackles across the glass. "Being near you makes it worse. I can't watch you go under again. I can't watch you…die, again."

"I won't. I'm fine now." My heart pounds. I only used the oraculi to save him, and now he's going to risk it all to go face my father alone? What can I say to stop him from leaving? "I'm fine."

He shakes his head. "You're not fine. I see you falling back there, and when your mind relives it, your body follows. You need to focus on staying present."

I can see the cracks in his fragile control. And I can feel the memories tugging at my mind. He's right. I woke up faster this time, but with a single

thought or image, I could slip right back into the past.

The room flips to the starlit garden…

I take a deep breath and try to ground myself in my freezing legs, folded against the frosted stone. My mouth is still tingling with the feeling of his lips on mine. I become aware of how little I am wearing, the thin shift clinging to every line of my body, still damp from the river.

I note the muscled planes of his chest, barely covered by his own soaked shirt. His scent is night air, cool and green, and underneath it that thread of cloves that makes me inhale deeper every time I catch it.

My attention sharpens on the present moment. I don't want to fall into more spinning memories. I want to be here, with him, with only scraps of fabric between us.

If we were in darkness again, I'd crawl back into his arms.

I look up at him through my lashes. "Then keep me here."

He turns as he seems to realize that I'm not just talking about being here together in this room.

"Ly. You can't mean what I think you mean." His low voice cuts through me. "You almost drowned."

"But I didn't." I'm not sure who this version of me is, but I was compliant, polite, and small in yet another life. None of that ever protected me from pain or kept me safe from death. After so many lives, I feel older. More sure. "We both have things we shouldn't think about right now. Let's help each other."

I push up off the floor. My legs barely hold me as I cross to him. The wet shift is no shield, the cold biting harder with every step I take closer. His eyes blaze silver, and I hiss as frost blooms beneath my feet.

His wings flare out, like he can't decide whether to swoop away or close the distance.

"Get back beside the fire, Ly," he growls.

I quake, but it's not all from the cold. "You told me what would happen if I took the oraculi." I stand up straighter. "I'm a thief."

He goes rigid.

"A thief. Who lied to you. And stole from you."

"Don't test me, Ly."

"Don't make promises you can't keep." I get as close as I can while meeting his gaze, arching my neck up and suppressing my shiver. "Didn't you tell me you'd remind me what you do to thieves?"

For what feels like an eternity, his lantern eyes stare into mine. Then he brushes his thumb over my bottom lip.

"Say it again." His voice is low and dangerous, even as he runs gentle fingertips down my neck, over the curve of my breast, and around my waist, trailing tingles. "And I will make sure you don't forget this time."

My voice is steadier than the rest of me. "I stole from you, Alaris. And I would do it again in a heartbeat."

I gasp as he grips me tight to him. His other hand slides through my hair and cups the back of my neck. He curves down but keeps our mouths an inch apart. "And what about other memories? If I touch you, will I have your full attention?"

All other versions of reality go quiet. The only things that matter are his hands and his lips a breath from mine.

"Yes," I murmur.

I think he can see it's true, see his effect on me, because his eyes flash wide. This may not be everything I want between us…but I would give anything to close the gap between our lips.

I bite my bottom one instead. "What about you? Is this enough for you to stay?"

"Me?" His wings curve in around us, blocking most of the light. He walks me backward until my knees hit the chair in front of the fire, and I drop into it. He sinks slowly down between my legs, his hands settling on the armrests on either side of me. "Chains would not be enough to keep me from this."

He dodges my lips, trailing kisses down my throat, open and warm where the rest of him is cool. His hand travels over the wet shift and cups my breast. His thumb drags across the peak, and I gasp, my hips lifting off the chair. He does it again, slower, his eyes coming up to my face and staying there. "Yes?"

"Yes." Now there is nothing in the world but that one touch. My skin that was cold before is on fire. I'm on fire.

His mouth closes over my breast through the fabric, his tongue warm, and I arch into him. My fingers slide into his midnight hair, cool as river water. He drags the neck of the shift down, baring me to the air and to him, and sets his lips back on skin.

I pant, the flicks of his tongue sending pulses straight between my legs.

“I should punish you,” he murmurs, as his other hand slides up the inside of my thigh, pushing the soaked hem aside. He stops at the edge of my undergarment, skating just along the outside of it. He takes my ear in his teeth, nipping and sucking, his fingers playing lightly over me until I whimper. “I should deny you. And make you beg.”

“Alaris…” I am ready to beg. I have never wanted anything the way I want him to touch me. My knees open wider. “Alaris, please.”

He reaches under the band and drags his fingers over me, finding me slick. He runs them over me once, twice. Then again. Every pass makes my hips roll toward his hand, and he lets me, and gives me nothing more.

Every time he skates over my entrance I feel the anticipation of him inside me. I clutch his shoulders and find his body wound tight, a shocking contrast to his gentle hand. His touch is already so different from my own, where I can predict every movement.

He pauses two fingers at my entrance, dancing at the edge but not dipping in, and I tense for them. Then he drags them up, finally sliding over the bundle of nerves screaming for pressure.

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I arch, gasping. He circles it lightly, and my eyes roll back.

“Will you steal from me? Lie to me? Run from me again?”

I shake my head. “No. No. No.” I will say anything, as long as he keeps touching me.

“No what?” He flicks his tongue over my nipple as his circling fingers fall into a rhythm. “No to which one?”

“No, I won’t”—he sucks the peak and I gasp—“steal from you.”

“Good.” I feel the word hum against my skin. He moves to the other breast. “And?”

I cannot remember what else he asked. Pleasure and heat gather with each circle, building, and I moan.

His fingers and his tongue stop, and I whimper in frustration.

"Evil, evil man."

"Lord of night with a bad reputation, remember?" he says, giving my nipple another flick.

I gasp and laugh, then moan when he sinks a finger into me.

He curves it on a spot and I cry out, my heels coming off the floor.

He lifts his mouth to mine, swallowing the sounds.

"Promise me, Ly." His finger works in and out, each thrust essential and addictive. Then he adds another. "Promise me you will never do something so foolish again."

I can't answer. He keeps hitting that spot, while his thumb flicks back and forth. I lose touch with where my limbs are in the chair, and he grips my hip to keep me where he wants me. He takes my answer on his tongue, the kiss hot and open, swallowing my cries as his fingers pick up speed.

Something is building. It tightens and coils with every stroke, pulling me toward a tipping point. I don't know what is at the end of this. Only that if he stops, I will break apart, and if he does not, I will break apart anyway.

I feel a jolt of it, and seize, before returning to myself.

"Alaris," I cry, writhing. I grip his shoulders, the arms of the chair, anything I can reach. "I can't…I'm…"

"You can." His silver eyes are on my face. "You will."

He drives his fingers deep inside me.

I break apart completely, clenching and breaking and clenching again, every stroke of his hand sending new pleasure through me. He doesn't stop, continuing the relentless onslaught until I'm babbling, and squeezing again, his arm locked around my back my only tether.

I gasp and shudder, and flop back in the chair. Only then does he pull his fingers away from me. I can't speak. My eyes close, my entire body suddenly so heavy.

"Ly, look at me."

I crack my eyes at his beautiful face, still panting.

"That's enough now." He puts a hand under my knees, lifts me off the chair, and carries me to his bed. He sets me down on the mattress and folds the covers over me.

But it's not enough. The pleasure is ebbing but the ache isn't.

Before he can get too far away, I free an arm from the covers. I reach a bold hand out to touch him and find him hard. He draws a breath through

his teeth and my stomach flips.

Although my limbs are heavy, my pulse picks up. I'm more and more sure this belongs inside me.

He tenses, and in a second, he's at the end of the bed, wings pulled back.

"What?" I pant.

His wings twitch. "I should leave."

My legs are rubber, slipping apart. All I can think about is kicking off the covers, shedding the remaining fabric on my body, and launching myself at him. "I don't want you to."

His eyes flare, silver so bright the room dims around him. His hands frame my feet, fingers pressing deep into the mattress, every muscle in him locked.

Then he straightens, a smile curving his wicked mouth. "Then let ending here be your punishment. Even after you stole from me, I gave you your distraction." His wings widen as he backs up. "Sleep well, Lysandra."

In a few steps and a flap of feathers, he's out the balcony doors, the rush of cold air hitting me only briefly, before they close.

Part of me wants to run out on the balcony after him. But he looked in control of his power again. I don't think he's at risk of going to Illios tonight.

My limbs are heavy, and the bedding holds his scent. The ache between my legs has softened into something warm and slow. I have never felt like this. Wrung out and sated, alive and electric, all at the same time. I lie back and close my eyes.

As soon as I do, I'm grabbed in a stream of light and color. I can tell it's not sleep pulling at my consciousness. I seize and my eyes fly open, darting around the room. I try to stay in the present. What can I latch onto? How can I stay here, in Arastos, in this life?

But before I come up with an answer, my eyes roll back. The scent of roses fills my nose, and I fall into memory.

48

I wake at midnight and breathe in the scent of spoiling roses. My birthday is behind me. The toast my father made floats through my mind, and I toss, tangling myself further in the sheets. My marriageability is going to change things.

Still, over the following days and weeks, I manage to cling to my privacy at the Sunrise Palace. I ignore the letters from lords, letting them pile up. After Somnus, Seran insists I start accepting invites, but I still drag my feet, attending the minimum number of parties.

When a knock comes at my door after solstice, I assume I'm being summoned to yet another event to meet lords.

A maid stands there, holding out a dress. It's white, but thick, and high-necked. It doesn't look like the other dresses I've been sent for festivities.

"Seran says you are to attend a family gathering this morning, your highness. He asked that you wear this."

Two carriages wait in the courtyard. Rinalda is already seated in one, her red hair severe against the pale seat cushion. I climb into my own. As we roll toward the windward gates instead of the Central Palace, my stomach tightens. There is only one reason I'm being taken outside the Citadel in this dress.

The Crimson Square.

My father does not summon the royal family to witness the death of petty criminals. Either someone important is about to be put to the pyre or lots of people are.

The balcony is already crowded when Rinalda and I arrive. My father sits on the throne at the center, flanked by my brothers, with a crowd of nobles and advisors behind them. Rinalda takes a place in line next to Jasper, and I shuffle in beside her, hanging back a step to stay out of his sightline.

Below, the square is packed. Thousands of faces tilt upward, mouths open, voices climbing over one another. They scream for the death of traitors. They howl for justice as though their devotion will be cataloged and rewarded. It will not. Loyalty to the flame earns nothing beyond the right to keep living under it. Anything less is punished in the very square where they stand.

Set back from my siblings, I can see the rigid line of Rinalda's shoulders. Her fingers curl around her own forearm, nails pressing crescents into the skin. I open my mouth to say something, but a horn sounds below, low and long, and the crowd falls silent.

A voice rings out over the square: "For the crime of treason against the emperor, the blood of Ignar, and the Eternal Flame, the condemned are sentenced to burn."

Thirty or so men and women are led out and forced to kneel, then bent forward so their foreheads press to the stone. They will burn without even the dignity of looking at the sky.

It's not a small execution, but I still don't see why a band of criminals was enough to gather us all here.

Then a tall figure is led out, back straight, despite his tattered clothes. The nobles on the balcony murmur and gasp. At the risk of stepping into Jasper's line of sight, I stand on my toes and lean forward, but even with a better view, I don't recognize him.

The priests guide him to an elevated central pyre and chain his wrists around an iron post. It will heat and burn his skin long before the first flames meet flesh.

The announcer booms out again. "The traitors were led by Alaris Arastoros, previous Sovereign of Arastos. Stripped of all titles, and sentenced to burn, for crimes against the emperor."

Now I gasp. The sovereign of the most shadoward province on the continent, dragged to the Crimson Square as a traitor? I have watched my father's justice carried out on thieves and rebels. Nobles burned too, with proof of their crimes. But a sovereign?

It's never happened.

And Alaris Arastoros at that? I've heard his name in passing at parties, attached to a reputation that makes the court ladies giggle behind their fans. But a traitor?

I cannot make out his face from this angle, only the dark fall of his hair and the line of his jaw. I want to ask Rinalda if she knows what happened, what he did, but the priests are already moving. They carry torches to each of the criminals, setting fire to each. As screams start to rise, four priests surround the central pyre, lowering their torches to the kindling.

The Sovereign of Arastos doesn't fight his chains the way I have seen so many do. Even as the iron at his back glows red, he doesn't thrash or shout. I would think he's unconscious, but his head is up.

I can't watch.

I lock my chin forward and let my eyes go glassy. If Jasper or one of my other brothers turns around and catches me looking away, it will be a lick of flame across my arm and a long ride back for lobellum. So I stare, and I do not see. The smoke rolls up from below, thick with the smell of pitch and boiling flesh.

I hate this.

Beside me, Rinalda is almost relaxed, her hands loose at her sides. She is watching the pyre with an expression so blank, I wonder if she is somewhere else entirely. Standing before a different pyre, years ago, with tears streaming down her face and her hands raised. They made her light it herself, her lover bound to the stake, and Rinalda's blue flame so searingly hot that Seran said it would have been impossible to feel. As if that were mercy. As if the color of the fire could make it kind.

Finally, the carriage takes me back to the Sunrise Palace, the awful smells clinging to my dress and hair.

The days creak on. The next time Seran sends for me, it is for a party. The gossip is all about the violence that's sparked in Arastos. I only catch pieces, having missed most of the chatter that overtook the palace in the days right after the burning.

At least lords seem more interested in the conflict than me, and I'm allowed to hang back. But Seran sidles up to my elbow before I go.

"I've been speaking with the advisors. These unfortunate events have accelerated your father's desire to see you married," he says in his usual mild manner. "We need to strengthen our shadoward alliances and ease the

unrest with a wedding. I'll update you on your schedule tomorrow. And I'll send a seamstress to make you some new dresses."

The threat of more events triples my exhaustion as I return to the Sunrise Palace. I take my shoes off on the first floor, an action Rinalda would surely sneer at. I climb the marble stairs and pause. A man dressed in black is on the upper landing.

Except for Seran, men aren't allowed here. Even guards only come when called.

"What are you…?" My eyes widen as I take in his mask.

He closes the distance between us and shoves me. For one excruciating second, I'm airborne, then I slam headfirst to the marble.

It all goes black.



A knock brings me to my senses. My eyes fly wide and I gasp, pain shooting through my head and neck. I seize.

The knock comes again.

"The lord sent me to check on you, Lady." It's Flora's voice, muffled through the door.

Daylight pours through the window, bright enough to be near noon. I am in Alaris's bed in a tangle of covers. I grit my teeth as I force myself up on shaking arms, surprised I can move at all through the agony of what feels like crushed bone.

The pain in my head is fading, but something worse replaces it.

Oh no.

That wasn't a dream. What I just saw really happened.

I throw the covers off and leap out of bed. The room lurches as my body locks, and I fall to my knees. For a terrible breath I cannot feel my legs. Then the numbness fades and I force myself upright with a new throb in my kneecaps.

I stumble out the door, push past Flora, and race down the hall. It warps, and I catch myself on the wall. I feel my way along panel after panel, until my hands land on the door to the office. I twist the handle and spill inside.

Heads turn toward me. Alaris, Dashol, Karns, and Nykiri.

My eyes catch on Dashol's broad frame, then on Nykiri's cropped hair, and the square comes back. Both of them knelt next to the pyre, foreheads to the stone. I didn't recognize them while I was remembering, but now I do.

"You can't go," is all I get out before my knees give.

The floor rushes up and then stops. Dashol has me, his arm locked under my ribs, holding me upright. Voices tangle as my vision swims.

Then cooler hands support me. Alaris has me. He's speaking. Even though I want to listen he's blurring out.

There are now five lifetimes competing for my attention. I can feel his arm under my grip, but somehow, I'm also spinning. Courtiers and courtyards and my bedroom and blood…it all layers and weaves as I sink and float.

I fight to the surface. I have to warn him. I saw him on the pyre, chained, flames climbing. I shake my head until the office comes back.

"You can't attack. It's too dangerous. You all burn. You all burn in the Crimson Square."

The last thing I hear is Alaris saying my name.

49

I jerk awake to a familiar scent: lavender.

I take a moment to orient myself. I'm in Alaris's bed, and for the first time, I'm not alone. I'm in his arms. A familiar ringed hand is tucked around my waist, anchoring me, while the other moves through my hair. My rose gold waves have grown out to my waist, the dingy gray ends the only signal I ever cut and dyed it.

"Ly," he says, before I even speak. "You're awake."

His voice is low and calm, his breath warm against my ear. I blink slowly, heart thudding.

His fingers card through my hair in long, slow passes. Cool against my scalp, then sliding through the strands, each drag so unhurried it feels like he could do this for hours. Each stroke sends a wash of calm over me, and tingles over my head and down my spine.

I sigh. Then I remember myself.

"Alaris!" I try to sit up. "I need to tell you…"

"Stay still. I left you alone last night because I thought these visions were finished. I'm not taking the chance again." His arm tightens, drawing me back against him. His chest is cool and solid beneath me. "I've been reading up on Cyralia. It turns out your…instinct…last night was correct. The old books suggest you can be anchored by sensation. Pleasure and pain can help slow the cycling, to keep you in the present."

His fingers find the crown of my head and draw down again, and my whole body softens into him, buzzing pleasure spreading over me.

How long has he been here, stroking my hair? He has better things to do. I push his arm off and sit up. “You don’t have to do that!”

He sits up behind me and traps me in his arms, speaking low in my ear. “Ly, I swear, if you even try it…this *is* a kidnapping. You’re not going anywhere.”

He lowers both of us back down slowly, my heart going wild. I should argue. I should insist. But his fingers move through my hair again, slow and deliberate, and the thought scatters. His thumb traces the curve of my ear, and a trail of tingles follows its path. My breath hitches.

“Alar…”

His fingers graze down to the nape of my neck, pressing gently at the base of my skull. Every thought I had about getting up, about the office, about the visions, goes quiet. There is only the cool point of pressure and the sensation spreading out from it.

The only thought that squirms through is that I wish he was doing this because he wanted to, not because a book told him it would help in a magical medical event, and I’m a problem his otherworldly patience makes him willing to solve.

As soon as he releases the pressure, I force myself to fight through the drowsy spell he’s putting me under and twist in his arms. He holds still, his expression controlled and unreadable.

The sun is dipping low, orange catching in his hair. I seize. It reminds me of the priests’ torches as they touched the kindling at the base of his pyre.

I have to find my voice. I have to convince him. “Alaris…I saw you burn.”

His thumb sweeps my cheek. “Not now,” he says quietly. “That can wait.”

