



GLOW

OF THE EVERFLAME

THE KINDRED'S CURSE SAGA, BOOK TWO

PENN COLE

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P E N N C O L E

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EMARION



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The Realms of Emarion

LUMNOS, REALM OF LIGHT AND SHADOW

*A light which burns, while shadows bite
Their eyes of blue haunt day and night*

FORTOS, REALM OF FORCE AND VALOR

*With eyes and swords enrobed in red
They'll mend you whole or strike you dead*

FAUNOS, REALM OF BEAST AND BRUTE

*Fur and feathers, beasts that crawl
Their yellow eyes control them all*

ARBOROS, REALM OF ROOT AND THORN

*Eyes of moss bring nature's scorn
The prettiest flowers have poison thorns*

IGNIOS, REALM OF SAND AND FLAME

*Flame in spirit, flame in sight
The desert holds their fiery might*

UMBROS, REALM OF MIND AND SECRET

*Irises black, with hearts to match
A kiss, and soon your mind they'll snatch*

MEROS, REALM OF SEA AND SKY

*A gaze to match the vengeful seas
In water deep, they'll drown your pleas*

SOPHOS, REALM OF THOUGHT AND SPARK

*The cunning spark of wisdom true
Rose eyes will be the death of you*

MONTIOS, REALM OF STONE AND ICE

*Violet stone to match their gaze
Beware their ice at end of days*

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*For every spark that has lost its light
and needs a little help
remembering how to glow.*



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Chapter One

A hallucination.

It had to be a hallucination.

That was the only explanation. The visions I'd been carefully avoiding for a decade were back, and I only had myself to blame.

For years, I'd taken a regimen of a rare substance known as flameroot to ward off the wild, impossible delusions I'd developed as a young girl—delusions that I could feel things, *do* things, that mortals like me should not be able to feel and do.

Before disappearing without a trace almost seven months ago, my mother—the best healer in Lumnos, Realm of Light and Shadows, one of the nine realms of Emarion—had been obsessed with ensuring I took my daily dose. She warned me the visions could come back if I missed even a single day.

Well, I'd certainly missed more than a day.

Several weeks had passed since I'd hurled my entire supply of the distinctive red powder into the sea for reasons that, even now, I struggled to explain.

Perhaps because of the way it dulled my emotions and left me feeling hollow and cold, or perhaps because of the mysterious black-eyed woman who cornered me in a dark alley and urged me to give it up after revealing family secrets she never should have known.

At the time, the flameroot had represented everything I hated about my life—every loss, every mystery, every invisible harness that held me back in my sheltered, mundane life. Throwing it away had made me feel free in a way I'd never experienced in all my life.

But now, doubled over on my hands and knees in a circle of smoldering, newly blackened grass outside my family home, with my younger half-brother Teller staring in shock at the space just above my head, I felt anything but free. And the flameroot, my only chance at

salvation from this insanity I had so recklessly invited, now lay at the bottom of the Sacred Sea.

Panic gripped me by the throat as Teller's words haunted my thoughts.

Diem—you're wearing the Crown. You've been selected. You are the new Queen of Lumnos.

"I'm going mad," I said hoarsely. "I've lost my mind, and there's nothing I can do to stop it."

"You're not going mad," Teller said, though his expression was less than convincing. "I can see the Crown myself—it's floating right over you."

I reached up to rip it away, my fingers clawing for purchase, but I felt only cold, empty air.

Teller's face grew brighter as he approached me, illuminated by an unearthly light. I whipped around to search the shadowy forest for its source before realizing the light had come from *me*—from the space above my head, and from a silvery glow emanating from my skin.

Another delusion.

A hopeless whimper escaped my lips.

"I'll get Father," Teller said. "If he can see it, too, then—"

"No!" I shouted. Our father, Andrei, was already furious with me. The fight we'd had—oh gods, the horrible things I'd said to him...

You are not my father!

Where is our mother? Why did you stop looking for her? Why haven't you grieved her loss?

Perhaps you do not look because you do not care. Perhaps you're the real reason she's gone.