I feel like I’m more shaken by the news than he is. But he doesn’t have the image of a distant Alaris, hands chained around an iron post at his back, flames climbing. I shudder.

“It can wait,” he says again more firmly. “Do you think there are more?”

“More what?”

“More memories. I’m not underestimating this again.”

I line up what I saw since I used the oraculi a second time: in the life I saw before I went in the river, I woke up uneasy, but my days went on as

normal. My father paraded me before the court in spring. Then I walked into a garden and never walked out.

And last night, I saw a life where I was calm at midnight. Up until the moment when I was thrown down the stairs, I don't remember being afraid at all.

"I don't think so," I say. "I think that was the first one."

He makes a low sound that I feel through his chest. "Then let's just wait a little bit longer. When you're ready, you can tell me what you saw."

The words *I'm ready now* die on my tongue as his hand settles back into my hair, resuming the slow, steady rhythm. I close my eyes.

If there were more lives, he would hold me through them too.

So I let myself sink into the feeling. The weight of his arm across me, the slow pull of his fingers sending tingles over me, the steady rise of his chest against my back. I have never had anything like this before. In every life, I lived alone, and I died alone in terror. If I think about it, I'm not sure there are many people who would have mourned me. Maybe no one.

I turn my face to his shoulder so he will not see the wetness on my lashes.

When a memory rises too close and the room starts to blur, I breathe him in. Cool air and cloves on his skin, and lavender in the air; the scent that has come to mean this bed, this place, the present. I hold it in until the walls steady.

But there is one thing I'm ready to admit…

I think I know who killed me.

At twenty I was tense, watchful, hidden in the Sunrise Palace, trying to avoid the attention of my father or brothers. But at twenty-one, something changed. The fear arrived, and the countdown began.

Every time, I died before I reached twenty-two. And while the time and place and manner of death seemed random, a pattern is becoming clear.

In the life I married Cantor, I never made it to my wedding night.

In the life when my father placed me beside him at the high table, death in the garden quickly followed.

And in this last life, where Alaris burned, and Seran told me we would need a new shadoward treaty, I was pushed down the stairs.

I can't be sure about the backroom conversations and decisions that might have shaped the lives when I was stowed away in the tower or losing

myself in drink. But I know whenever I got close to marriage, I died soon after.

And there is one more thing. The night my father sat me at the high table, I saw my mother's face.

I thought, in the moment, that she was angry at me. Or maybe embarrassed at a flameless daughter being trotted out in front of the court. Or worried I would fail, the way I have always failed, and the shame would fall on her.

But she should have been pleased. Thrilled. For the first time in my life, I was useful—not only useful, exalted, at my father's side. A good match would raise her standing. A daughter married into a powerful house is an extension of the empress's reach. She should have been calculating which lord to support, not gripping her cup with white knuckles and the tendons popping out on her throat.

I thought she was upset on my birthday because of the mistress in my father's lap. But the mistress is nothing new. My mother's emotion that night was directed at me, not at him. I just couldn't see it then.

Now I can.

As soon as I marry, I leave the palace, and a deadly secret is no longer contained. Others will find out I have no flame, raising questions. When my children don't either, those questions will demand answers. And my children might even carry the signs of Cyralia more visibly than I do.

"I think I know who sent the masked man," I say, finally, the words thick in my throat.

Alaris's fingers pause at my scalp. Then they resume, and I tell him all of it. My mother's face at the spring event, the fury that should have been pride. The pattern I can now trace through five lives: afraid at twenty-one, dead by twenty-two. When the road to marriage becomes clearest, the masked man comes.

I stare at the orange light on the ceiling and wonder which version of the secret she is keeping. Did she take someone to her bed before the marriage? After? Or did she come to the emperor already carrying cyralian blood in her veins, disguised behind red hair and a mostly mortal lineage the archivists never questioned?

Something like pity rises up. She was twenty-one when she married the closest thing to a living god, angry and terrifying, sizzling like a brazier.

She walked into marriage with a secret that could kill her at the age when I could barely sit through a banquet beside the same man.

The sympathy lasts the span of one breath.

Because cleaning up her secret requires my death. However she came to carry cyralian blood, however young or desperate or trapped she was, the solution she landed on was a man in a mask with a blade. Again, and again, and again.

May you never live to endure what I have. When she said that to me on my birthday, I thought it was the wine and humiliation talking.

She meant it.

Alaris's hand stills in my hair. He is quiet for a long time.

"I have been looking into it, without any answers worth reporting so far," he says finally. "You weren't a very public figure, and with you missing, digging too deeply would raise uncomfortable questions…" A pause. "I see the pattern. The empress has the means and the knowledge to do it. Your life is a threat to her."

I swallow. Hearing it back from him makes it feel more real.

"If it is the empress, then we already have a solution," he says, his voice low. "Once I kill the emperor, she won't need you gone to protect herself from a dead husband's wrath."

I weigh his words. If my father dies, there will be no emperor to worry about the stain of a cyralian daughter.

"Do you think that will be enough? She already sent him after me in this life…"

Because I left the palace. The point was to contain me. Even though she doesn't know why I ran, she sent him to find me anyway.

"If he doesn't stop, I'll keep you in my sight every moment until I can kill him," Alaris says simply.

His words make me wriggle closer, my eyes drifting closed. Just like last time, I don't feel like I've slept. It's like I've been awake since I went in the river. Or for months.

But the burning pyre flashes against my lids.

"But I saw it, again and again. You don't win." My voice comes out soft. "The Flame keeps burning. We have to come up with something else…"

"I will hear it all. But I think that's enough now." His thumb completes one slow circle at my temple. "Rest now, Ly."

I want to argue. But in another few minutes, I don't think I'll have a choice. I tense my back. I'm not the only one who has had sleepless night after sleepless night. "Only if you sleep too."

His chest stills for a moment. "Fine. I'm still going to hold you so I wake up if your breathing changes."

I swallow, nodding, like this reason is perfectly practical and does nothing to my heart at all.

He slides lower on the pillows, nestling me into his shoulder. I watch as his eyes close. My pulse picks up. I actually don't think I'm going to be able to achieve the sleep I just negotiated for both of us.

He smiles, like he knows I'm looking, and cracks one eye. "Go to sleep, Ly."

I squirm, adjusting. And I stare at his chest rising and falling for a few more moments. The exhaustion pulling on my mind is powerful enough to subdue my nerves.

I let his scent soothe me to sleep.



When I open my eyes, the room is filled with dim morning light. The fire has burned to ash.

He is still asleep.

I've been living in his room all this time, but I have never seen this. His face is slack, the careful composure gone. His dark lashes rest against his cheekbones. His lips are slightly parted. His hands are crossed on my back, and I know if I so much as shift, he'll feel it.

So I stay relaxed, breathing slow, and I let myself enjoy looking. The strong line of his jaw, the angle of his nose, the way his onyx hair falls across his forehead. I have cataloged these features more times than I should have, but I have rarely had unmonitored access like this.

He is so beautiful it makes my chest ache.

Mine, my traitorous chest says.

No. He's not. And that shouldn't be what matters right now.

I have been dreaming. Proper dreams, with a tangle of things both real and unreal. A spring courtyard and lords raising their cups. The road through snow to Cantor's keep, the creak of a carriage, his easy laugh. My

father's voice announcing a match. The threads weave together and fray apart.

But one real memory stands out. The staircase under the throne. White doors with no handles. A basin so bright I couldn't look at it.

Even though it pains me to give up this moment, this is too important. I place my palm on his chest.

"Alaris. Wake up."

His eyes open. For one unguarded breath they are soft, unfocused, then they zero in on me. He searches my face. "Still here?"

"I'm here." I hold his gaze. "I know a way to the Eternal Flame."

50

I'm not sure I'm going to be able to articulate myself with our faces this close together. I need all of my wits to untangle what I'm thinking.

"Can I?" I ask, gesturing toward the edge of the bed on the other side of him.

His lips purse slightly. He reminds me of one of the hawks, when they're trying to decide if they *want* to understand me, expression blank but willful.

But he sighs and lifts the covers. He stands first, then puts out a hand for me. "Slowly."

I accept it, the lesser of two distractions, and climb up onto shaking legs. I'm still in my ruined nightgown.

My ruined dignity rears its head. "Let me get my robe…"

He goes to get it for me, leaving me perched on the edge of the bed, chewing my thumb, arranging my words. He sits next to me and puts it on my shoulders, but I jump up and start pacing. My legs are only a little wobbly now.

"In all my lives, I was brought before the Flame once. To bless my marriage to Cantor."

"Cantor." His voice is low. It's not a question. I already told him the story, so he knows I'm referring to the second son of the Sovereign of Nyvos.

"Before we left for Nyvos, we were brought before the Eternal Flame to receive a blessing, a ceremony, to help ensure my children would be

ignarian. It was a condition of the marriage. It's a condition of all the princesses' marriages to divinial lords."

My father did a similar blessing for the empresses when they were pregnant, to bolster Ignar's blood in their wombs in hopes of ensuring a sun-strong child.

"But it wasn't just Cantor and me…a delegation from Nyvos was present to bear witness. With my father's top advisors, guards, and priests, the numbers weren't quite even, but they weren't far off." I raise my eyes, hoping he is following where this is leading.

"You think a group can get before the Flame through an engagement."

"Yes."

"Will the emperor agree to one fast enough?"

I nod. "I thought he only agreed to marry me to Cantor because I spent months seeding the idea with lords and advisors. But I saw a life where I lived through spring." The months stand out because I only lived them once. It feels like remembering my future. "I didn't need to convince him. He was eager. He is eager."

"And who exactly are you proposing to marry?"

I swallow. "You."

Alaris blinks.

"I'm powerless…or they all think I am. My value to the throne will only ever be in the heirs I produce. Especially if they are in a shadoward province. Especially—"

"—if they are with a sovereign," he finishes.

"Exactly."

It's no secret my father has been placing daughters in the highest houses he can for centuries. But every match has been with a third son, or a cousin. None of his grandchildren stand to rule significant lands.

This marriage would give my father the thing he's been chasing for three thousand years: a real change in the balance created after the Incarnial Wars. The true expansion of ignarian lands and power in the provinces.

Handed to him by his least favorite daughter.

Alaris is quiet for a long moment. "You'd have to return. To the capital. Close to your mother. You wouldn't be able to wait here behind the wards."

"I know." It doesn't matter how many guards I have at the palace, or locks. Death slipped in through cracks no guard could seal.

“That’s not all, Ly. You’d be in the chamber when we attack. It isn’t safe.”

“This is the least dangerous way for you to get to the Flame.” I give a weak shrug and smile. “If you die, I’ll never be safe anyway.”

“You would be if I succeeded,” he says softly. “If the emperor is dead, you won’t have to be afraid.”

I take a moment to piece together what he’s saying. “If the emperor is dead…and you’re dead? Don’t say that!”

“I’m prepared to die, Lysandra,” he says, his eyes calm. Serene, even. “Whatever it takes.”

I don’t like that look. Panic flares. I walk straight up to him, sticking my face right in his, our eyes close to level since he’s sitting on the bed.

“You’re not going to die, Alaris. You’re going to keep me safe when we go to the palace, and you’re going to marry me. And that’s final.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I thought you said this was just an engagement.”

“I didn’t mean…that was an accident.” I flame red. “That’s not the point! This is the best possible way to the Flame. The risk to me is well worth it.”

I’m staring into the eyes of the man who’s kept me safe, when no one else could. And yet, I’m also looking at a dead man, because the path he’s on leads to ruin.

His expression stays perfectly still.

Impossible man.

I whirl. “I’m going to tell Karns. He’ll agree with me—”

“Wait.” He grabs my hand, his head hanging down. He looks up, lips curling into a tentative smile. “Fine. Lysandra Ignaros, will you take the most notorious lord in the provinces as your husband?”

“I will.” My heart jumps, which I decide is relief and only relief, as my lips twitch up. “There is no time to waste. Can we call a meeting?”

Flora brings me food and helps me dress. She braids my hair in a tight coil at the back of my head and ties a scarf over it. The weight of it surprises me after all these weeks with it short.

Alaris walks me to the office. His hand hovers at the small of my back like he’s still afraid I might fall over. We open the door onto Dashol, Karns, and Nykiri, already gathered around the desk, ruffled hair and thick voices betraying the early hour. Dashol is mid-sentence, but the moment he sees me he stops.

Nykiri glares at me, arms crossed. No doubt she's guessed the scene I caused yesterday was due to the oraculi. I don't want to assume that scowl on her face is out of concern for me, but she might be worried blame will fall on her. I give her a small smile as encouragement. Without her, I wouldn't have seen what I needed to see.

She shifts her attention to the desk, then the window.

"Lyra." Dashol looks me over, scarf to boots. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I smile shyly. "And about that…I really should reintroduce myself. My name is Lysandra Ignaros. I am the seventh princess of the empire, fourteenth child of Emperor Belzas."

Dashol's mouth opens, closes, then opens again. He looks at Alaris, who gives a single nod.

Nykiri scowls harder at the window.

Karns takes off his glasses and gives them a wipe, then puts them back on, his face strained. "Princess Lysandra. We are honored to host you."

I can't imagine Karns is thrilled at the idea of hosting royalty by surprise. "The honor has been all mine. And just Ly is fine."

Alaris walks farther into the office and pulls out a chair for me, which I accept. He puts his hands on the back. "Ly has a plan."

I skip the parts about reliving past lives and deaths and tell them about the engagement ceremony before the flame. I explain my father's reaction on my birthday and how eager he is to marry me off.

I've watched how my father behaved in more lives now. I am confident he will agree to make me Alaris's bride.

Interest, then determination, grows on each of their faces. I can practically see their minds working.

"We need a cover story," Karns says, as soon as I finish. "One that explains where you've been all these months and how you met Alaris. Give me an hour."

While Karns goes off by himself, muttering with a notepad, the rest of us work on a list of names. I describe the delegation from Nyvos as best I can—a group of soldiers or servants won't be welcomed to witness the ceremony. Dashol writes names, crosses them out, then writes them again, trying to decide who to have in the chamber and who should wait outside it to hold our exit. Nykiri sits on the windowsill with her arms crossed, and Alaris stands behind me with one hand on the back of my chair, close enough that I can feel the cool air that surrounds him.

We work until Karns slaps his pen down, drawing our eyes to him. “I’m ready. Your attention, please.”

We settle in front of a map of the continent as he raps a pointer on Arastos. “It is well known that Alaris went to visit his cousin a month ago and took his time returning.”

Alaris’s ill-fated trip to test his shadowgates against the palace wards… the trip that cost three lives and left his power in tatters.

Karns draws the pointer toward a sketch of a castle and stops it in a forested area. “On his way back, he was delayed. He encountered an encampment of criminals and learned they were waiting to receive a kidnapped noble being transported into Arastos. He sent his soldiers to uncover more. After a few weeks of investigation, the soldiers came back with the location of the captive.” He smacks the pointer on the province between Arastos and Ignos. “Sophys.”

“Why Sophys?” Nykiri asks.

“Questions at the end,” Karns replies.

I press my lips together. I am glad I am not the one who opened my mouth first.

“Seven days ago, Alaris set out with a company in secret.” Karns’s pointer traces a line from Arastos to Sophys. “He found the rest of the criminal band, killed them all, and rescued the noble, only to discover the person they had taken was”—he swings his pointer to me—“Princess Lysandra, the emperor’s youngest daughter. Far from home, scared, but otherwise unharmed. Kidnapped from her room four months ago and moved from place to place ever since.”

I stare down the stick, entranced. This lie of a life where I was taken against my will is simpler and more believable than the truth.

“The rescue is happening right now.” Karns slings the pointer over his shoulder. “Alaris just found Lysandra. This evening, he will send a hawk to the emperor with a coded message explaining the situation. And in two days’ time, he will arrive at the capital with the princess. Not only to deliver her, but also to ask for her hand in marriage.”

“What if someone reports they saw Alaris here in Arastos when he was supposed to be on the road?” Dashol asks.

Karns is ready. “We’ll lock down the castle immediately. No uncontrolled messages in or out. Anyone the emperor sends will only leave

with the right answers. The issue is if he tries to verify the route, but that would take riders weeks.

"And for the next two days, we will make the story true…tomorrow morning, our group will use the shadowgates to travel to Sophys and ride all day to the house of Lady Vesper for an overnight stay. Then, the company will travel the roads to the capital, in the open, so the emperor's own watchers have time to spot them and report their movements."

It is not a perfect plan. Plenty of witnesses could contradict our story. But facts take time to find and untangle. The shadowgates give us an impossible advantage to move faster than information. All the emperor's eyes will show him is his daughter, unharmed, escorted by a sovereign.

Any other explanation would be stranger than the story we hand him.

We don't actually need to reach the altar—provincial law requires the wedding take place in Arastos for my children to be heirs here. We just have to get him to confirm the engagement and perform the blessing before riders can make it to Arastos and back.

"What about Drina?" I ask.

"Her last direct contact with the palace was when the people of Culdridge were here," Alaris says. "She uses birds with coded messages in between. The hawks catch and release them so we can check the messages first. We will detain her, in case she tries another method."

"On it." Dashol nods.

Dashol and Alaris leave to take care of Drina and prepare the other combatants. Nykiri slips through the mirror to select weapons that can be concealed and brought into the chamber for the ceremony, while Karns goes to lock down the castle.

He leaves me with his notepad to practice my story, then returns later to quiz me on it.

"How were you taken from the capital?"

"On the river." The story isn't too dissimilar from the real one, but instead of going seaward toward Delvos, it has me traveling mountainward toward Sophys in the captors' boat.

"Where were you kept?"

"I was moved between underground locations by carriage. I was rescued from a cellar."

"How long were you there?"

“I’m not sure; weeks in some places, days in others. They moved me a lot.”

“Did you see the faces of your captors?”

“Yes, I was mostly cared for by a woman with gray hair. And a man with a beard. There were others, but I didn’t see them.”

“What did you eat?”

I blink. “That wasn’t on the list. Do you think they’ll ask that?”

“Your father could ask anything. We need to be prepared.”

“My father isn’t likely to be the one with the questions.” The emperor is more the type for long silences and flames if he doesn’t like something presented to him. “Captain Orso is.”

“Then if Captain Orso asks you what you ate, what you wore, where you slept, are you going to be able to lie convincingly? Actually…” Karns eyes my scarf, perhaps remembering how many months I spent lying to him. He adjusts his glasses. “I think you’ll be fine. Back to the list.”

When he’s satisfied I know all the answers he’s provided, he offers to walk me back to Alaris’s bedroom.

It’s a sweet and unexpected offer from Karns. I don’t know whether he simply noticed I always have an escort or if Dashol or Alaris tipped him off that I would like one. Karns doesn’t strike me as a warrior, and I’m not sure what he would be able to do if the masked man showed up, but I accept the company over the silent hallway.

I’ve been around Karns daily these past weeks but feel surprisingly shy as we walk together down the corridor. We’ve never really socialized.

He seems unbothered, his hands behind his back, his expression as prim as ever.

“On second thought, my father will question part of the story,” I say at the door. “That Alaris killed everyone and there is no one left to punish. Don’t you think that’s a bit neat?”

Karns considers me, his eyes flat behind his glasses, calculating. “It is. Evidence would help.” Then one corner of his mouth moves, barely. “I’ll rustle up some body parts.”

For a second, he reminds me of Siro.

We part on that.

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I spend the rest of the afternoon with Flora, packing my bag. I leave the jewelry, my uniforms, and the dress I arrived in from Delvos. On a whim, I pack the bottle of wine Alaris gave me. If anyone spies it, I can claim Alaris brought it on the road with him to celebrate capturing the criminals.

Flora helps me bathe and wash my hair, using stronger soap to coax out the last of the charcoal. She lathers and scrubs and rinses until the water runs clear, and my hair is rose gold from root to tip. I face the mirror, and Princess Lysandra stares back, pampered, oiled, cheeks still flushed from the heat of the bath. She blinks when I do. Her chest lifts when I take a deep breath.

But it's lavender that fills my nose, not roses. And I still look different than I did when I left. Muscles show that weren't there before, and there is a leaner seriousness to my face. I hope that lends credibility to my cover story.

When we emerge from the bathing room, Alaris is there. I dip my head, resisting the urge to smooth my hair. He's seen it as it grew out, of course, but I was unconscious for most of that. Or bedraggled, waking from fever and dreams.

"Thank you, Flora," he says, as she exits. Alaris turns toward me, eyes locked on my hair. He crosses the space between us slowly. He lifts a finger and hooks a lock free, rubbing it with his thumb. "Beautiful color," he murmurs.

Heat blooms across my cheeks. I reach up, self-conscious. “I should do something to make it darker. My father hates how pale it is…”

“Don’t.” His voice is soft. He curls the strand around his finger. “It’s perfect. It looks just like…”

“The dawn. That’s what they tell me.”

His eyelids are heavy. “Funny. I was going to say it looks just like a sunset.”

My chest squeezes. Not dawn. Sunset. The end of the day and the beginning of the night.

I swallow hard. My gaze drops to his mouth, then the ground. “Did… did you send the hawk?”

He nods. “The emperor knows we are coming. The countdown has begun. Are you ready?”

“As ready as I can be.” Marriage has always preceded my death. As soon as Alaris asks for my hand, my mother will become all the more desperate. But it’s worth it. The plan is sound, right up until the moment we are shut in the chamber. “You still haven’t told me how you’ll extinguish the Flame.”

“I can do it.”

A non-answer. “I’m going to be in the chamber with you. I’d rather not be surprised.”

“Alright then. I’ll show you. I need that.”

He points directly at my chest. I glance down, wide-eyed, unsure what he means, until I follow his finger to the voidstone dangling around my neck. I lift the chain over my head and hand it to him.

He walks to the bed, slides one knee through the sheets, and reaches across the huge wooden headboard. He puts the point of the voidstone against one of the carved stars…the very star I noticed in my search that looks like it is made up of inlaid pieces. They fold around the facets of the voidstone as he presses in, and one of the carved clouds *thunks* open.

He reaches inside and retrieves something, then walks back, dangling the voidstone toward me. “Here.”

I didn’t know I had the key to a secret compartment around my neck all this time. I snatch it back and loop it over my head. “What if I had lost that?” I ask, indignant. “Or gotten angry with you and thrown it in the river?”

“After you did so many memorable things to get it?” His eyes travel over my body as he chuckles. “Unlikely.”

My cheeks flame.

He walks to the sitting area. “And you did throw it in the river. With yourself attached. Please don’t repeat that.”

“I’ll throw whoever I like in the river,” I mutter, stalking after him.

He sits on the couch with plenty of space for me and places the bundle on the central table. “Hands to yourself, troublesome Ly,” he says, as he unwraps it.

“I’ll put my hands wherever I like too,” I say as I sit.

“So I’ve experienced.”

I cough, eager to change the subject.

He unfolds the last edge of the white cloth, revealing a black blade. It’s as long as my forearm, with a wicked curved tip and a simple T-shaped handle. It’s one solid piece with no seam between the blade and the grip. The black material absorbs all the light around it. It might be the deepest, truest black I’ve ever seen.

And it looks familiar…

“I’ll use this to destroy the Flame,” he says simply. “It was named ‘eternal,’ but even the strongest flame in the world can’t withstand the truly eternal nothing that exists in the void. This blade has its power.”

The blade looks plenty dangerous, and I’m glad to have a concrete answer over vague assurances, but another question rises up: “Then can’t somebody else wield it?”

Alaris isn’t the type to send someone in his place, but his words from yesterday still haunt me. *I’m prepared to die, Lysandra*. Even remembering the calm way he said it makes my heart race.

“I am the only one who can wield it. And I’m the only one who can kill your father.”

“Why?”

“I wonder if you already suspect why,” he says softly. “Even if you think it’s impossible.”

Alaris is the most powerful divinial I’ve ever met. Far more powerful than a fifth-generation lord should be. But the arastorian line is well documented, with every birth and death on file, so I’ve dismissed my own questions about the potency of his blood.

But now it seems like he's giving me permission to throw away what I think I know…

Then I remember where I've seen this blade before.

I stand and cross to the bookshelf, pulling down the painted book of the gods. I return to the couch and flip to the end, to the picture of Arastor dragging a black blade across the sky. It's unmistakable. The blade in front of me on the table has the exact same shape.

But that isn't what I'm struck by. "Why do these pictures look so much like you?"

"That is an old book." He examines my face carefully. "When humans first saw incarnials, they thought we were the gods. They started modeling their paintings and statues after us, until they learned we were something new."

Us. We.

He holds for a heartbeat longer, then lifts his hand to his earring and twists.

The change is immediate. His hair spills down to his waist**.** His eyes lose their void-dark depth and fill with soft, glowing silver. Ethereal. Ancient. His features are the same, but they are more precise now. The cheekbones cut closer. The jawline sharper.

And the power. It rolls off him, making it harder to take a breath. Every divine presence I have ever felt, my father's included, was a candle held up to this. This is the source, undiluted. Everything left of Arastor's power, the power that formed the night and void, incarnate in the world. *Incarnial*.

The shadowgates. The blasts of starfire he threw at the masked man. The raw, terrifying power flowing out of him at Noctus. The wings.

They unfurl now, appearing at his back, misting black feathers that fade and reform and fade again as he stretches them and then lets them settle. I should have known the first time I saw him in that field; no divinial looks like this.

Alaris isn't even partly mortal. He was made, not born. And he's ancient, older than my father, older than the empire.

"But the incarnials were all killed in the wars," I say, still struggling to understand how this could be true.

"Those were chaotic times," he says. His voice is the same melodic low tone, but it reverberates differently, as if he is speaking in a much bigger space. "The death of a descendant was reported as my own."

“Oh!” I hadn’t yet realized this means Alaris was the start of the arastorian line. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was millennia ago.”

“Still, you had a family member who…”

“It’s not like you’re imagining.” He shakes his head. “I had no interest in humans or other incarnials, though both approached me to join their side of the wars. When it was clear I couldn’t be won over, mortal women were sent to me until I got curious enough to participate. One of them had a child who posed as me and fought for the human kings. I didn’t find out until centuries later.”

“They never told you?”

“I kept myself apart from humans. Sometimes I didn’t set foot on the ground for centuries, existing in darkness and between stars. But even if they had, I don’t know if it would have mattered to me. I didn’t experience that type of attachment back then. I had no feelings about things like birth and death.” He pauses. “But I suppose finding out must have impacted me, somehow. I never lay with a woman again. Which was no strain. I had little interest.”

I swallow, trying to picture a cold, detached Alaris, soaring above it all, and find it easy. The painting in the book shows Arastor the same way.

I’m losing track of how many times I’ve had this feeling: like I’m seeing Alaris for the first time. I already overwrote the flippant lord with the rebel leader, striving to fix what’s wrong with the world. But now it’s getting layered over again. I know the word for that look in his eyes now: ancient. It is the expression of a being that has spent millennia alone in the dark, watching the world from a height no other living thing could reach.

I stare into his bright eyes, and I understand why people thought the incarnials were gods. He looks so inhuman. Then he blinks, and he is just Alaris again. *Just*. As if that word could ever apply to him.

It scares me a little, the idea of how cold he was. But I have watched him crouch at the bedsides of the dying, watched him set up tents in the mud, watched him press lavender to the smallest of my wounds. Whatever he was before, he chose to come down.

“Then why are you here? Something must have changed.”

He nods. “From my unique vantage point, I saw the cost of the wither. It…sparked something in me. It’s one thing to fly above the world in darkness, and it’s another to let it all go dark. I couldn’t stay apart anymore.

I approached the ruling family of Arastos. I told the lord and his wife what I was and what I intended to do. They agreed to let me pose as their son and take the house. My cousin is their real son, the true heir. Vesper helped me disguise my appearance with this earring."

When I saw him in the field and on Noctus, I assumed it was a temporary transformation, but this is his true form. I flip through the book to the page that's nagged at me since I saw it: Cyralia and Arastor on a hill.

"Then is this what she really looked like?" I ask. "Cyralia's incarnial?"

"I never had an occasion to meet Cyralia's incarnial, back then. I stayed away from most of them." He taps the page. "This is a portrayal of Arastor's life, not mine. I'm not sure where the artist got this influence."

That calms me more than it should. Whatever pull I feel toward him, it is mine alone, not an echo of a relationship he had with my ancestor.

But I shouldn't even be asking him about such trivial worries. I close the book slowly. He has lived for thousands and thousands of years, and I have been taking up his time with…what? Where I sleep? Whether I can walk down a hallway? Whether my jaw aches?

I suck in a shuddering breath. "I've been bothering you with…so many things."

His starlight eyes land on me. "You think your concerns are small compared to what I've seen."

"Yes," I admit.

"No, Lysandra." The sound of my full name in that reverberating voice pins me to the cushion. "I've lived a long time, but I was outside the world. That made everything easy, but meaningless. I don't want to watch from a distance anymore. I want to be in it. The way you see the world—you make me want to be in it."

I open my mouth and close it again. Then I clutch the book to my chest.

"I hope you are satisfied now, my Ly, that all I need is a way in."

I raise my gaze to his, just in time to see him twist his earring. The shift is immediate. His wings vanish. The glow dims. The divine being in front of me becomes the man I know again.

He is no less beautiful, and even though no part of him is glowing, I wonder how I ever thought him even partly mortal.

"I'm satisfied," I say, mouth dry. "That's quite a transformation."

"I wanted to check on you." He stands. "But I have more to take care of tonight. I'll see you tomorrow. Sleep now, my Ly."

He takes the blade from the table, nods, and disappears, the shadowgate crackling open and closed in a breath.

I'm not sure how to process all of this, or any of it. He came down for the wither, for the people dying at the edges. I know that.

But when he said he wants to be in the world, he was looking right at me.

You make me want to be in it.

52

I crowd into the office with thirty men and women holding travel bags and riding gear. They all look like they have been on the road for days. Dirt covers collars and cuffs, rubbed across cheekbones and boots. Dashol has a scrape on his jaw that wasn't there yesterday, and there are a few black eyes. Only Karns looks as neat and put together as ever, his job to stay here and make sure any attempts to validate Alaris's whereabouts get the right answer.

Flora helped me rub a layer of dirt all over, turning my freshly un-charcoaled hair dingy before we wrapped it in a scarf. I'm dressed like a woman rescued and clothed in whatever her saviors had on hand: a man's tunic that hangs past my hips, trousers cinched with a cord at the waist, and boots two sizes too large that rub at my heels with every step.

Karns gives us a final briefing, reminding us of our cover story. Everyone has to tell the same tale about the last few weeks. Our company is larger than what will be allowed into the chamber, with the hope that at least ten of the men with noble blood and higher positions in Arastos will be witnesses, while the other twenty hold our exit.

I recognize some of the grim faces from around the castle, but most I have never seen before. One man in the line catches my eye. He is fit, with a hawkish look about him. His riding outfit makes it clear he's noble.

"My cousin, Orent," Alaris says, sidling up to me and following my eyes. "I fetched him from his castle this morning."

His cousin. The true heir of Arastos, the one whose house and title Alaris borrowed. I wonder how he feels about an incarnial flying down and taking his place. He looks nothing but focused. Determined.

I find it hard to meet Alaris's eyes. I glance up at his earring, that glinting point at his jaw hiding so much.

"Here," Alaris says, passing me something. "Tie it under your tunic."

He strolls back to the front of the room. My hand drifts to where the voidstone usually hangs, missing its familiar weight.

I look down into my hand and see the moonstone dagger in its sheath. I never made it back to the aviary to retrieve it. My chest warms. I'm glad to have this as a memento…and a weapon. I tie it to my belt loop.

Alaris steps in front of the gathered crew, and all eyes go to him. "Our only goal for the next two days is the safe delivery of the recovered captive into royal hands. From the moment we step outside this office, we will not speak of our true purpose, but we all know what is at stake. We will succeed, because if we fail, we die, and the world dies with us."

The air in front of the office door splits, bright at the edges, dark void at the center. My stomach still drops at the sight of it.

"You'll go after me," Dashol says, guiding me to the end of the assembling line. "We've all had a lot more time to drill scenarios, so if you get lost, just look to Alaris or me."

I nod and grip the handle of my bag. We shuffle forward, as person after person steps toward the dark opening and disappears.

We reach the front. Dashol claps Karns on the shoulder, which only earns a scowl, nods to Alaris, and steps through.

Karns rights himself and straightens his vest and glasses. "I look forward to your return, Lysandra."

From Karns, the words are practically sappy. Plus, the implication that I will return here makes me want to hug him.

I don't think he would appreciate that, so I just smile. "Thank you, Karns. I look forward to it too. Tell Siro the same for me."

I haven't been back to the greenhouse since the day before Noctus, but I'm sure the crystalline lobell buds are poking through their twisted leaves, ready to harvest. Siro can take it from here.

Then I meet Alaris's eyes. His face is stone, his dark gaze drinking me in, like we have all the time in the world. Is he looking for fear? Or expecting me to change my mind?

I lift my chin. He doesn't need to worry about me right now. I ignore my pounding heart and step through the gate.

The void is less frightening now that I've been through it a few times. I hold my breath through the endless dark and sucking feeling, trusting that I'll make it to the other side. Then stone and pine needles crunch under my boots, and I stagger forward into gray morning woods.

The forest wavers and tilts, and I stumble. Travel through the shadowgate appears to be more difficult when you go farther, and it doesn't look like I'm the only one impacted. Some members of the group are steadier than others. Nykiri looks fine, while Dashol puts a hand on a tree trunk, breathing through his nose.

I turn back, expecting Alaris, but see nothing but trees.

Then, to my right, the air bursts open, and he emerges astride his midnight steed. Hawks fly out behind him, screeching and dispersing into the woods. Even though his black cloak and face are dirtied, he doesn't look like one of us. With his dark hair flying, his ringed fingers on the reins, and the jewel glinting at his ear, he looks like a sovereign. Or a god. Or the immortal he is, just smeared with a bit of dust. Seeing the actual heir next to him makes it even clearer that he was never just an ordinary divinial lord.

"With me." He brings the horse alongside me and reaches down. His hand closes around my waist and pulls me off the ground, setting me in front of him. I allow myself to keep contact with his chest, grateful for the cradle of his arms as I continue to find my center.

We ride at the front of the company, leading them through the woods, until we reach a woman dressed in plain clothes minding a herd of horses. She gives Alaris a nod, and the group moves as one to saddle and mount.

"Remember," Alaris says, close to my ear. "Vesper's husband is loyal to the emperor, as most are in Sophys. From here on out, eyes could be on us."

We ride hard all day through unfamiliar terrain. The trees are tall pines, with paler bark and needles than in Arastos, spaced far enough apart to show the sky. The air is warm, as if we changed seasons in addition to provinces. For hours, the only sound is pounding hooves. We rest the horses once, then continue.

The trees open to scrubland. By the time we reach a road, the sun starts to set. We ride the last stretch in graying light.

A grand estate comes into view, the grounds surrounded by a low wall. It's all beige, with the exception of a huge brass eye mounted above the

doors.

We're entering a house of the goddess of truth, absolutely drenched in lies.

The front gate opens for us, and we ride to the entrance. Stable hands with lanterns emerge and take the horses' reins. I glance over the company and see the effect we've created—any scouts that saw this bedraggled group riding up would believe we've been traveling for weeks.

A woman with luscious honey curls appears between the lanterns in the doorway.

The woman from Somnus. Vesper.

Her bright purple eyes and dimple are just as I remember them, giving her a permanent look of mischief. Her gaze lands on me briefly but moves on without any sign of recognition.

A man joins her. He is immaculately dressed in pale linen, with a posture so straight he and Karns could compare notes, and a sour expression.

Alaris dismounts and lifts me down after, holding my waist only long enough to set me on my feet. He sweeps toward the doorway, arms wide.

"Lord Folten," he croons. "Thank you so much for receiving us on short notice. Wonderful to see both you and your beautiful wife."

Vesper preens, stepping forward with her hand outstretched. Alaris accepts it and kisses it for longer than propriety requires. Vesper giggles, while Folten's nose wrinkles.

"My house is open to you, Sovereign," Folten says, in a stern tone that conveys the opposite. "We get too few visitors. Fewer still in such a state."

"Ah, I apologize, there were some unforeseen circumstances that have us arriving like beggars at your door."

Folten sniffs, his eyes moving over the ragged company and settling on me.

"Allow me to introduce the lovely Lady Maren," Alaris says without missing a beat.

Since the palace chose to keep my disappearance secret, we all agreed that I should travel under a cover name and hide my hair. I curtsy, keeping my eyes low.

"She's had a hard few weeks, so we'd appreciate your hospitality, and your discretion." He glances over at the stable hands pointedly.

“Of course. Come in,” Folten says, in a flat tone that suggests he wishes we wouldn’t.

Vesper steps forward. “You must be worn through. I’ll show you to your rooms.”

She leads us through an empty entry, the smooth beige stone only broken up by lanterns, and guides us up a wide stone staircase.

“Lord Alaris,” she says, “since it’s so late, I’ve arranged for food to be brought straight to each of the rooms. Will that do?”

“Your consideration is only matched by your beauty,” he says.