I regretted every word.

Though he was not my father by blood, Andrei had claimed the role with fierce dedication. His love for me and my mother was indisputable, and although no part of me truly believed he had played a role in her disappearance, my frustration over our family's endless secrets had pushed my temper to its limit.

He might never forgive me for being so cruel. If he found out I'd also been lying to him about the flameroot...

"Don't tell him yet," I begged. "Please, Teller."

"We have to tell someone. If that really is the Crown of Lumnos, that means the King is dead, and you're going to have to..." He shook his head, unable to get the words out.

No.

This was all part of the hallucination. It had to be.

Maybe Teller wasn't even here. Maybe I was talking to myself, lost in my own insanity.

My focus shifted to the marshy shoreline that ran in front of our family's land, the same spot where I'd flung the vials of flameroot into the sea. The current was strong in this area, but maybe...

I climbed to my feet and staggered toward the water's edge, clumsily kicking off my boots and unlatching my weapons. I was still wearing Prince Luther's tunic and the plated armor pants of the Royal Guard uniform, after his cousin had dressed me when my own clothes were incinerated by the armory fire. The fabric soaked up the frigid water like a sponge, plastering to my skin and weighing me down to the muddy seafloor.

"By the Flames, Diem, what are you doing?" Teller protested. "Come back, it's as cold as the glaciers of hell out there."

I didn't answer, my mind too focused on my search. I dove under the surface and tried to spot some sign of the distinctive jars, but the water was too murky to see more than a foot through its cloudy depths.

I came up gasping for breath and caught sight of my reflection on the surface. Even through the ripples, I could see it hovering above me, its scattered dots of light twinkling like gemstones.

The Crown of Lumnos.

No, I told myself. *Not the Crown—just my imagination. My madness.*

A fresh wave of dread sent me wading deeper into the water and thrashing wildly as I rummaged along the seabed.

"Diem, come back to shore," Teller called out. "We'll figure this out."

"I can't," I yelled back. "I can't. I... I have to..."

"Come back, or I'm going to get Father."

"No!" I whirled around and saw the panic in Teller's caramel-brown eyes.

"Please, Diem," he begged. "You're scaring me."

"The flameroot—I threw it out here a few weeks ago. I was angry, and I..." I pushed myself deeper into the ink-black sea. "I need to find it. I can stop all of this if I can just find it."

My brother's expression shifted to something like pity as his voice dropped low. "The flameroot isn't going to stop this, D. That Crown is real."

“No,” I rasped, an invisible noose tightening around my neck.

“Remember when we were little,” he said gently, “and you were so scared the flameroot wouldn’t work. You made me promise to tell you if your mind was starting to go, and I swore to you that I would. Do you remember?”

I managed a nod.

“I need you to trust me. I’m telling you, on my life, that you are not imagining this. I don’t know how in the nine realms this happened, but that powder won’t make it go away.”

His tone was so earnest that I might have believed him, had I been listening. But my focus had shifted—to the dark-haired, blue-eyed, finely dressed Descended girl standing behind him holding a bouquet of white roses whose petals seemed to be dipped in glowing moonlight.

The flowers tumbled to the ground. “Blessed Kindred, you... you’re...”

Teller stumbled backward. “Lily! What are you doing here?”

Her gaze locked on me—on the spot above my head. “Diem said I could come for dinner, and I thought...” Her hands flew to her mouth. “Is—is it real? Are you...?”

Lily’s unexpected arrival snapped me out of my stupor. I waded back to the shore, trying to find the words to tell her that no, this couldn’t be real, not for a thousand different reasons, but the words wouldn’t come. At the moment, *real* was too complicated a concept.

“This means our King is dead,” Lily murmured. She sank to her knees and placed a fist over her heart. “Long live our Queen.”

“Please, don’t,” I protested, attempting to wring the liquid from my waterlogged clothes. “I’m *not* your Queen.”

Teller’s eyes darted between us. Slowly, he began to drop to his knees. “Long live—”

“Oh stop it,” I hissed and grabbed his arm, hauling him back to his feet. “Not you, too.”

Lily lowered her head. “Blessed Mother Lumnos has chosen you.”

“Then she made a mistake. I can’t be the—*will you please stand up?*—I can’t be the Queen. I’m only a mortal.”

Growing up in the poor village of Mortal City, I’d spent my life isolated from the luxurious world of the Descended, the offspring of nine sibling gods and goddesses known as the Kindred, who long ago colonized our mortal home. I knew very little of the rules of royalty, but I did know

this much: when a monarch died, their throne passed to the most powerful Descended. Only those with the blood of Lumnos flowing in their veins had ever worn her Crown.

Until now.

Lily rose, her face still aglow with reverence. “Perhaps she decided it’s time for a mortal to reign.”

“Has that ever happened before?” I asked.

She shook her head. “None of the nine realms has ever had a mortal Crown. But they say Blessed Mother Lumnos can see what lies in the future. Maybe she believes a change is needed.”

“Or maybe you’re not mortal,” Teller said quietly.

My focus shot to my brother. “How can you say that? Do I look like a Descended to you?”

He ran a hand down the back of his neck and scanned me from head to toe as if seeing me for the very first time. “You’re tall, like they are. You’ve always been strong. I haven’t seen you bleed from a wound since...” He stiffened. “Since your visions started.”

“Of course you have,” I argued, though as my thoughts tumbled through a web of memories, I couldn’t seem to think of one, either.

Only once—weeks ago, at the royal palace, when a Descended guard had nicked my throat with his blade. But that knife had been Fortosian steel, one of the only substances that could pierce Descended flesh. Their nearly impenetrable skin, along with quick healing and the power to wield magic, manifested in Descended children at puberty—the same time my visions began.

My last confrontation with Prince Luther played in my mind, his striking blue-grey eyes watching me through the bloody handprints I’d left across his skin.

I know you feel my power, he’d taunted. Because I can feel yours, too. You’re no more mortal than I am.

No. No, no, no, no.

I *had* to be a mortal. My mother would know if the man who sired me had been Descended, and she would never keep that from me.

Would she?

“What about your eyes?” Lily asked, squinting as she looked closer for the telltale blue that would mark me as a Lumnos Descended, as opposed to the brown of the mortals. “I’ve never noticed before. Are they...?”

“Grey,” I answered. “Not like the mortals or the Descended. But I was born with brown eyes, they changed when I—”

Lily’s gasp cut me off. “Grey? Your eyes are *grey*?”

“Why? Does that mean something?”

“Show me,” she insisted.

My shoulders tensed. I had long ago learned to be wary of the attention my unusual eye color attracted. Children of mixed mortal-Descended heritage were forbidden by law, and any blue-eyed child who couldn’t prove pure-blooded lineage was condemned to execution if they were found.

A strong reason for your mother to lie about what you are, my conscience reminded me.

Lily let out a strangled cry as she took in my smoky irises. She staggered back, then turned as if to flee. “I have to go. I have to tell Luther about this. He’s been—”

“No!” I ran forward and clutched her shoulders. “Lily, you cannot tell your brother. You have to promise me you won’t say a word.”

“You don’t understand, Luther can help you. He saw—”

“I don’t want his help,” I snapped, a little too harshly. I regretted the hurt that flickered across her face, but this was one area where Lily and I would never see eye to eye.

Her brother had been the King’s heir apparent, groomed to take the throne from a young age. His magic was so infamously strong, no one had even been considered a close second. Luther’s name had been all but engraved on the Crown.

And considering that only hours ago, I’d sliced a blade into his throat as we’d threatened each other’s lives—among *other* deeply unsettling exchanges—I wasn’t in any rush to tell him it now belonged to me.

“He cannot know about this,” I said. “No one can. Not yet, at least. Please Lily, I’m begging you.”

“But you’re our Queen,” she whispered, looking pained.

I gripped her tighter. “If I’m your Queen, then you have to obey me, correct? You must do as I command?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

“Then I command you as your Queen—tell no one about this. *Especially* Prince Luther.”

She let out a whimper as she realized she was caught.