Vesper bats her lashes.

His saccharine comments used to turn my stomach, but now I just want to tell him to lay off so Lord Folten doesn’t kick us out.

I already knew his charm was a performance, a rebel lord hiding his intentions behind faked flirtation and indulgence. But now I have to remeasure the distance between the truth and the lie. Alaris isn’t really even a lord. He said he was so unconcerned with worldly things, he sometimes didn’t return to the ground for *centuries*.

How can I relate to something so ancient? Why would he waste even a moment on me? Nerves dance in my stomach.

I shake my head. I have to trust what I’ve seen behind closed doors. He didn’t fill his room with beautiful things, and bring me bundles of food from foreign markets, for his reputation.

He’s still Alaris.

Vesper leads us down a corridor of pale stone archways, her voice carrying as she tells staff that her guests require privacy and are not to be disturbed after their meals are delivered.

This house is bare, with no tapestries or carvings or paintings or rugs. I spot bookshelves through a doorway, running floor to ceiling, but even those have been stripped of their color, their spines various shades of beige.

Vesper looked more at home against the backdrop of the Somnus decorations. Even though she’s not dressed garishly, with a violet dress and a few bracelets glinting on her wrist, she looks completely out of place here.

She opens door after door, and our people file in. As the group dwindles down, I glance at Alaris but receive no cue that one of the rooms is for me.

When it’s just the two of us left, Vesper turns and clasps her hands. “Now for our sovereign and his lovely lady guest, I’m afraid we’re out of rooms in this wing. Come with me.”

She guides us up a narrower staircase. As we get to the corridor on the next floor, the difference is immediate: the plush rug, curling gold sconces, and rich tapestries are a sharp contrast to the bare stone of the rest of the house.

"This is where my personal guests stay when they visit," she says. "I hope you won't mind the furnishings, I'm the one who decorated it." She rolls her eyes with a slight smile. "My husband always feels the need to name that."

She takes us down the short corridor—there are only four doors, two on one side, and two on the other.

"You're the only guests up here, so you'll have complete privacy. For our Lady Maren…" She opens the first door for me.

The room is sumptuous, with candles and lanterns casting a glow on the rose-colored bedspread and plum walls.

"And Lord Alaris, I'll take you to yours. I'll be back in just a moment, Lady Maren, to deliver your meal."

I see her honey head tip up just before the door shuts, giving me one final image of the pair of them in profile. They're both so beautiful. I stare at the closed door as jealousy pangs through me. I want to snatch open the door and see if he really goes straight to his room. Or if she joins him…

It's silly, really. From everything he's told me, he and Vesper are not only allies but old friends. But she's so beautiful and free. And imagining going to bed without another word between us feels wrong, when I'm so used to…

Sleeping in his room. Seeing him first thing in the morning. Having him check in on me at night if anything significant happened.

Ugh.

I walk straight to the bed and throw myself on it, remembering too late how dirty my clothes are. My lower half aches from the horse. I tried, the whole ride, not to pay attention to how his strong chest felt behind me, how good it felt to be in his arms…

Ugh, ugh.

I slam a pink pillow on top of my face, trying to muffle these unhelpful thoughts. Or myself.

We are on a deadly mission. I can handle not saying goodnight.

I think of him handing me the moonstone dagger and running his fingers through my hair.

Get. A. Grip, Lysandra, I think to myself. *Or I will personally ensure this is your last life.*

I'm saved from myself by a knock on the door. I open it to honey blonde and a dimpled smile.

"Oh, thank you." I widen the door for Vesper as she swoops in with a dinner tray. "You really didn't have to bring it yourself."

"I wanted to," she says. "After all, I'd like to keep up the tradition of you and me having private chats."

I'm glad she can't see my expression as she walks the tray over to the table. She sets it down and removes the cover, revealing steaming slices of meat, bread, and soup.

She turns to me, hands behind her back. "I won't keep you, because the hour is already late. But there are a few things I simply must tell you, to be a good hostess."

"Alright…" Something about her energy seems overly exuberant, her stained lips curving with pure delight.

"No one else will come up here tonight. These rooms are warded against sound, so no one can hear anything happening inside." She points behind me. "There is a door at the back of that wardrobe that connects to the adjoining room where your travel companion is staying. And the last piece of information, in case you didn't know it yet, is that he actually doesn't need to sleep."

My eyes fly wide and my face instantly catches fire at how these facts fit together. "Uhh…it's not like that between us…"

"I know, I could tell." She shrugs. "Some people just need extra help. I can tell that you, like him, are one of those people. To your credit, I thought you were the more reasonable target."

I open my mouth, but she isn't finished.

"Prophecy isn't my specialty." Her purple eyes glint as she steps closer. "But I saw something between the two of you on Somnus. That's why I gave you the mask and the push you needed." She reaches out and pats my shoulder gently. "Consider this push number two. What you do with it is up to you."

She walks past me to the door and waggles her fingers over her shoulder. "I look forward to getting to know you better when this is all over, Lysandra."

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The door shuts. I want to thank her and I want to deny everything and I want to ask what exactly she thinks she saw between us. But it's too late to get a word in. I drift over to the food in a haze and sit down but don't touch it.

Two minutes alone in a room with Vesper, and I've been yanked into a whirlwind, just like on Somnus.

When we first met, even though she helped me, I thought of her as frivolous. A sordid romp in a powder room behind her husband's back painted a certain picture. Now that I see her inviting rebels into her home, enabling a plot she has supported with powerful magic and prophecies, I'm in awe.

She's a force, though I'm not sure if she's a force pushing me toward a good destination or a cliff.

Hunger wins out over shock after the day's ride, so I eat a little of everything. As soon as the fork and knife go down, I'm left in the silence.

These walls aren't warded against entry.

I stand and pace. I'm sure the masked man stayed in Arastos after he attacked me, and even if he left, there is no way he could have traveled as fast as we did to get here. But my father knows we are staying here for the night, which means my mother might know as well. She could send someone else.

But it's always the masked man. No matter where I've gone, it's always him. That makes me think she doesn't have other options to call on. She

may be well connected and endlessly wealthy, but she's also closely watched. It would be risky to try to hire a new assassin on short notice.

So I'm fine. I'm probably fine. She'll send the masked man, and he needs time to catch up.

The next step is bathing, but that sounds too vulnerable. I'll sleep in my dirt and shower tomorrow. I always feel safer in daylight.

I glance at the wardrobe. Maybe I'll crack the secret door between us, just to make sure Alaris can hear me if I scream.

I open the wardrobe and push aside the clothes. Sure enough, the back panel has a seam.

I raise my fist, then hesitate. He has enough to worry about. He really shouldn't have to add my fears to the list the night before we face the emperor.

I lower my hand just as the wardrobe door swings open from the other side. Cool air spills through, carrying the green, mineral scent I've come to know so well.

Alaris peers at me, his dark curls hanging in his eyes. "Ah, there you are. I was finishing up some things with Dashol. Did you eat?"

I nod, unable to speak for a moment.

"I assumed we would resume our usual arrangement, since these walls aren't warded against anything but sound." He steps aside. "Come sleep in here, if you'd like."

I swallow hard, relief pounding in time with my heartbeat. "Yes, thank you."

This offer is saving me from a night spent wide awake, staring at the canopy.

I climb through the wardrobe. The color scheme of this room is a deep cobalt, with blacks and charcoals, plus a few silver and gold touches. The bed stands there like a taunt, and the echo of Vesper's words makes me flush.

But Alaris is collected as ever. He gestures at the clothes hanging behind me. "These are all options Vesper provided for you to wear to sleep, and tomorrow. You can shower first."

I nod and grab the first soft dress I can reach, then head toward the bathing room. I scrub myself with the fragrant soaps, all too aware Alaris is on the other side of the door. Not having to worry about the masked man is a gift, but my pulse is picking up for a whole other reason.

I finish as quickly as I can, wring out my hair, and don the blush dress. The surprisingly low-cut dress, with more lace than fabric along the neckline. *Vesper*.

I keep my hair over my chest as I re-emerge.

"You take the bed," he says. "Feel free to go to sleep if you're tired. I'll shower."

I nod, my words still getting caught in my throat as he moves past me to the bathing room.

I sit tentatively on the sheets, then lie back on them, their silky feel delightful on clean skin. I turn my face to them.

I wish they smelled like him.

I flip over, internally screaming. Why can't I get a grip? I've been dealing with this attraction, these feelings, for weeks. Months. But I've never found myself so overwhelmed. I jump off the bed and stalk back and forth. I'm not going to survive this night with him.

What do curtains really change? Why does being in this room with him tonight feel so different?

Is it just because I'm nervous, now that I know what he is? Or maybe it's because, deep down, I knew there was one more secret between us. And now he and I are standing before one another as we really are. That final puzzle piece, his powers, his ancient calm and stillness, explained.

Or maybe it's all Vesper's fault, for putting these thoughts in my head.

What did Alaris first tell me about her on Somnus, back when they were both strangers to me? That Vesper tends to get her way?

I'm quite sure Vesper didn't choose this marriage to the sour Lord Folten for herself…she's in his house and his province, constrained by his loyalties. But she's making the best of it, in big ways and small. She's risking her life to stop the wither. She unabashedly decorated the wing she was allowed to. And when she needs a disguise to enjoy herself, she enchants one.

It makes me wonder what I could have done differently at the palace, even with all the scrutiny I was under, to make my life feel more like mine.

It makes me wonder what I can do right now to live the life I want.

The water is still running, and any second Alaris is going to come back out. There are no more lies between us. Nothing for me to steal, no excuse or distraction required. Just a squeezing in my chest and this desperate desire to be near him.

He can say no. But the last thing I'm going to do, for all the versions of me that lived and died before, is wait for a better opportunity that will likely never come.

An idea strikes me. I slip into my room to get my travel bag.

I step back through the wardrobe at the exact moment he emerges from the bathing room, toweling his dark waves.

"What do you have there, evil-minded Ly?"

I smile shyly as I hold up the bottle with the purple, green, and gold label. "A wine meant for celebrations."

His mouth curves in response. "I don't think that was on Karns's approved packing list."

"I know a certain lecherous lord I could blame this on if I was caught with it." My heart is pounding, but every second that passes I feel more and more sure. "Leave it to the notorious lord of night to bring a bottle of wine on a rescue mission."

"Expensive wine too." He takes it and tosses the towel. "What are we celebrating?"

I clear my throat. "Our last night alive, probably. Do we have two cups for a toast?"

"Yes."

"Then let's have one."

I'm not calm, but I'm resolved. I watch the muscles in his forearm work as he uncorks the wine, and the grip of his elegant ringed fingers as he tips the red liquid into clear glass.

I accept mine and perch on the edge of the bed.

He leans against the desk. "What would you like to toast to?"

"To our upcoming wedding," I say, raising my cup.

He mimics the motion. I take a sip. I lick my lips. The wine really is delicious, with an acidic bite and a little spice on top of rich red berries. When I look up, his eyes are fixed on me.

Does he like seeing me enjoy the wine? Did he bring me foods, and encourage me to reveal my desires, because desiring things is new to him?

I take another small sip. "It's good," I say.

His eyes gleam. Obsidian.

I've been trying, and failing, to hide how my body has been on fire for him since we met. And despite his account of how indifferent to humanity he used to be, I think he wants me too.

“I know this engagement won’t lead to a wedding…”

It’s still hard to get the words out. He watches me, waiting. With that endless patience of his, he could wait me out forever.

“Even though none of it is real…I want to celebrate tonight like it’s our wedding night.”

His entire frame stills. The shift is small, but I think he’s stopped breathing.

“Sweet Ly,” he says, his voice pitched low. “You can’t possibly mean what I think you mean.”

“Does a wedding night mean something different in Arastos?” I twist the cup in my hands. “You understand I’m not asking for the wedding part.”

“And you can understand why I’m skeptical.” He puts down his wine, eyes glinting dangerously. “I think the only honest request you’ve made, without some trick or other motive, might have been that fur.”

“Aren’t you the one always telling me to ask for what I want? I want this.”

“You’ve lied to me with those words before, Ly.”

“I’m not lying. You know all my secrets now.”

He shakes his head.

I swallow. “If you don’t want to…”

“Don’t you dare say a word to undermine my restraint.” His jaw pops, even as he smiles. “Every night, every second near you, I’m in a fight to the death with better judgment.”

My pulse stutters. “What better judgment?”

“You need me to protect you.” He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “If you regret this, if it complicates things, are you going to want to go back behind the wards with me?”

“I won’t regret it.”

“I’ll still save you, no matter what.” His dark eyes bore into mine. “But I don’t want to cause you any unnecessary pain.”

I stand and lift my chin. “Here is my judgment: I’ve lived plenty of times, but never long enough to have something like this.” It’s a vulnerable admission, but I’m past caring. “I want a new memory. Something that is just for me, just because I wanted it. And I do. Want you.”

For a moment, he says nothing. He just looks at me. Then he stands, the movement precise, controlled.

And crosses to the bed.

The air shifts.

His pulsing presence floods the room. It's electric. I feel every nerve, aware of every inch of space between us. A cool bramble scent washes over me. I don't move, or even breathe, as he comes closer. His strength and beauty are overwhelming.

"And what about me?" he murmurs. He takes the wine out of my hand and sets it on the bedside table. He hooks a finger under my chin, lifting my gaze to his. "When you've had your fun, and this is just another memory for you?"

"There don't need to be any promises between us. We'll deal with after, after."

"Oh, Ly. There is no after for me." He runs his fingers through my hair, resting his hand on the back of my neck. "It turns out I'm terrible at saying no to you, and now you're going to have to suffer the consequences."

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Alaris's mouth covers mine. One hand cradles the back of my neck and the other circles my waist, pulling me tight against him. The kiss devours me, his lips and tongue stealing all thoughts, sucking and pulling and dancing. My eyelids squeeze tight as I arch into him. He supports me as he deepens the kiss. He's exploring my mouth with such relentless devastation, my legs alone can't keep me steady.

When we break apart, I'm breathless.

I feel his hardness against my stomach and press into it, heat pulsing through me. He inhales sharply, and his hands close on the back of my legs, lifting me high on his chest. My arms fold around his shoulders as I bend down to keep kissing him, his mouth like a spell, irresistible to mine.

He puts one knee on the bed, then the other, still kissing me as he carries me back across the sheets.

I'm not thinking as my tongue tangles with his, my fingers deep in his hair, every breath full of cloves. There's no plan, no strategy, no distraction. This is a piece of joy, fragile, but so real I can barely breathe. It's not about survival. And somehow it is.

This is the memory I asked for. For the first night in all my lives, I'm not just going to survive. I'm going to *live*.

He slides me down his front, guides me to the mattress, and kneels between my thighs. The heat in his gaze is so intense, I almost sit up to kiss him again. My swollen lips part, my chest rising and falling with quick breaths.

His eyes flash, drinking in my disheveled state.

His hands skim over my soft dress, the fabric only enhancing the touch of his fingers on my collarbone, my chest, my nipples, my stomach. And he knows exactly what he's doing when he ghosts back up over the peaks, making me jerk.

I'm not wearing anything under this dress, and the air is cool against the wetness gathering between my thighs.

He pulls back and stares down at me, looking every inch the incarnial he is. His silk shirt does nothing to hide his powerful torso, tension in every line of his frame.

"Tell me again what you want, my Ly," he says, sliding his hands over my hips. "Do you really want this?"

"I do," I breathe, the thrum between my legs demanding more touch.

"How am I to know you're not lying?" His voice is a low rumble, his fingers flexing. "You'll have to be clearer than that."

"I want you to touch me."

"I am touching you."

Technically true, and maddening.

"Not like that."

"Then like what?"

That smirk. I know he knows what to do better than I do, and this is testing my ability to name what I need. Action is easier. I grab his hand and place it on my breast. He strokes his thumb across the peak, and I gasp.

"Hmm, you're lucky I'm being this generous when you didn't say it." He circles my nipple through the fabric, lazy, like he has all the time in the world. My hips shift.

Two more circles, and I make a sound. I can't take it.

"More," I manage.

"More what?"

"Your mouth. I want your mouth."

"Good," he murmurs. "Then you'll have it."

He lowers his head and takes my nipple in his mouth, and the heat of his tongue through the cloth makes me grip his hair. He drags his teeth over it and I cry out.

"Like that?" he asks, breath warm against my skin.

"Yes. Like…" I break off because his hand has slid to my other breast and the dual touch is making it impossible to form sentences.

Then he replaces his tongue with his other thumb and captures my mouth in another kiss. My eyes press shut, my hips bucking as he keeps dragging his thumbs up and down.

It's overwhelming, and it's setting me on fire, the throb between my legs insistent.

He hooks one finger into my neckline and pulls. The fabric tears and cool air hits my skin.

"This isn't mine!" A giggle escapes as I look at the torn lace, exposing my chest.

He looks down at me with a satisfaction that makes my cheeks burn. "Oh, Ly, that's where you're wrong. Everything is yours."

His mouth closes over my bare nipple and I lose the objection. His tongue is warm and deliberate, and each stroke sends a pulse of heat lower. He collects both wrists in one hand, pinning them over my head, and curves the other around my thigh, gripping it high enough that he tugs at the sensitive skin near my entrance.

He licks until I'm writhing and whimpering.

I ache for him, but his hand doesn't move any closer to where I want it. I throw my head back and whine, pulling on his grip on my wrists.

"Ugh! You are…just…just so…"

"Just what?" he asks.

"Evil!" Because he knows exactly what my body wants, and he isn't giving it to me.

He chuckles. "Evil or not, all I've gotten out of you is that you want my mouth. I suppose I'll have to work with that."

He releases my wrists and dips lower, kissing between my breasts, my ribs, my belly button. He nips my hip, then licks the spot, and continues the trail of kisses, nudging my thighs open.

His eyes find mine as he lifts my hem. He's so beautiful, it's unreal, and it distracts me from my own bareness. I can hardly comprehend that Alaris is between my legs.

"Don't worry," he murmurs. "We'll keep working on your vocabulary. Just maybe not right now."

Before I can form a thought, he licks me. Straight up the middle. He does it again and I'm gasping. He does it one more time and I'm liquid. All my desire centers on his tongue passing over my clit.

He finds a rhythm. Repeated. Constant. Until I'm not sure what I'm babbling, but it's something and his name.

Then he sucks.

My head comes off the bed, the sound I make uncontrolled, my thighs tensing.

He holds my hips steady and laves his tongue against me, giving me stronger pressure as he inserts a finger into me. Then he works in another. He curves them on some magic spot, and I clench, crying out. He licks as his fingers stroke, and I lose track of one pulse of sensation riding into the next.