“Everyone’s going to know the moment they take one look at you,” Teller said, pointing to the Crown.

“There must be a way to conceal it or take it off.” I looked at Lily hopefully. “Right?”

“King Ulther only wore it for special occasions,” she said, then hesitated. “But perhaps it can’t be removed until you complete the Rite.”

“She means the Rite of Coronation. It’s a ritual held on Coeurîle,” he explained, pointing across the Sacred Sea toward the forbidden island at its center. I’d never been more grateful that my brother was the one mortal invited to attend Lumnos’s prestigious Descended school, making him well versed in their arcane traditions.

“When is that?” I asked.

“After the Period of Challenging. In thirty days, any Descended in the realm can Challenge the new Crown, if they believe that person to be...” He shot me a sympathetic look. “...unworthy to wear it.”

“Good.” I gave a short laugh as tightly wound tension eased from my bones. “Perfect, actually. Luther can Challenge me. Gods, I’ll just *give* it to him. Let them all find me unworthy, for all I care.”

Teller and Lily shared a somber glance.

“It’s not that simple,” he said slowly. “If someone invokes the Challenging, they must duel until either the Crown or the Challenger is killed.” Teller looked ill. “It’s a fight to the death, D.”

“Surely there’s some other way...” My voice fell silent at the dread on my brother’s face.

My world began to splinter around me. If all this was true, life as I knew it was over. The mortals, with their well-earned distrust of the Descended and their outright hatred of the royals, would run me out of the village. Would I even survive long enough to make peace with my father? To find my missing mother?

And Henri. Oh gods, *Henri*.

My childhood sweetheart, the man whose marriage proposal still hung unanswered over my head—and the man who had brought me into the bloody fold of the Guardians of the Everflame, the mortal resistance. The Guardians had proven there was no line they wouldn’t cross to destroy the Descended. If they believed I was one of them—and worse, the Crown...

I started to sink under the heaviness of it all. One day ago, I was an inconsequential mortal girl living an unimportant life, and now I was... what

even was I?

“Tell me this is a hallucination,” I whispered. “Tell me I’ve lost my mind and this is some awful dream.”

Teller’s arms slid around my shoulders. “Whatever happens, you won’t be alone. We’ll figure this out together.”

The rough tremble in his voice nearly broke me apart. With his elite education, he knew far more than I did about the consequences the Crown would bring. If he was this scared...

Shame swept through me and cooled the molten burn of my panic. I was the elder sibling—I was supposed to be strong for him. Promise him that everything would be fine. With his quiet, steady manner, he had already been a rock for our family since our mother’s disappearance. I couldn’t let him carry this burden, too.

I took a deep breath, crushing the fear down, down, down into a leaden ball that I could roll away into the shadows of my heart. I pulled away from Teller and placed a palm on his cheek. The light from the Crown filled his eyes with a brilliant glow, revealing the anxiety he was trying so valiantly to hide.

“Tomorrow, go to Father and Henri. Tell them I’ve left town to visit a friend, and you’re not certain when I’ll return.”

He shot a look toward our family’s cottage. “Are you sure we shouldn’t tell Father now? What if Mother told him something before she...” He trailed off.

“Not yet. I need to sort this out for myself first.”

Teller frowned, but nodded. I gave a silent prayer of thanks for the gift of a loyal brother—though whether my prayers were meant for the Descended’s Kindred or the Old Gods of the mortals, I was no longer sure.

“Where will we go tonight?” he asked.

“You’re staying here. I need you to go through your books from school for anything about the Crown, this Rite of Coronation, the Challenging—anything you can find that might help me get me out of this.”

“What about you?”

That, I had no answer for. I couldn’t risk being seen by anyone until I learned how to hide this infernal *thing* floating over my head.

“I can help,” Lily jumped in. “There’s a cabin on the royal hunting grounds, not far from the palace. No one would dare use it without

permission from the Crown, so you won't be disturbed. Besides, you're the true owner." She shrugged. "All the royal properties belong to you now."