His fingers thrust and his tongue flicks until I seize so hard my thighs shake, intense pleasure flooding me.

I fall back, gasping, my breath choppy.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, wearing a look of desire and satisfaction.

"I didn't…I didn't know it could happen that fast," I say, voice breathy.

"Hmm." His eyes burn into me. "Should I have taken my time with you? Let you moan and beg and get close, again and again? You named the method, not the metronome. I'd be happy to do it differently…" He dips his head, tongue out.

"No!" I block his face with my hands. If he licks me again, I don't think I'll ever get my wits back. And if he does what he's threatening, I really will lose my mind.

The billionaire had one rule: no falling in love.

We all know how that goes. Browse Lokepub for your next romance.

He sits up, kneeling, my rubbery thighs draped over his. "Then, what do you want now, Ly? Sleep? A good rest before we go? Because I'll make sure you get it, if that's what you desire. You only have to tell me."

That rouses me. He's not leaving me like this again. I don't want cloth between my skin and his. I scramble up on my elbows.

“I want all of you.” I’m too desperate to be embarrassed. I tug my dress up. “Right now.”

“As I said, Ly.” Energy pulses around him, all signs of teasing gone. “Everything is yours.”

He pulls the shirt over his head in a single motion and tosses it. I stare at the breathtaking lines of him, his shoulders, arms, and torso carved from stone. He unfastens his pants, freeing something I’ve only seen on statues and in paintings. It’s strange, but beautiful. And in comparison with those artworks, or his fingers, huge.

He slides the long shaft over the sensitive parts he just worked, and I gasp. It feels amazing. Amazing. I push my hips toward him. I want it inside me.

He grips my thighs. His eyes are serious now, intensity glinting from their dark depths. “Say it again.”

“I want it. Please.”

He puts the tip against me, just a bit of pressure. “Again.”

I spread my legs. “I want it. I want…”

He slides over the outside of me instead, and my words disappear.

I refocus on him as he positions himself back at my entrance, his jaw set. His arms lock, his whole frame held still with a control that makes my breath catch.

“Tell me.” His voice is quieter. Lower. “Tell me you want this.”

“I want this,” I whisper.

His eyes search mine. Now I believe he is no longer teasing me. He really needs to hear it.

“Alaris.” I put a gentle hand on his wrist, and I feel the tremor running through him. I lift the other toward his face, even though I can’t reach it. “I want you. Please.”

He exhales. Then he presses in. Just a bit, so I feel the fullness of it. I twist my hands in the sheets and moan, eyes locked on his.

He bends down and gives me another kiss. A few shallow thrusts, and I’m desperate for more. The stretch is incredible. I want him deeper.

“Please,” I beg.

He pushes in again, and my eyes roll back. Another push, and it stings a little. I wince.

He stills completely. Then his hips contract, like he is going to pull out.

“No!” I grab him to keep him where he is. “Just wait.” I breathe through it, and it subsides, the sting disappearing into the exquisite stretch. “Keep going.”

He holds another moment, then takes the hand I have on him, and kisses it, dismissing it from duty. He presses in farther, working out then in, bit by bit. I gasp each time he hits a new spot inside. It’s incredibly tight, but pleasure and warmth build around it.

He groans, dropping his chin. I look down, and he is fully sheathed inside me. I wiggle a little, adjusting. The sensation is overwhelming in the best way. I feel so full. Little muscles flex and squeeze around his hardness, pinging pleasure through me.

“Tell me what to do, Ly,” he says through clenched teeth, drawing my eyes back up. “I’ll do whatever you want.”

All of his stony control over his expression is gone. Seeing strain on his face, seeing that uncontrolled glint in his gaze, drives me wild.

I’m burning for more. I jerk on him before I can help it.

“Please. Move.”

He pulls out ever so slightly, and pushes back in. He hits something deep that feels so good my mind whites out.

“Ah!” My hands fly out and grab him.

He gets the point, his eyes drinking in every reaction. He slides in and out, slowly, picking an agonizing pace. He starts to stroke my body. He begins with comforting areas, like my arms and waist and hips. Then he starts to play, tweaking my nipples and sliding to my clit.

“Alaris!” I cry as he rubs.

I’m so full, it’s totally unlike anything I’ve experienced before. Every pass of his fingers makes me tighten around him, so I feel everything.

Then he presses in deeper and holds. My eyes go wide, every bit of attention on his fingers as they move. I lose control of my limbs as I buck and writhe and whimper. He thrusts a few more times and I come apart, squeezing around his thickness. I moan into the sheets.

When I look up at him, bleary-eyed, his eyes are bright and silver.

He pauses for just a second, panting. One corner of his lips lifts, a slight wrinkle in his brow. “I think this night is going to haunt me forever.”

I don’t get a chance to respond before he hooks my leg up. Then he really starts to thrust.

He moves in me like everything before was just a preamble. I'm swept away in sensation, as he drives into me with a rhythm that steals every thought. A new feeling blossoms in me. I yelp as he hits a spot deep, deep within. It's more intense, and I tense harder. As it climbs, I know this time is going to be different.

I lock eyes with him. "Alaris, I'm…I'm…"

"I know," he says, his fingers gliding back and forth over my clit. "I know. Now let go."

I break, begging wordlessly as I come completely undone, until my legs are shaking and I'm clamping down so hard I don't know how he's still moving. The different pleasure points play off one another, each cresting into new pangs of bliss.

His rhythm breaks against me. He drives in as far as he'll go, his whole body drawn tight, a low, unsteady sound catching in his throat. His eyes glow like stars, and this time he doesn't blink it away. Cold pours off his skin, while mine burns.

I've never seen him like this, and the sight of it drags me into a new wave. I didn't think I had anything left, but I clench around him again, pleasure pulsing through me. I'm lost, and I can't tell where his shaking ends and mine begins.

I hum and grip a moment more, before falling limp.

He's still inside me, my muscles fluttering around his bulk.

"Wow…wow," I say.

He pulls back. I try to meet his gaze, bleary eyes struggling through blinks. He leans down and kisses me, stroking gentle fingers along my jaw as he withdraws. "I'll be right back."

I hear him get up. I have no idea how he's able to stand right now. I'm in pieces. He took me apart.

It's not fair.

Next time, I want to be the one to break him. I want to be the one to leave him flat on the bed, unable to stand.

I work to stay awake as he uses a towel to clean me off. But I must have failed, because I swim back to consciousness as he rolls me onto my side, tucking me into his chest.

"Rest, Lysandra," he murmurs. "Rest."

"Don't want it to be over," I mumble. "I want to try more things…on you."

He chuckles. “If I do everything I want to you, you’ll never sleep. In fact, the world will probably end before I’m done.”

“Oh,” I sigh, an impossibly heavy exhaustion pulling me under. “We can’t have that.”

“No,” he whispers into my hair. “We can’t have that.”

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"Wake up, sweet Ly," a familiar voice murmurs in my ear.

My eyes open slowly, cracking on an unfamiliar room.

I'm still wrapped tight in Alaris's arms. The sleep was short, but it was so deep, I feel nothing but drowsy bliss.

Until I remember what we are here to do and unease pangs in my heart.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, nuzzling into my hair. I can tell he's asking about last night.

"Good." And it's true. Even though we are setting out to do something incredibly dangerous, my body hums with deep, enduring satisfaction. "Really good. You?"

He pauses a moment, and I hold my breath, waiting to hear if there is some regret. "Happier than I've ever been. Happier than I deserve. I think you might have doomed me."

I twist to read his face, but one look into his dark eyes instantly makes me picture him above me, face intense, thrusting. I squirm and flip over.

He chuckles and kisses the back of my neck. "What's wrong, my Ly?"

I turn my face into the pillow. "We broke your rule about sleeping with staff," I grumble. "I'm worried about my position as your hawk keeper."

"My hawks survived before you. They can survive after."

I smack his arm. "So you are going to fire me?"

"Ly, I don't think I *can* employ a princess of the blood. As a sovereign of this realm, I'm fairly certain I work for you." He kisses the back of my neck again. "A role I relish."

I wiggle against him, and I don't miss the hardness against my backside, or his sharp intake of breath. I do it again.

"You're going to have to stop doing that, or else our night together is going to turn into a night and a morning." His voice is low, his breath tickling the shell of my ear. He nips it. "And I need to make sure you can still ride."

Heat spreads through me. Now that I know what it can be like, how he can make me feel, I get lit on fire even faster. He had me at his mercy, but there are a few things I've heard of I'd like to try on him. I arch my back. "I could easily be convinced…"

"Wicked Ly," he groans, adjusting our bodies so I'm still tucked into his chest, but our hips don't touch. "Take pity on me. Remember those world-ending consequences?"

"Right. The world." The world has never mattered less.

"I let you sleep as long as I could. We have to go now." But he holds me tighter against him, contradicting his own words.

He doesn't move, and neither do I. I don't want this spell to break.

"If this is the only time…" He presses his face into my hair. "I'll carry this with me for as long as I live. Last night, and all our time together."

I freeze. That sounded a lot like a goodbye. Or at least, the potential for one.

I flip over in his arms to face him. I examine his cool dark gaze, shuttered and calm.

I know there's danger, for all of us, but Alaris is the one who will wield the blade to extinguish the Flame. He's the one who has to kill the half-divine emperor. And even though he's an incarnial, the look in his eyes at every turn tells me he thinks he might not achieve both and survive.

I'm not of Ignar, but fire flares through my blood.

"If this never happens again because you don't want me," I snap, "I will find a way to live with that—"

"I could never not want you—"

"—but what I won't forgive is you dying. You can't die."

I don't have any more meaningful words than that. As I glare at him, his expression doesn't change. He stares back at me with that ancient stillness, as immovable as a mountain, as cold as the stars.

My peaceful feelings are all replaced with sour nerves, as my stomach tightens.

Impossible man.

I know no matter what I say, he will still do whatever it takes, including die. I pull away from him then, and his grip loosens, allowing me to rise to the edge of the bed. I have to ensure the plan unfolds seamlessly. I need to get Dashol on my side so we can protect Alaris when he might not be protecting himself.

I hear Alaris push himself up behind me, and he places a gentle hand on my back. “I can hear your mind spinning, Ly. I’ve learned that’s dangerous.”

“Trust that instinct.” I look over my shoulder at him. “You told me to want things. You don’t get to be surprised when I do.”

His eyes widen. I turn away. I know, just like the oraculi, this isn’t a fight that will be won with words.

I adjust my dress, or what’s left of it, and stand. An ache I’ve never felt before makes itself known between my legs. I wince.

“Ly?”

“I’m fine,” I say, testing a step.

In a second, I’m scooped off my feet. I yelp and cling to his shoulders as Alaris settles me in his arms.

“Speaking of things we want, I would like to request the word ‘fine’ be stricken from your vocabulary. Now come, we don’t have much time.”

He floats me through the wardrobe as if I have a choice in the matter. He carries me across the adjoining room, straight to the bathing room.

He sets me down on the tile so gently, it takes longer than the trip.

“Now shower. I want to shower with you, but…” His eyes flick down my body, then back up, desire clear in his features. Under his gaze, I’m not even embarrassed at how much skin the ruined neckline of my dress exposes. “Again, world-ending consequences.”

I flush, imagining a repeat of any of last night’s activities under a stream of hot water, against slippery tile.

“I’m finding myself caring about the world less and less,” I say hoarsely.

He chuckles and closes the bathing room door between us.

I shower quickly and dress in simple clothes from the wardrobe, the moonstone dagger tied under my skirts. I braid up my hair and curl it into a bun, then hide it under a scarf.

Someone knocks, and I open the door to Vesper. I'm glad Alaris had the foresight to close the wardrobe between us. Still, I'm not sure I manage to keep my expression even.

"Lady Maren, it looks like you are still feeling your hard ride from yesterday," Vesper says, blinking innocent purple eyes.

My cheeks flare and my mouth drops open.

"Drink up." She hands me a cup of tea. "Consequences are close to impossible given your choice of partner, but this should settle any possibility."

I catch her meaning. Cheeks flaming, I accept the tea and down it. I'm saved from further conversation as Alaris steps out into the hallway.

His eyes shift between us. "Thank you for your hospitality, Vesper. We are going to have to eat breakfast on the road. We are behind schedule."

The company saddles up in the courtyard, with clean faces but travel-stained clothes. Dashol positions himself near the front, jaw set, sword at his hip. Nykiri takes a place near the back.

Alaris lifts me onto his horse, then swings up behind me.

"Lady Maren and I will ride ahead," he says, guiding the black stallion toward the gates. "I'll see the rest of you by this evening."

We take off down the road, galloping slower than the eye-stinging ride when he first took me to see the wither, but still surpassing most horses at top speed.

I'll have to remember sometime to ask him about the horse, but the ride is too fast for talk. The pounding hooves change the scenery around us quickly. I absorb as much as I can as we transition from scrubland to wide open plains. This is my first time in Sophys, its golden-brown hills far different from the lush landscape in Delvos.

I know we could be observed by scouts hiding anywhere on the road, so I try to keep the contact between us to a minimum. I'm also aware that if my mother did find some new assassin, they could be lying in wait, an arrow notched and drawn. But above us, a single hawk traces wide circles against the pale sky. I watch it bank and turn, riding the wind without effort, and I feel freer. At least until I'm inside the Citadel walls, I'll be under the hawk's watchful eyes. They can't follow us in—the archers shoot any unknown birds on sight.

It's a smooth ride, but in no time at all, my thighs ache, the muscles clenching to try to save me from the pressure of the saddle. I haven't ridden

much, and last night's activities aren't helping. I shift my weight, grip the pommel, press my knees tighter.

"Troublesome Ly," Alaris murmurs low in my ear. He grips under my right thigh and lifts my leg, adjusting me to sit sidesaddle in front of him.

I almost complain. The position requires him to hold the reins in one hand, the other much more invested in holding me steady at this speed. But it's so much better, I decide not to fight this.

I wonder if scouts along the road would find it suspicious if I nuzzled my head on the Sovereign of Arastos's shoulder.

The road cuts through low hills covered in grain. Farmland gives way to sparse woods, then marshland as we cross a river. The air gets warmer and warmer, until winter itself feels like a myth. The sun beats down and sweat pricks my brow. The breeze helps, but only a little.

Did my father's eternal summer always feel like this? I can barely get a breath of fresh air in this heat.

All too soon, the capital appears as a pale line against the horizon, and my stomach drops.

A phantom pressure tightens across my throat. Then hot agony, punched into my ribs. Muscles along the back of my head and spine spasm. My body holds every death I lived through. And most of them happened here. I don't want to get sucked back into the memories.

Pleasure and pain can help.

I turn my face toward Alaris, indulging briefly in the smell of cloves and cool night air that lingers on his skin.

Then I turn my eyes back to the horizon.

I can do this.

I'm not returning as the same princess who lived in the Sunrise Palace, isolated and unaware. I ran, I survived, and I'm riding back by choice. This is my plan. This is my home. I need to use every tool at my disposal to make sure Alaris succeeds and survives.

The horse slows, and I return my attention to the road.

Captain Orso is in the middle of it.

He steps forward before the horse has fully stopped, gold insignia catching the sun. The last time I saw him, he was monitoring the exit at the end of summer party. But his stern face has been playing on my mind ever since I saw Drina reporting to one of his men in the woods.

A plain carriage with a hooded driver and gray gelding is pulled off to the side of the road. With no ornamentation and slats covering the windows, it looks more like a prison cart than a royal escort.

"Lord Alaris, I'm Captain Orso. I believe we've met." He gestures to the royal insignia on his shoulder, so there can be no doubt as to his identity.

"Yes, I recall," Alaris says, his tone smooth, as if the captain of the guard had simply interrupted a pleasure ride.

"I've come to collect your passenger and escort her the rest of the way."

Orso doesn't wait for Alaris's confirmation. He walks up to the stallion's flank and hauls me down, setting me in the dirt.

He steps back, settling his hand on his sword. He examines the scarf covering my hair but doesn't comment on it. "We'll travel the rest of the way by carriage. Get in."

"Shall I follow behind?" Alaris asks, nonchalantly. If I hadn't spent an embarrassing amount of time observing his face, I wouldn't notice the slight tightness in the corner of his jaw, despite his upturned lips. "I assume the emperor would like an audience."

"Follow the main road to the city. Go through the front gate, and the emperor will receive you. We'll be going our own route. Get in the carriage now," Orso says to me, gruffly. "We can't stay on the road."

I fall into myself and obey, forcing my steps away from the man who's kept me safe all these months, even as my mind screams for me to stay with him.

I climb into the carriage and sit, and I have to fight not to look at Alaris through the slats. I'm afraid if I do, I won't be able to hide what shows on my face in such close quarters. My traitor eyes lift just enough to note his ringed fingers squeezing a little too tight on the reins, before Orso enters after me and shuts the door.

In a jolt, we start rolling.

The huge man fills the opposite wall of the carriage, close-cropped gray hair showing the shape of his blocky head.

I keep my face as blank as I can and fold my hands in my lap to stop them from shaking. I can't show nerves or guilt. Drina never uncovered who I was. If she had, Orso wouldn't be here collecting me in a carriage. He would be in Arastos with a bloodied sword, carrying out the emperor's justice.

“Do you require a healer, your highness?” he asks, his rough voice carrying no warmth. I note he didn’t use my title until we were alone.

“No. I’m well.”

“Then we’ll go straight to see your father.”

“Shouldn’t I change into something more…?”

“He is very eager to hear your account of these last few months.” His tone leaves no room for argument. “We will not keep him waiting.”

The practice with Karns suddenly doesn’t feel like enough. I wet my lips. “Do you want to hear…?”

He cuts me off. “Your father should be the first.”

I squeeze my hands in my lap and try to calm my heart.

We ride the rest of the way in silence. The space between the slats is too narrow to see much without leaning close, but it’s clear when we hit the city streets, rattling off dirt and onto cobblestones. After winding uphill for a spell, the carriage stops. Voices outside exchange words. Then we roll onto flat, smooth stone.

We are inside the Citadel.

I grit my teeth. I’m back in my mother’s territory. The hawks can’t follow. And with the wards against magical entry, Alaris won’t be able to use the shadowgates to reach me.

Even if the masked man is on his way here, she still might find another way to end this.

When the carriage stops again, Orso moves. He gets out first and holds the door for me.

I step out to find myself at a side door of the Central Palace. Was it always this hot? Was the glare off the marble always this bright? Everything is blinding white. Before I absorb how jarring it is to be back, Orso ushers me inside.

We avoid the main marble hallways, taking side corridors. We encounter no one. These walkways must have been cleared, because the palace is never this empty. There are always staff or courtiers or guards about. I take a deep breath, trying to remind myself that Orso didn’t catch me. I’m here because I *want* this audience with the emperor. Even though my body reacts like the air here is full of hot poison, I came back on purpose.