My heart skipped a beat at the idea that all the opulence and excess I had once despised the royals for hoarding was now mine to possess. To think of what I could do with all that wealth—the problems I could solve, the people I could help...

I shook my head to clear the thoughts away. I had no intention of keeping the throne, and certainly no desire to fight anyone to the death for it. This was all one massive, unthinkable mistake.

I just needed some time to prove it.

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Chapter Two

An hour later, I found myself alone at the royal hunting lodge, a spacious cabin nestled in a quiet patch of forest. The interior was rich with warm woods, cozy furniture, and layered hides. The main family room smelled faintly of tobacco and hickory, its walls dotted with the heads of slain beasts and oil paintings depicting the Crowns of old.

The doors were secured with bloodlocks that only opened with “*royal blood, willingly given.*” When I’d pricked my finger and placed it on the smooth black disc, the click of the latch felt more like a door opening in my soul than in front of my eyes.

The truth was unavoidable. *Royal* blood meant *my* blood. I was indeed the Queen—at least for now.

Lily had left, promising to return with food and dry clothes despite my protests. Her sudden keenness to serve me was disconcerting, a far cry from the casual disdain, if not outright hatred, with which most mortals viewed the Crown. Easier to respect a throne when you’re raised to believe your beloved brother will inherit it, I supposed.

I hadn’t worked up the nerve to ask her how Luther might react to losing the Crown everyone had been so certain he would receive. I wondered if she thought he would kill me on the spot or wait for the Challenging to do it more formally.

Even though, lately, he hadn’t quite seemed like my enemy anymore. He’d saved my life by pulling me from the collapsing armory. And when we’d said our final goodbyes, the way he’d looked at me, the way he’d *kissed* me...

A shiver rolled down my spine.

I walked to the massive stone hearth and struggled to build a fire with my stiff, frostbitten fingers. With these wet clothes plastered to my skin, I couldn’t seem to get warm, no matter how high the flames climbed.

I peeled the sopping tunic over my head and laid it out by the fire, then followed suit with the rest. A snort escaped me as I saw the elegant undergarments Luther's cousin had chosen when she'd dressed my unconscious body this morning. The wine-colored lace was woven with velvet ribbon, and a clasp between my breasts was inset with a sapphire surrounded in pearls.

How could I possibly step into a world where even the garments they hid beneath their clothing cost more than every possession I'd ever owned?

I tugged a blanket around my shoulders and threw a fresh log onto the fire, sending a cloud of sparks swirling upward. A sharp burst of panic pulled my muscles taut as my mind flashed back to the armory and the sound of the victims' anguished screams. The towering flames seemed to point a finger in accusation: *You caused this. You killed them.*

My skin still prickled with the phantom sting of blistering embers raining down on me as the building collapsed. And yet—there wasn't a single wound on my flesh. There was no sign at all of the blaze that had burned my clothes away and left me unconscious for hours. No mortal should have survived it... but if I wasn't—

"No," I snapped at myself, gritting my teeth. I shoved those thoughts away before they sank too deep.

The memory of the inferno had finally chased away my chill, but it left behind an unbearably heavy exhaustion. It felt as if an entire lifetime had passed in the span of one wretched day. I was hopelessly adrift, unsure where to even begin my search for answers.

"When all else fails, keep moving," I said to the empty room, echoing the command my father had drilled into me. "If you cannot run, then walk. If you cannot walk, then crawl."

His voice filled my stormy mind. *If you are outnumbered or overwhelmed, or if all seems lost, just keep moving. Onward, until the very last breath.*

My heart twisted. Though my anger over our fight still simmered, his words gave me much-needed clarity. I couldn't hide in this cabin forever. The world was not some prowling creature that might lose interest and wander off. I had to keep pushing forward, keep learning who I was and what it meant to wear this Crown.

Queen or not, I was still Diem Bellator—and a Bellator did not flee from a challenge merely because it scared them.

Outside, the heavy clop of hoofbeats approached. Lily must have returned on horseback.