Orso stops in front of a door. When I catch up, he pulls it open, revealing the gallery on one side of the throne room.

The floor is gold-veined marble. Rows of columns wider than a man with his arms outstretched hold up the vaulted ceiling. It's painted with scenes of the gods, all of them beautiful but small, turning deferential eyes toward Ignar, rendered at grand scale at the front of the room, haloed in flames.

And below, on the massive marble throne, is the man I've always called father.

Emperor Belzas.

56

My father looks the same as he has my whole life, the same as he has for thousands of years: broad-shouldered, bronze-skinned, with dark red hair that's a touch lighter at the temples. He's wrapped in molten gold robes, a gold circlet gleaming on his brow. He fills the huge marble throne with his legs and arms draped wide.

Seran stands to the right of the dais, hands clasped at his waist. He looks older than I remember, his weathered face sallow next to his typical olive robes. As the advisor assigned to my keeping and care, these last months couldn't have been easy on him.

I thought I would be able to walk before my father with my back straight, but my knees feel like they are going to give out, and I have to hide my shaking hands in my skirts. I feel like a child again: small, flameless, weak.

I stop at the edge of the heat emanating from the throne, and bow low, pressing my palms to the stone. I relish the moment to cool my forehead before I lift my face to him. I don't raise my eyes until he speaks.

"Daughter. Lysandra. Where have you been?" His voice booms in the space by design, without him having to raise it. I look up then.

If he has any warm feelings at my safe return, they don't show on his face. His chin is tilted back, his gaze holding something like anger mixed with boredom.

I've been an inconvenience.

“Father, forgive me. I was taken from my room. After that I…I’m not sure how to tell it.” I don’t have to fake the fear and nerves filling my voice. “I was taken by boat and carriage, kept in cellars, and other dark places. They wanted a ransom, so they left me unharmed, but…it was horrible. I thought I would never survive it.”

It seems like a pathetically shallow summary of months that doesn’t do the intricate story Karns crafted justice. But Nykiri skulked in the corner during a few of my rounds of practice. She didn’t hesitate to correct me, eyes flashing yellow.

Don’t over-explain, she said. *Liars always feel the need to give too many details. People who tell the truth expect you to believe them.*

My father watches me down his nose. I don’t even blink, ready for any hint of a spark, any sign he is going to use his power.

“Orso,” the emperor says, his bored tone bone-chilling. “Why in all this time have you brought me none of this? I should have had heads roasting on spikes long before some shadoward sovereign had to get involved.”

Orso falls to one knee. “It is my failure, your majesty. I will take full responsibility, if the story proves true. Before you pass your judgment, there are other facts I must report.”

My heart stutters. *Other facts?*

I glance at his blocky profile, bent in perfect submission.

“Then report,” my father says, leaning his head back against the throne.

Orso stands and clasps his hands behind his back. “Princess Lysandra disappeared in the beginning of autumn, and reports she was taken against her will and kept in hiding. A strange woman joined Lord Alaris’s staff just after Somnus. She did not act like a servant and was treated differently from the rest. My informant’s guess was that the woman was a noble in disguise or in hiding. I didn’t think it was connected to the princess. But now Princess Lysandra has returned to us with Lord Alaris as an escort.”

I clench my teeth, trying to hide it, trying to keep my breathing calm. After all I’ve done to get here, with everything at stake, I cannot let this story muddy my own. Or Alaris will end up in the Crimson Square that much faster.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, Captain,” I stammer, managing to keep my tone controlled. “Why would I lie about what happened to me?”

“This is a disgrace, Orso,” Seran says, his voice as smooth as ever. “What are you accusing the princess of, exactly?”

“I make no accusation,” Orso says gruffly, chin directed squarely at the throne. “I’m simply reporting the facts to my emperor for him to decide. I uncovered no evidence of kidnappers that night, and this report from my informant came a month ago. I suggest more investigation before we accept the princess’s account as true.”

“Surely you have some other evidence aside from one vague account,” Seran says, unruffled. “It sounds to me like you’re bringing up this servant woman to cover your own failures.”

I know he’s not defending me out of care, but still, I’ve never been more grateful to Seran in my life.

My father doesn’t move, his eyes sliding between Orso and Seran, not revealing who has his ear. We don’t have time for an investigation, and if Orso is granted it, he will easily figure out I’m lying. I need to jump in before the emperor makes up his mind.

An idea sparks.

“Captain Orso.” I turn toward him. “What did this strange woman look like? Did she look like me? Is that the source of the confusion?”

He doesn’t even glance my way. “In general, yes, though there was one feature that stood out as bearing a possible resemblance: her hair. It appeared to be a light color, poorly dyed darker.”

“The princess’s hair is her most recognizable feature,” Seran interjects. “Kidnappers could have also made modifications to her appearance. We’ve barely given her a chance to tell her story. Lysandra?”

“My hair isn’t dyed,” I say.

Seran nods. “Then the servant can’t be the same woman.”

“Dye can be removed.” Orso rounds on me, his steely eyes flicking up to my scarf.

It doesn’t escape my notice that he could have asked me to remove my scarf the whole ride here. Seran has him pinned: Orso doesn’t know if he’s right or not. Maybe he really doubts me, but he also wants to cast doubt. The truth could be the difference between his life and mine.

He wants time to investigate, but I’m not going to give it to him.

“What length was it?” I press, keeping my most polite and innocent tone. “That wouldn’t be changed so easily.”

Orso pauses now. He either has to lie to the emperor, look like he didn’t gather basic details, or tell the truth and risk contradiction. “Short. Crudely chopped to the shoulder.”

He's my father's man. I'm not surprised he told the truth.

I hold his eyes a moment. "Short hair? You're sure?"

"That was the report."

"Forgive me, Father, my hair is still a mess from travel." I slide off the scarf, then pull the pins, letting my braid fall free. I untie it, just so there can be no doubt that the length reaches to my waist. The muscles in Orso's neck pop out, but I turn to the throne, ignoring him. "I don't even understand what he's implying. That I left the palace of my own volition? To work as a servant? Or that I was forced to?"

There is something different in Seran's gaze. A rare look of…surprise?

I'm not quite acting like the old Princess Lysandra. He probably expected to have to get me out of this.

Seran recovers his look of perpetual calm. "Lord Alaris is famous for having women come and go. Is it really so surprising that he might be… hosting…a lady who doesn't want her true location known?"

Thank goodness for Alaris's terrible reputation.

My father is completely still another moment, then laughter booms out. "A silly, silly thing to bring up, Orso. How could a laborer bear any resemblance to my youngest? She may be pale, but she is of the flame."

"Of course, Majesty," he says, stepping back. "I only aim to—"

Flame leaps out, scorching the marble in front of Orso. To his credit, he doesn't even flinch, although I do.

"It seems the failure is solely yours." My father's lips lift into the first curve of a smile, anger and joy sharing his face, like all he truly craves is a reason. "I had seven daughters before, and I have seven daughters now, so I won't take your life for this. But since you failed to protect my blood and then bent my ear with this ridiculous story…I'll take your ear."

I stumble back as a blast of flame shoots from the throne, knocking Orso to the marble. His sword and cape splay as he clutches the side of his head. He moans, lifting his hand, shock clear on his features.

Bubbling flesh and bloody skin take the place of what was previously his ear, and a good part of his scalp.

"Now, leave us. And let our guest in."

The emperor settles back as Orso picks himself up off the floor and staggers out. I think I hear him retch, and I hope for his sake he can hold it in. My eyes flick up to Seran, but his face, as always, is unbothered.

The doors swing open, and cool air rushes in. I take a deep breath.

I don’t have to turn around to know who it is.

I keep my eyes fixed on one gold swirl in the marble, as Alaris’s steps echo through the hall.

“Your majesty,” he says, dipping to one knee and bowing his head. He’s darkness in the corner of my eye. “Thank you for receiving me.”

“It’s been too long since you visited the Citadel, Lord Alaris.”

“And it’s my loss. As I’m sure you know, the climate here is far superior this time of year.”

My father hums assent. “I believe you’ve met my daughter.”

“Of course.” Alaris stands and bows in my direction. “Princess Lysandra. It’s good to see you back where you belong.”

I raise my eyes briefly and nod, not yet trusting myself to speak.

“It seems I owe you gratitude.” My father’s eyes burn. “Who would have thought the Sovereign of Arastos would ride out personally to deal with criminals? And in another province, no less.”

“I admit my advisors might call me impulsive for taking up the sword myself. I did not know how far the trail would lead.” Alaris’s lips curve into a smile, like he’s just a bored pleasure seeker, after sport. “But now I’m grateful I did.”

“And the traitors?” My father drums his fingers on his armrest. “I was disappointed to receive the report that they all died.”

“It was quite a skirmish. I lost two horses. But some of them wore distinctive rings. My men are bringing hands in case they can be traced.”

A slight pulse of heat emanates from the throne. “I would have preferred heads.”

“Apologies, your majesty. I will recover every piece of information my people gathered on this group and provide it.” His tone is cool and unbothered, his performance of the charming lord flawless as usual.

“Good. And when we’re done here, some of your people will lead my guards to the camp, just in case faces can still be recognized. Every man, woman, and child related to them is to be burned.”

In this heat, it’s unlikely any flesh would hold up. And of course, there are no bodies to be found.

“I will ensure they do, your majesty,” Alaris says smoothly. “My company is supposed to arrive early this evening.”

“That’s right. You made incredible time from Sophys.” My father sits back in the chair now, ember eyes blazing. “I hear you have quite the horse

in my stables. Leave it in the capital a season, for breeding."

The emperor isn't supposed to demand property from the provinces, above the annual tithes. I suppose this skates around the treaties because he only told Alaris to let him *borrow* the horse.

Still, it turns my stomach. Alaris saved his daughter's life, and the emperor rewards him by taking the horse he brought her back on?

I used to believe in Belzas's divine right to be on that throne. That despite his tempers and his bloodthirst, his power, the power I so desperately wanted to spark in me, kept this land thriving. Now I see the small man beneath all the brilliance, who won't even let the air cool to stop people from dying.

He's half as divine as Alaris, but far less than half the man.

It makes me stand up straighter. I'm glad I don't share his blood. I'm glad I'm not of sun and consumptive flame.

"Consider the horse a gift." Alaris bows again. "To honor what I hope will become a closer relationship." He turns to me. "And I do hope our relationship will become closer. I've only been in the presence of your beautiful daughter for a few days, but I admit I find myself smitten. So much so that I would like to make a request of you, Emperor." Alaris kneels. "I would like to request your daughter's hand in marriage. With your blessing, I intend to make her the Lady of Arastos."

I hold my breath and fix my eyes on the floor in front of me. I can't look at Alaris, or the throne. I wait in agonizing silence for my father to speak.

Instead, at the top of my vision, I see him stand.

He starts down the stairs, each foot landing with an echoing thump. The heat presses stronger and stronger on my face, intensifying with every footfall. He lands on the bottom step, and a wall of scorching air washes over me, a clear and intentional expression of power.

I look up at the two of them facing each other. My father simmers, his burnished skin radiating heat that makes the air shimmer, while Alaris's skin and dark clothes seem cast in a cooler light, completely unaffected.

Orso clutching the side of his head flashes through my mind.

"A surprising request." My father's voice is controlled. "After only days together."

I think what he really wants to say is *for a sovereign.*

"My advisors would tell me that I'm too quick with my passions, but what can I say? I follow my heart." Alaris cups his chest. "And I promise to

keep your daughter in mine and treat her well."

My father steps off the marble that gave him a height advantage over Alaris and strolls over to me. The heat rolling off his skin feels like an open furnace door. I try not to cringe as he puts his palm between my neck and shoulder, his touch both dry and burning.

"Did you hear that, daughter? The man you just rode in with has asked for your hand."

If I show too much eagerness, he might keep us apart. He wouldn't like to feel a decision was made without him.

I meet his gaze, fluttering my lashes. "I'm…I'm surprised to hear Lord Alaris's interest. I will do whatever you wish me to."

I know you want this. I see you clearly now.

We're only two months away from spring, when he'll seat me beside him, sending suitors into a frenzy. Why wouldn't he accept the best proposal he's ever going to get a little early?

He considers me another moment, then he lets me go. I breathe for what feels like the first time in minutes as he climbs the steps and settles back into his throne. "I'll consider what you've proposed, Lord Alaris. When your men arrive this evening, we'll welcome them with a banquet. Seran, escort our guest and the princess."

Alaris and I both kneel on the marble, then stand as Seran comes forward to usher us out.

He walks us halfway down the hall and pauses. "The crown would appreciate your assistance in keeping Princess Lysandra's tribulations completely private, Lord Alaris. Please let me know if there's anyone who needs to be dealt with to ensure it."

Dealt with. Even in Seran's mild tone, it still sounds exactly like the threat it is.

"The people who rode with me are my most trusted few. I will stake my life on their silence."

"Excellent. Then a footman is waiting for you beyond the main doors. Princess, this way." Seran guides me to the side door.

"Oh, and Lysandra," the voice from the throne booms out.

I pause and look back.

"Cover that up until you're announced back at court."

It takes me a second to realize he means my hair.

A wave of cool air washes over me, and I glance toward Alaris, noting the small tic in his jaw as he stalks away from the throne.

I do my best to wrap my hair back up as I follow Seran out of the hall.

57

Seran joins me in the plain carriage, which rolls us across the Citadel and deposits us at a side door of the Sunrise Palace. I thought it would be more jarring to be back, but after so many memories, it feels like I was just here days ago. The only strange thing about the familiar marble halls is that they're empty, cleared of maids and guards.

I clench my fists as we walk up the steps I was once thrown down.

Seran stops with me at my door. "Princess…" He pauses, like he's going to ask something. "You did well. With a proposal from the Sovereign of Arastos, your disappearance might be the best thing that ever happened to you."

What an absurd thing to say to someone who was just kidnapped.

"Thank you," is all I say. "What do you think the emperor will decide?"

"Only he knows, but I will do my best. Until you hear from me, stay in your rooms and speak with no one. You mustn't say anything that could contradict the emperor's accounts of your whereabouts. Your future depends on it."

I can see now how the palace has taken control of the narrative—separating Alaris and me on the road before we reached the city, secreting me in the back, hiding my hair and movements.

I wonder what story my father has told about my absence.

"I'll send word later." Seran turns to leave.

"Wait!" I start after him. "Would it be possible to get extra guards?"

I'm sure he notices the intensity in my face. It's all I can do to keep myself from grabbing his olive sleeve. As soon as I'm alone in this room, it will just be me and the memories, and a lock that never protected me from my killer.

"It's just…they took me from my room. I wasn't safe here. Could you put guards outside the door, and below my balcony?"

It's a reasonable request given my cover story, but he pauses so long I begin to wonder if maybe Orso wasn't the only one who didn't fully believe me.

But he nods. "Of course, Princess. I will arrange for extra guards."

He shuts the door.

I turn and face my bedroom, all white marble and lace. It used to feel like home, like relief from the world outside. Now it's both too hollow and too delicate.

I scan every corner, rubbing my arms. I drag a chair in front of the door and huddle alongside it with the moonstone dagger clutched in my fist, ears straining for any hint of movement. I stay that way until jangling steps tell me guards are stationed in the hallway. That's one entrance covered.

I go through the glass doors to check the balcony. I peek over the railing just long enough to spy the heads of two guards below, then pull back from the edge, sweat prickling up my spine.

Guards aren't a perfect guarantee against my mother's desperation, but they're an obstacle.

The garden is so familiar it's imprinted on my eyes, the rows of hedges and flowers unchanged, swaying in the warm breeze. But all along the railing, my lobell bushes have died. The pots hold sad, dried stems, long baked in the capital's sun. They're bent and cracked, split by the shriveled, seven-petal blooms they couldn't support before they went to seed.

It breaks my heart a little. I am proud of what I achieved, proud of how I adapted and grew what I needed to hide the burns I couldn't deflect. But no matter what I did, I couldn't change my hair. I couldn't change my blood or my power. I could only mask my flaws a short while and hide away the rest of the time.

I thought it was enough, but it was no life.

But I'm different now. I'm not just trying to survive anymore. Being back here is proof of that. I'm in the most dangerous place I could possibly be, on purpose, because people are depending on me.

I brush a finger over a dried petal. New flowers are planted in Arastos now. Siro is caring for them, and a castle of people will benefit from the harvest. After all this is done, I'd like to go back and grow even more.

But there will be no after if there is no engagement, and there will be no engagement if there is no bride. Even with the extra guards, I need to be careful. I leave the balcony and latch the glass doors behind me. I lock myself in the bathing room, moonstone dagger pointed at the door.

Until my father approves this marriage, there is nothing I can do but keep breathing.



A muffled knock stirs me. I redouble my grip on my knife, listening.

Another knock rings out, clearer this time.

"It's me," Seran says, voice softened through two doors.

"One moment." I stumble out of the bathing room, hours of holding myself at the ready leaving me coiled in knots. I slip the moonstone dagger under my pillow, slide the chair to one side, and open the door.

Seran stands there with two maids. His impassive gaze takes me in, still in my travel clothes. "Your father wants you at the banquet tonight. This will be your grand reintroduction to court. I brought a dress for you. There's no time to waste."

The maids take me to the bath and scrub me down. They apply cosmetics to hide my tired eyes, oil my skin, and twist my curls into an arrangement I would never achieve without supervision. Then they step away and turn a long mirror toward me.

The dress Seran picked is lilac, the neck lined with fabric roses. Real roses crown the back of my head from temple to temple. The outfit transforms me into a blooming flower, even though I look pale and my eyes are a bit red.

I don't even want to breathe near the roses.

"Good," Seran says, when he returns and surveys me. "Now quickly."

A royal carriage awaits me this time, white with gold ornamentation. Seran rides with me and helps me out when we reach the Central Palace. His gait is quick as he sweeps us through to the banquet hall. He steps to one side as the doors swing wide, leaving me centered in the opening.

The room is already bustling, a lively event in progress. Every noble at court must be here, chatting and dining beneath blown-glass chandeliers. Teeth and silk and goblets gleam in the torchlight. The room falls quiet in segments as faces turn toward me.

"Come, Princess," Seran says, offering his arm. "I'll take you to your seat."

The room quiets completely.

I try to unclench my jaw, feeling every eye in the room as I let Seran escort me. Why can't I remember how Princess Lysandra walked? How she carried herself? Every muscle, every step, every breath is a choice that takes effort. I force myself to curve my lips into a slight smile.