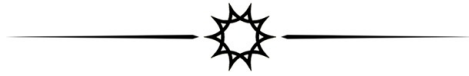
I felt a stab of guilt that she was traipsing back and forth at night in a misguided effort to win my favor. I tugged the blanket tighter around my half-naked body and walked to the door, throwing it open before she could knock.

“Honestly Lily, you really don’t have to—”

My voice withered away as I stared into eyes so pale they were nearly silver, split by the jagged line of an angry scar.

The eyes of Prince Luther.

Lily had betrayed me.



IF I THOUGHT I had seen a glimpse of Luther’s fiery temper before, it was nothing compared to the frenzied man staring at me now.

I barely recognized him. His expression was wild, eyes wide and lips bloodless. His chest heaved with shallow breaths, the muscles coating his body twitching with coiled tension. He looked closer to an animal than the eternally poised Prince I’d come to know. The jewel-encrusted sword he normally carried on his back was unsheathed and gripped in his white-knuckled fist.

He apparently had no intention of waiting for the Challenging to shed my blood.

I swore internally. My mortal weapons were useless against his Descended skin, and the one weapon that might save me—the Fortosian steel blade gifted by Henri’s friend, Brecke—was gone, fallen at Luther’s feet and forgotten amid the fervor of our stolen kiss.

My blood heated at the memory.

Bands of light and shadow, the manifestation of his Descended magic, curled around his arms like twisting vines. The scar that tore across his face looked darker than ever, a harbinger of the destruction he had the power to unleash.

Luther took a step closer, moving into the doorframe. It took every shred of my courage to resist a retreat.

Strangely, hurt tugged at my chest. Despite our wildly different worlds and my suspicions about his role in my mother's disappearance, some naive part of me had felt a bond forming between us I couldn't explain. Not a friendship, exactly. Something... else.

But it was clear enough from the sword in his hand and the scorching pulse of his aura that Luther hadn't come here for anything like *friendship*.

I braced my shoulders and raised my chin, even as the icy fingers of fear crept along my skin. I might be terrified, but I would die—perhaps literally—before I would let Luther Corbois see me cower.

"I won't go down without a fight," I warned. "At least give me a blade to make it fair—if you even know the meaning of that word."

The dark lines of his brows pulled in, his sharp features dulling slightly.

"It's hardly my fault the Crown chose me instead of you," I said. "As soon as I find out how to get rid of it, you can have it. I don't want any part of you or your people."

Surprise flashed over his face. I wondered if the possibility of someone not wanting the Crown had ever occurred to him.

My eyes darted warily to his bejeweled sword. "If you won't give me a weapon, then kill me with magic. I refuse to die by *that*. It's too embarrassing."

His gaze followed my line of sight. He bristled, staring at his own blade like he had only just now taken note of its presence.

"How long have you known?" he asked, his voice deadly soft. "What you are. What you would become."

My jaw clenched. "I told you before. I'm just a mortal. I didn't expect any of this."

"There's no point in lying. We're well past keeping those secrets now."

I let the blanket fall and stormed forward to close the distance between us. "How dare you lecture me about secrets," I hissed. "Why don't you tell me what you did to my mother?"

He stilled and took me in, some dark thought churning in his eyes as they dragged slowly over my bare flesh.

"Eyes up here, Prince," I snapped.

His focus shot back to mine, his pupils blown wide.

I jerked my chin at his weapon. "Now put away that garish piece of tin before I do it for you."

He stared at me for a long, silent minute. His jaw flexed as he battled some internal decision—perhaps debating which part of me to carve up first.

“Is that why you killed the King?” he asked finally. “Because you think I hurt your mother?”

“Killed the King?” I nearly choked on the words.

“You were alone with him before he died.”

“At *your* request! He was barely alive as it was.”

“The guards said they heard arguing. There were signs of a struggle.”

I clamped my mouth shut. I was still trying to make sense of my bizarre final encounter with the King—his surprising strength as he’d pinned me at his side, the way his frail body had lit up with an eerie glow.

They told me you would come for me, he had said. They told me your blood would shatter our stone and lay waste to our borders. Devourer of Crowns. Ravager of Realms. Herald of Vengeance.

Best