In this room of ivory silk and gold, one group stands out in darker colors: Alaris's company, seated at a long table in front of the dais. It's an honored, and dangerous, place to be. I swallow down emotion as I spot Nykiri and Dashol. Even though the alternative was storming the Citadel, I feel responsible for their safety as they masquerade as my rescuers. Dashol did so much to help me acclimate to Arastos, and now he's seated just in front of the emperor, and I shouldn't even look at him too long.

I catch the figure at the head of the table, dressed in midnight blue silk: Alaris. I need to play my role perfectly, and it's always been harder to hide under his gaze. I push down every feeling, using every ounce of restraint to keep my face calm, and let my attention flick away from him.

Seran guides me straight to the dais, to the seat I only took in one other life: right beside the emperor. We're both raised above the crowd, but my chair is still lower, putting me a head below him. I arrange my lilac skirts and sit.

"Princess Lysandra, welcome back to court." The emperor lifts his cup. "I'm pleased to have my youngest back in our number. She was away for her health, but now that she's returned, raise your cups."

My smile freezes as all the cups in the hall rise toward me. It's a disorienting echo of my birthday.

"Let the feast begin."

Servers swarm the hall, bearing golden dishes. Courses arrive in gleaming procession: glazed lamb, figs, soft bread. It's hard to keep my appetite when I can feel the heat radiating off my father's skin, but it's been so long since I've eaten, I manage a few bites. It's all a little bland, a little too sweet. I miss the black salt.

I do my best to keep my eyes off the table below the dais, trying not to monitor ways that Dashol and the others could draw the wrong kind of attention. Alaris is every inch the noble, relaxed and elegant. But Dashol sits stiffly in formal clothes that barely fit his wide shoulders, and Nykiri looks far too grim. She needs to adjust that scowl. She's being honored by the emperor.

I give my father a sidelong glance, trying to sense his mood. Has he made a decision about Alaris's proposal? Does he know which way he'll go, or is he still deciding? Asking would make me look eager, so my only option is silence.

I know you want this, so hurry up.

Every day he delays the decision is another day when Orso's soldiers could find some proof of our lies. Each night he delays is another night I have to spend in the Sunrise Palace, awaiting death at the hands of the masked man. And all the while, Alaris will be vulnerable, surrounded by enemies.

My gaze travels the hall and stops on my mother. Her orange-red hair is pulled into a knot so tight it tugs the skin at her temples. She isn't looking at me, focused on the honey-glazed meat in front of her, although her pursed lips and grip on her silverware make her look like she's close to vibrating. Fear hits first, then something hotter, closer to fury. She's the reason I know the taste of blood so well, the sensation of a knife sliding against bone. My jaw pings painfully.

I turn away. For once, I don't bother to monitor what's on her face. I don't care what she's feeling.

I catch other eyes on me. My heart clenches. *Rinalda*. Her expression is twisted with an intensity that doesn't match her usual icy composure.

My lips part. I wish I could talk to her now. In every life I remember, there was the same distance between us. Maybe now that I feel a bit older, there's something I could say that would close it.

The emperor downs his cup and holds it out. A new server, one I've never seen before, scurries forward with a pitcher. His hands are shaking; he's being too careful not to spill. *A little slow.*

My father's fist tightens on the cup, but the server manages to finish and slink back, unburned. *Strange…*

Then the emperor stands, and the hall falls quiet. "You may have noticed some other unexpected company in our midst." He gestures in an

arc with his wine. “Welcome to the Sovereign of Arastos, and his travel companions. With Princess Lysandra’s return, I’ve made a decision about her future.”

I grip my hands in my lap. No one in the hall so much as breathes, all eyes fixed on the emperor.

“I’m pleased to announce the illustrious and sun-strong blood of Ignar will be joined in marriage with the blood of Arastor.” He pauses, letting the court absorb his words. “I’ve approved the betrothal between my daughter, Lysandra, Princess of the Dawn, and the Sovereign of Arastos.”

I tamp down a burst of emotions in my chest, fear and nerves warring with sparks of bright elation. *We did it.* He accepted the engagement.

Murmurs and gasps break out around the room. Usually, it would be dangerous to make sounds while my father still stands, but I think this is his intended effect. Even my late arrival was part of his theater. He’s just turned my disappearance into his greatest victory: a betrothal to a sovereign. To an outside eye, it would look as if this was all his plan.

“Join me in toasting the new couple.”

I can’t stop my eyes from going to Alaris as shaking fingers find my cup. His mouth curves up slowly, his chin lifted, the picture of happy confidence as he takes a sip. Everyone in the hall lifts their wine, the chatter picking up. The emperor bangs down his goblet and sits.

“Are you pleased, Lysandra?” he asks, making me jump in my seat.

In the life I sat beside him in spring, he never actually spoke to me during the meal. I compose my face, setting down my wine without taking a sip.

“Yes, Father. I’m very happy.”

“All that matters is your flame-bearing heirs,” he says, before I even finish. “Tomorrow, I’ll give a blessing before the Eternal Flame to make sure it comes to pass. The sovereign will take you to Arastos to be married. You must insist on having the wedding right away. The day you arrive.”

“Yes, Father,” I say, but he’s already straightened to peruse the room, not requiring my confirmation.

He’s in a rush too. He must be worried Alaris will change his mind, given the lord of night’s reputation for flightiness and his love of many women.

I also see another reason why I’m up on this dais away from the crowd. Courtiers make no secret of the topic of their conversations, eyes and

gestures directed at me. If I were seated anywhere among them, they would ask questions.

My answers might not match my father's account of my absence.

I don't even know where I supposedly was for my health these last months, or what he claimed ailed me. Keeping me at a distance from them is the wisest move. He means to hurry me through the blessing and spirit me away before the illusion cracks.

Good. That means we are both in a rush to get me wed before anyone looks too closely.

As the servers produce the final sweet course, I sense the heat of eyes that aren't usually on me: my brothers. I'm sure they're all reeling at the idea that their invisible sister might factor into their power games. They're probably trying to figure out what this wedding means for them, and whether my gain is their loss.

Marus's expression is wary, and Jasper sneers at me over his wine when I catch his eye, but I get a lifted goblet from a bleary-eyed Borin. He must be between two and six cups.

When the first chords rise and nobles begin to pair off, a young lord approaches, eyes bright, hand outstretched in invitation.

I barely see it out of the corner of my eye as my father flicks his fingers. A cruel lick of flame snaps in the air between us, knocking away the lord's hand with a red mark he is smart enough to endure with a hiss and quickly hide.

My father laughs, accompanying the sound with a burst of heat. "You mean to dance with the princess when she's promised to another?" he says, loud enough to reach every ear nearby.

The young lord pales, bows stiffly, and folds back into the crowd.

There is nothing unusual about dancing with someone who is betrothed or married. It's clear my father intends to keep me isolated until the end of the evening.

Alaris rises like a shadow. "Your majesty," he says, bowing low. "Then may the one she is betrothed to request a dance?"

My father draws out the silence before responding. "Why not? Enjoy a dance with your bride."

Alaris walks around the long head table, his eyes on me the entire time. My heart thrums in my chest with every step. *We did it, we did it, we did it.*

But I maintain my careful mask as he extends his hand up to me, and I delicately take it. Most of the room is watching as he guides me down the steps. Thankfully, I don't stumble.

We step onto the floor. He holds me with a hand at my waist, my palm in his. The touch is formal. It's harder to be mindful of how I'm allowed to touch him than to not touch him at all.

But then the music swells, and the rest falls away. We move together like we've practiced this, turning and stepping in time. My lilac skirts swirl when he spins me out, and my heart leaps when he whips me back in.

His voice is quiet against my ear. "How are you?"

We step out.

We step in. "Just fine," I mutter.

He twists me into the next turn, never missing a beat.

He takes a liberty on a dip, leaning down to my ear. "I'll come to your room tonight. You shouldn't be alone."

"No," I say quietly but firmly. I barely move my lips. His eyes meet mine, searching. I do my best to look encouraging, even though I know tonight will be miserable. I give him the barest head shake. *We're almost there*.

He nods, almost imperceptibly, and practically lifts me off my feet in the final steps, guiding and turning me in the dance. I let him sweep my body away to the music. For a moment, it's just us, whirling in a haunting song.

The orchestra draws out its final note. Our steps slow. Our hands part. I steal one last look into his eyes, and I swear they flash silver, so fast it could have just been the candlelight.

I curtsy and he bows, then I stiffly return to my father's side, summoning every ounce of control not to look back.

Seran escorts me to the Sunrise Palace, and I'm relieved to see guards are still posted on either side of my door.

Yet, as soon as I'm alone in my room, I feel the same panic that inspired me to run. I sit on the edge of the bed, then stand again. My jaw aches from clenching. I press my thumbs into the hinges the way Alaris showed me, but as tight as they are, the pressure just hurts.

I can only hope my mother sees the wisdom of patience. The masked man must still be on his way. With any luck, she'll plan to have him catch me after I leave, like she did when I set off to marry in Nyvos.

I don’t bother to pull the bell for maids, unlacing the dress myself. I slip on my white nightgown. Staring down at the lace hem, and my bare feet on cool marble, I’m thrown back to my life before, as if I never left.

I inhale and catch roses in the air.

I whirl around, searching the surfaces. My room doesn’t always smell like roses. It must be the ones in my hair.

I pull the pins and hold my breath as I remove the flowers.

But even though I’m not breathing, the scent fills my nose anyway.

The room tilts.

I right myself, dizzy. It’s happening again. *Another life.*

It’s like a spell, pulling me down.

I really thought I was done. I don’t know what unlatched more memories—if it was a delayed effect of the oraculi or simply being back in this room.

Just wait, I beg, staggering to the bed. *I’ll let you come, just wait.*

There’s no stopping it. The ceremony is tomorrow, so I need to get through this tonight. Even if it means a night spent in feverish memories instead of sleep.

I can do this. I’ve managed to get through the memories alone before. I take my last breaths in the present and close my eyes.

And I wake up.

58

I open my eyes at midnight, sunrise-colored roses crowding every surface. My birthday is behind me. At Somnus, I stand at the edge of the hall and watch the delvarians cause a ruckus. I put off attending more social events as long as I can, until Seran insists I accept a few invites.

At the winter solstice, I dance with the olive-skinned lord from Nyvos. For a brief moment, I allow myself to be hopeful about who my father will choose for me. I lie awake at night wondering which province I'll end up in, and whether the images in my mind match their terrain.

A few days after Noctus, I pass a window and see shadows in the sky. A flock of large birds soars overhead. Archers race along the walls, firing arrows, but there are too many; for every one that spirals down, three more birds cut through.

Guards flood the corridor. One grabs my arm and pulls me from the window. They drag Rinalda from her rooms and take us deep into marble, until we reach a basement chamber. No one tells us what is going on as they slam metal doors shut behind us.

Rinalda paces back and forth across the narrow room, her red hair catching the low lantern light each time she turns. I sit on a bench against the wall and watch her cover the same stretch of floor for the better part of the day.

It's surely night when the door rattles, and the metal lock turns. Rinalda pulls me against her, her hands gripping my shoulders hard enough to

bruise. But when the door opens, it is only Seran, informing us it's safe to come out.

No one tells me what happened, but the archers stay on the walls, and the guards double at every door. I am kept inside, which I don't mind, saved from having to accept invites to more events. I only wish the gardens and the balconies weren't closed to me.

With nothing else to do, I spend longer in the bath one night, soaking in scented oils, letting the warmth loosen my limbs. I am floating, eyes closed, calm, when a *thunk* echoes from the hall. I sit up and brush my hair out of my face, watching the door. Nothing stirs, so I settle back and let the water cover my ears once more.

A shadow falls across my eyes. I open them just in time to see a dark figure as his hands shove me under. I choke. Water floods my throat, burning like fire. I kick and claw at the rim, but the hands hold me down. Spots crowd my vision, bright then dark.

Then nothing at all.



A muffled knock wakes me. I cough violently and sit up.

I'm shaking, breath ragged, sweat sticky on my skin.

I cough and cough, until spit glistens on my hand.

Another knock rings out, clearer this time. "Your highness?"

It's a woman's voice.

I survived the night. Despite being back in the Sunrise Palace, and despite falling into memory, I survived. I stumble out of bed. I need to pull myself together. "Just…" I cough and hack. "Just one moment!"

I take a few shuddering breaths and open the door. The world is grainy and bright, taking time to fully resolve itself around me. A woman in white stands there; a priestess of Ignar. She gestures to three more women waiting in the hall.

"We're here to help you prepare yourself for the Flame."

The priestesses don't wait for my confirmation to enter. They help me into a ceremonial robe and simple sandals, and I only have a moment to reach under my pillow and slip the moonstone dagger into one pocket. I'm dizzy, bounced between their hands, my throat constricting around every

breath, as if my body still thinks it's water not air entering my lungs. But I choke down my coughs. I just have to get through today. I just have to hold it together until we get in front of the Flame.

They take me to the temple complex and lead me through its long corridors, sprinkling flowers in front of my feet all the way to the baths at its center. The ceremonial pool sits in a wide sun-drenched chamber. Hands remove my clothes and guide me into the water, scented with citrus and crushed maranth leaves. The hot water washes away the dried sweat from last night, but the memories linger. I grit my teeth, keeping my head as high above the surface as I can.

The priestesses push me under, and I come up gasping, fighting panic. I glare, hair dripping in front of my face, but I have to stay calm. I can't signal to anyone that I'm anything other than a compliant bride. The bath hides my fearful tears as they reach for me again.

Their cleansing dips feel like torture, each one too rough to resist. I shake, my jaw twinging painfully. I do my best to center myself in this moment, in this unbroken body, in each breath.

The priestesses guide me from the bath. They wrap my breasts and hips with wide strips of gauzy fabric. They layer a white overdress on top, tying strings every few inches, then cover it with a long-sleeved robe tied once under my breasts.

They bind my wrists and throat with bands of raw silk bearing quartz and sunstone beads. Gold is traditional for most ceremonies, representing Ignar's power, but no metal is supposed to touch me today. My body is to absorb all the blessings, reflecting nothing back.

As they prepare my veil, I grab the moonstone dagger from my robe on the floor and slide it into my gauze skirt. The tight layers hold it securely against my hip. They return to me before I finish refastening the overdress.

"I had an itch," I explain, as they tie me back in.

The sheer veil is draped over my hair and pinned in place with carved bone. I feel cocooned, a sacred vessel for Ignar's power, even though he's gone from this world and doesn't care what I'm doing. Even though his blood has never been in me at all.

They slip woven-silk sandals onto my feet to prevent me from touching the gold-inlaid floor before they lead me to the temple. The priests of Ignar wait in a semicircle around the altar, white-robed and solemn. They chant and wave scented smoke over my head.

I remember some of these rituals from my ceremony with Cantor, but I still need the priestesses to guide me down when I'm meant to kneel and nudge me when they want me to stand. A heavy scent of maranth follows me as a procession of priests and priestesses lead me to the Central Palace. My sandals scuff against the tile, my layered outfit limiting my pace. I trail them through the palace, until marble doors groan open and I step into the throne room.

The path to the dais is flanked by a small crowd, dressed in dark clothing on one side and light on the other. Thankfully, I only spot three brothers; we didn't give my four oldest enough warning to travel here, nor any of my married sisters.

The other two redheads on my side are Rinalda and my mother. I meet my mother's eyes for a full breath, not flinching away. Her chin is lifted, her expression tight. Whatever she's feeling, she's locked it down today.

Rinalda, on the other hand, is showing rare emotion, her eyebrows pulled together. Is she worried for me?

I'm worried for her too.

Please don't kill any of them. I send one pleading look to Nykiri, who will remain with most of the company outside the chamber. Karns agreed it would be safer to incapacitate my siblings than face their flames. Siro provided cloths soaked in powerful sedatives, which the group will use on the ignarians before they cross swords with the guards. But I know once the violence starts, no one can control who gets hurt.

I need Rinalda not to block our exit with her blue fire, and I need her safe.

Alaris faces the throne, his silhouette a stark contrast from the white steps up to the emperor. My father sits with his knees spread wide, robes covered in a solid gold breastplate. Past lives crawl under my skin as I approach, another version of this scene fighting to surface with a different groom waiting ahead, but I shove it down. I stop next to Alaris and bow as low as my ceremonial gown allows.

My father studies me for a long moment, taking his time to assess my presentation. Then he speaks: "Lord Alaris, why do you come before the Flame today?"

"I come to receive Ignar's blessing so I may marry Lysandra Ignaros." Alaris's low voice is like a caress on my cheek. After my visions last night, I feel like we've been apart for months.

My father's eyes blaze. "And do you swear to wed her in Arastos, to bear your heirs there, on arastorian lands?"

"I swear it."

My father smiles. In his eyes, the map created at the end of the Incarnial Wars is finally being redrawn, with an entire province returned to Ignar. "Then let us go before the Flame and bless Lysandra to bear a sun-strong child."

The priestesses swarm me and undo three of the ties in the center of my dress. They hold it open, exposing my midsection. A priest approaches with a bowl and brush. He dips the brush into white ash and paints a sun low on my stomach. The priestesses retie the dress and re-drape my robe.

A priest takes Alaris's hand, and a priestess takes mine, and they fold them together. His cool skin is an instant relief.

My father speaks again. "None of my line and no women may accompany us before the Flame. Lysandra's womb and blood alone must absorb Ignar's fire. Men from both sides serve to bear witness to these vows and this blessing."

Emperor Belzas strolls down from the dais and leads us behind the throne. He stomps his foot, and a huge marble slab groans to one side, inch by inch, revealing a wide, white staircase. He sparks a ball of flame in his hand and descends.

We enter next, followed by the priests carrying torches, the witnesses, and the guards.

We step down, down, down, deep beneath the palace. Even though the tunnel is wide enough to fit a carriage, the smooth walls and endless curve feel claustrophobic. The walls are pure white marble but sparks of color start to swim at the edges of my vision…

I smell roses, and the present wavers.

Not now.

Alaris squeezes my hand, bringing me back. I lock eyes with him. I see concern there, but I can't distract him right now. I give him a tight smile.

Finally, we reach the bottom, stopping before a pure white slab with a seam in the middle. I count our numbers. We have ten witnesses against my father's ten, plus his eight guards, and three priests. The numbers aren't perfect, but our people are armed and only need to keep the guards away from Alaris.

My father steps forward and presses his hand to both sides of the seam. The doors know who they open for. They rumble and part with the terrible sound of stone grating over stone.

Beyond them lies a corridor of the same marble. Another pair of doors waits at the end, which I know from my memories is the final seal on the chamber.

We step inside, and the first door shuts behind us. This space feels like a tomb, suffocating and still, with stale air and no light except the torches the priests carry.

The second set of doors begins to open with the same grinding effort. As soon as they crack, incredible light and heat blast into the corridor, staggering me. I squint and turn away. Everyone else in the party does the same. Only my father and Alaris keep their backs straight as the Eternal Flame is revealed.

The chamber ahead is vast, with huge columns supporting a vaulted ceiling. It's like an echo of the throne room far above, but instead of a seat, the room is arranged around the Eternal Flame, contained in a basin of white onyx. Aside from dancing tendrils of yellow and red leaping across its surface, it isn't really like a fire; it's a solid glowing ball, its white core so bright I can't look at it directly. It gives off no smoke, just blinding, soul-searing heat. My skin flushes and I break out in a sweat.

This was easier the first time, when I wasn't half-delirious with past lives crowding my brain.

I close my eyes against the brightness and open them in my dark bedroom. I'm in bed.

"Lysandra?" A low voice cuts through and the vision disappears.

I was just lying down, but now I'm on my feet, leaning against a hard body somewhere hot and bright.

Alaris. We're here with the Eternal Flame.

"I just tripped," I mumble, glancing around at the company. Seran's eyes are on me, but if he noticed my unusual behavior, it doesn't show in his face. The guards disperse to the edges, taking up their posts on either side of the room, their brows all dotted with sweat. The witnesses stop halfway into the space out of necessity, the heat an oppressive wall.

My father walks up the steps to the edge of the basin and raises his arms, basking in the Flame's radiance. It's like the sun trapped in a bowl. He turns to face us, smiling, the power of Ignar coursing through him. His

eyes go molten, his skin glowing golden, his hair moving with energy. He is Ignar's power walking in the world, only half-diluted with mortality. He beckons Alaris and me forward.

The air gets hotter with every step. The veil and robe hide my sweat, but it's pouring, soaking the gauze and overdress. I'm grateful for every bit of fabric shielding my skin.

My vision swims, but it's not from the heat. The temperature is stifling, making even breathing hard, but it doesn't seem to help me stay present. If anything, it's making it harder to keep my eyes open. Pain and pleasure seem to ground me, so I squeeze my nails into my palm as hard as I can.

The chamber refocuses.

The priests chant, and my father beckons me forward, his power surging. I take one step and feel like the flesh is burning off my bones. I take another, and the world tilts, the marble floor coming toward me, roses beckoning. Alaris is there. He catches me in his arms and pulls me up. The priests gasp and mutter, halting in their chant.

Alaris sets me on my feet and turns us so he's between me and the Flame. For a second, I think he's hiding my recovery from my father. Then I look into his eyes and find they're not their usual dark color.

They're pure silver.

He shoves me back at the same moment he whirls and launches himself at the emperor.

Chaos erupts.

Guards surge forward as our witnesses draw their weapons, slashing through unguarded flanks and locking blades with those who got their own up in time.

I shriek as someone grabs me around the waist.

"Ly, I've got you," Dashol says. "Just stay behind me."

He drags me toward a column, setting me against it and taking a stance in front of me.

I press against the marble, unable to do anything but watch as Alaris and my father clash.

Sunfire and starlight. Void and flame. My father throws fire bursts again and again, met blow for blow by Alaris's starlight. Alaris throws glittering bursts of cosmic power at the emperor, while focusing every blast of darkness at the basin.

A fiery explosion knocks him back a few steps, and I take a step forward. But Alaris produces a sword in one hand and the void-black dagger in the other. Shadows twist around his shoulders and form his wings. He launches himself at my father.

Dashol strikes at a guard who runs toward us, and a priest who dives for me. Red spills across the marble.

I no longer smell blood and ashes. I smell roses.

Sounds warp, then muffle, as I slide down the column and slip under.

I'm in my bedroom. It's just after midnight.

I blink my eyes open, and I'm back in the chamber.

The air is filled with clanging, shouting, and the roar of flames. Guards and some of our men are on the ground, while others are still locked in combat. Orent is still on his feet, though his arm is crooked and bleeding. Two of our company hold back advisors trying to leave, and I spot Seran's olive robes, huddled against a column.

Alaris has forced my father backward, and they battle closer to the Flame.

My father's face contorts in an expression I've never seen on him: fear. He snarls and lifts a hand, and a blazing column emerges from the basin. It arches and smashes down on top of Alaris, who blocks it with the dagger. The blade and the roaring column wrestle against each other, neither giving ground. But darkness swirls with the flame, winding up the column, headed for its blinding white heart.

My father bellows in rage.

He thrusts both hands forward, and a wall of fire leaps from the basin. Alaris still has the dagger raised, holding off the twisting column. He's unguarded.

"No!" I shriek, racing toward him.

Stop. My mind thrums the command. The inferno drags. It reaches Alaris, but its tongues crawl. The roar drops low and stretches out.

I cross more distance than the fire.

Am I doing that?

The thought breaks it. Sound crashes back and the blazing wall explodes forward. It throws me back and I cry out, as much in shock as pain. Alaris is on me in a second, swooping through the flames, wings spread. He grabs my wrist and spins me behind him. He curses under his breath.

“I’m fine,” he says. “Stay down.”

My side is red, sections of my robe and dress burned down to skin.

“Dashol!” he shouts. “Take her!”

I don’t resist this time as a hand pulls me back.

My father’s arm is already coming up again, power from the basin gathering behind him.

I don’t run forward this time. I don’t know if I’m helping, but I have to try. I reach deep inside, dragging the thrum up out of my chest.

Stop, I command, staring at the flame. The blast stutters. Sparks hang over the basin for half a breath.

Alaris doesn’t hesitate. He launches off the spot, swooping toward the flame. He throws his sword toward my father with a blinding burst of crackling starlight, banks around him up the steps, and plunges the dagger downward.

A burst of silver explodes from Alaris, sweeping through the chamber like wind, pushing Dashol and me behind a massive column. I put my head down as it streams through my hair and clothes.

The chamber turns orange, then red. Crimson light pulses, pulses, like an ancient and furious heartbeat. The ground quakes.

And then—detonation.

The chamber explodes in fire and force. Stone shatters. I fly back and hit my head on the marble.

59

I wake up the morning after my birthday to find the roses are already beginning to spoil. I was shocked by my father's toast last night, but I need to stay calm. He won't marry me to the first lord who asks. I have time to figure this out.

The week after Noctus, at Seran's insistence, I accept an invitation to a lunch with a lord from Mordun. I'm returning to the Sunrise Palace when a bird screeches. It's one hawk, then it's ten, then it's too many to count, black wings filling the sky. Men shout and guards race past me. Arrows zip overhead.

Metal clangs against metal at the courtyard entrance.

I freeze, not fully believing what I'm seeing. Warriors in dark clothes are clashing with the guards, driving them aside, as a huge force marches through the gates with weapons drawn. At their front is a man like I've never seen before, his skin glowing, eyes blazing silver, long dark hair whipping behind him. Wings arch up from each shoulder, made of misting black feathers that twist and reform like living shadow.

He looks like a god.

"Princess!" a voice shouts to me. "Get inside!"

I take a step to obey, then something punches the middle of my chest, knocking the air out of me. I look down and see a golden arrow between my breasts, the same kind the guards are firing at the birds. I glance up in shock and lock eyes with the winged man. His piercing silver gaze bores into mine, then drops to the arrow in my chest.

My mouth fills with blood and the world slants sideways.



I'm bobbing. Arms are holding me, one beneath my knees, one across my back. I crack my eyes to wide-open sky. I turn my head and the ground is rushing by far below. Alaris has me, and we are flying.

He lands hard near a copse of maranth trees, and I rock against his chest as he stumbles to his knees. He stands and staggers, walking us under the cover of their long branches and dark green leaves. He settles me against a trunk, kneeling beside me.

"Ly. Ly, are you alright?"

I force my eyes open. He is injured and dirty, covered in soot and blood, with half his shirt burned away. His chest is heaving.

But he's alive.

"Hit my head," I mumble. I reach to touch the tender spot under my hair where my skull met marble. "'tsalright now."

His hands are gentle as they feel my skull and neck, then check my ribs.

"Let me know if anything else hurts," he says.

He keeps prodding me as my sluggish mind clears. I only hiss when his fingers skate over fresh burns, the skin red and raw along one side of my torso. My robe is gone, reduced to charred scraps.

I pull myself to sit up farther, lifting a hand to my temple. I can only put together pieces of what I saw in the chamber. Bloodshed and fire and magic blur together with my memories. "What happened?"

"I extinguished the Flame." One of his hands is completely black, and it shakes as he curves it into a fist. "But the emperor…the emperor is alive. When the Flame went, he was still on his feet."

"So…we failed? The wither won't stop?"

"It will be slowed." He shakes his head, mouth grim. "The Flame was always the bigger problem, but it will be harder to kill your father now that he knows I'm coming. There will be war."

I swallow. "What about everyone else? Dashol?"

"I don't know. I pushed as many as I could behind columns before it exploded, but I had to get you out of there."

I think of my siblings, and the waiting company in the throne room. I hope everyone made it out. I hope no one was hurt.

"I'm sorry I fainted. I tried to stay present, but I couldn't…"

"Don't apologize." One corner of his lip lifts slightly. "You provided something of a distraction, even if you nearly gave me a heart attack. More memories?"

"Another life." *The first one.* Without even questioning it, I know it to be true. I went to bed on my birthday and woke up the next morning, with nothing at all disturbing me at midnight. And I died just as Alaris led a massive army through the gates, a golden arrow from the Citadel's own guard pierced through my heart. An accident, from the archers taking aim at the hawks overhead.

I stare at his silver eyes. So ethereal and beautiful, so dangerous and powerful.

"I saw my first life." I raise a shaking hand to his face. "You were there."

Even though he was a stranger in that moment, an enemy, when I locked onto those silver eyes, I couldn't look away.

I'm too tired for words, but I use the strength I have left to sit up and kiss him. I want to drink him in, even though he tastes like ashes. I kiss him with all the desperation I've felt these last few days, terrified of losing him.

He holds me carefully, but his lips devour mine back. I want to crawl into his lap right here, but he might be bleeding, and I'm burned. Though the longer we kiss, the more I think we should just work around that…

I flinch, as a phantom arrow punches through my chest.

"Ly?"

"Just…the memories…"

Gates appear before me.

Despite the chaos in the courtyard, I gaze in awe at the winged man. Then pain, and I look down to find a gold-fletched arrow lodged between my breasts. The Citadel's arrow. I glance up at the winged man. Our eyes meet. Blood fills my mouth as I fall.

I swim back to the present moment, orienting myself here. The smell of maranth surrounds me. But something in the image tugs at my awareness. Someone to Alaris's right…

A shape. One of many soldiers, but familiar. Dressed in black.

Hooded. And masked.

I've never been more certain of anything. The man next to Alaris in my memory is the masked man.

I fold over, struggling to gasp in my next breath.

"What is it?" he asks.

I scrape my sandals against the roots, pressing back against the tree as far as I can. "Nothing. I don't know. Just, just give me a second."

He nods and sits back on his haunches, wings flaring once.

I use the tree to help me stand, and stagger around Alaris to get some space to breathe.

It's as if I was just there. I can clearly picture the courtyard, the guards, the hawks. The army marching in. I was so focused on the man with wings, I didn't examine the soldiers around him. They wore all kinds of armor and leathers, and some had their faces covered, with helmets, and hoods, and scarves.

But I'm not confused by just any hood and mask. I know his silhouette. Even at the edge of my vision in a memory, I'm sure it's him.

I turn slowly to face Alaris. "Do you know him?"

"What?"

"Do you know…" I can't even bring myself to fully say it. "Do you know him?"

He stares at me, eyes still full of starlight. "Ly, I'm not sure what—"

"I saw you with him. He was right next to you. He was…" I'm not making sense. I have to slow down. "In my first life, you stormed the Citadel with an army. The masked man was next to you."

I wait for the tiny pinch of his brows that shows me he's confused. I wait for him to tell me he didn't know or offer the answer that explains this.

I wait. And I wait.

I take a slow step back. I must have something wrong. Alaris protected me from the masked man in the field. Alaris knocked us apart, then blasted the man again with that starlit power when he flipped his knife to throw it.

But did he flip his knife in order to throw it? He flipped his dagger and lifted it by the blade. His arm was straight…

Like he was offering the hilt.

My eyes go wide. "Stay back."

"Ly." Alaris stands. "Please talk to me—"

"Just stay right there, Alaris!" I snap. "Don't come any closer, just answer me. Do you know the masked man?"

His ancient eyes blaze. He's silent for another breath. "Yes."

"How?"

He stares, without saying a word.

I snatch the moonstone dagger from the binding at my hip, slicing some of the gauzy layers in the process. Alaris's lips part as I hold the blade between us.

"Answer me!" I keep it pointed at him, even though I'm no match for him, and I don't want to use it. "Tell me the truth."

All I want is for him to tell me I'm wrong and my memory is a lie. That my head and my heart haven't misled me all these months. That the only person who ever made me feel safe, who ever really made me feel seen and cared for, didn't have anything to do with my deaths.

But he doesn't.

"He's one of my soldiers," he says. "My most trusted."

The blade wavers as my heart cracks, sorrow washing over me and taking my strength. "Your most trusted…"

"I've tried my hardest not to lie to you, Lysandra." His stillness is total.

I take a few steps back as he continues to stare silently. This is the cold Alaris, who soared above the world for centuries. *No, no, no.*

Terror clenches around my heart. I whirl and run. He shouts after me, but I can't hear a word.

Why would Alaris want me dead?

He's the one who guessed I was cyralian, but why would he care about my bloodline?

Did he guess I was cyralian…or did he already know?

Adrenaline bursts through me. I run as fast as my legs will carry me, my flimsy sandals flapping over thorns and rocks. I stumble when a sandal snaps but keep going.

Run, run, run.

It feels just like when I ran from the masked man, but even worse, because my head is screaming while my heart is cracking in two.

I feel a gust of air behind me just before I'm tackled, slamming onto him instead of the thorn-covered ground.

"Ly, stop," he demands, holding my arms in a vise. "You're going to hurt yourself."

His words of concern make something explode in my chest, rage and fear filling me and chasing out all other thoughts. I punch and scratch and

kick, thrashing in his arms. “Let me go!” I shriek. “Let me go!”

“Ly, stop. I’m not trying to hurt you…”

I kick and buck and fight him, but he’s too strong. Panic rises in me like a wave and I scream. I swing the knife to stab him, but with my arm locked in place, I slice the side of my thigh instead.

He grunts and his arms loosen. I scramble off him and back up, holding the shaking knife between us. I watch my blood drip off the beautiful blade. The blade Alaris gave me to protect myself and soothe my fears.

Tears stream down my face. “You sent him, didn’t you? Why?”

“I had to, Ly. I saw you die that first time, with the arrow. When I figured out what your power was doing…”

I freeze. I didn’t tell him about my first life yet. *I didn’t tell him there was an arrow.*

“You remember? You remember…seeing me across the courtyard?”

“Your powers don’t affect me like everyone else,” he says in that reverberating voice. “Our patrons were lovers. What even time forgets, the night remembers.”

I try to process what he’s saying. When I woke at midnight after my birthday, with no memory of my previous lives, he returned to wherever he was months before, remembering everything?

That means he already knew how every coup went. There was no new information I could give him with the oraculi. While I’ve been spiraling in these dreams and visions seeking answers, he already lived all of it.

I never saw the same attack twice.

I almost always died in winter.

After Alaris failed.

“You’ve been using me to restart time?” My voice shakes. “You sent him to kill me for another chance at your stupid plan?”

His silver eyes and wings don’t look beautiful to me anymore. They look like the marks of a monster.

“You don’t understand. I had to stop this.” He takes a step toward me. “You don’t have any void in you, Lysandra. Do you know what that means? It means you aren’t even partly mortal. Cyralia placed you directly in your mother’s womb, outside of time, long after she faded. You are Cyralia’s incarnial. You are immortal.”

His words don’t make any sense. Incarnials weren’t born, they were made, and they all died. The entire province of Cyralon and all its divinials

stand against his word.

But right now, it doesn't matter.

"Is that your excuse for all this pain?" I snarl. "That I'm not still dead?"

I had no feelings about things like birth and death. If I have to look at his blank face another second, I'll scream until my voice breaks.

"You're not listening, Lysandra. If the wither kills everything, you won't die. You'll live forever, suffering, in a dead world."

"I don't care!" I screech. I laugh then, hysteria overtaking me and wracking my body with something between a laugh and a sob. "You failed this time too. My father is still alive. Are you going to kill me again? Are you going to murder me yourself?"

"Never." He scowls. "I won't let you die anymore."

As if it matters that he's not the one who held the knife. I'm alone with him. My true killer. I need to get away from here. I can't outrun him. I only know one way out.

I want him to suffer.

"If I'm her incarnial, then I can come back again." I lift the moonstone dagger to my throat. "And when I do, I'll make sure you never get what you want."

I start to slash, but he's too fast. In an instant, he's on me, his fingers clenched around the blade. I try to pull it free, but he grips hard, his blood mixing with mine and running down my chest.

"No," he growls, eyes blazing silver. "I told you, I won't let you die anymore."

I shriek then, trying to saw the knife free, but his hold doesn't give.

The glint in his eyes is dangerous. Wild. "It doesn't matter if you hate me. I'll still save you, Lysandra. Now sleep."

A pulse of power washes over me and forces my mind into darkness.

THANK YOU FOR READING

Book two is coming! *Shadoward* is the first book in a planned duology. Want to be the first to hear about the next book, cover reveals, character art, and more?

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Surprise is part of the fun, so please don't spoil any twists!

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In classic fashion, I'm currently writing this at 4 a.m. The full scope of my gratitude requires more time and space than I'm giving it in this page and a half, but I have a choice: be brief, or possibly cry as I think through all the moments that mattered on the journey of this book. And I have to finish formatting tonight and can't do that blurry-eyed, so I'm choosing brevity.

Getting this story out there required time, oodles and oodles of time, so the contributions from my community have been in rushes of support, intermingled with periods of extreme patience.

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Uh oh…the tears…

And thank you, reader, for coming on this journey with me. I hope you enjoyed the ride!

—Alison

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alison Archer is a romantic fantasy author debuting her brand of plot-driven, twisty romantasy x mystery with *Shadoward*.

Her characters get to sleep, because she doesn't. If she kept you up till 4 a.m. on a school/work night because you couldn't put this book down, she's passed on the curse, and she's finally free.

This is the first book of the Divinial Duology, with the next planned for 2027. She's also got another romantasy x mystery series in the works, because again…no sleep.

Learn more at www.authoralisonarcher.com, or follow along @authoralisonarcher:

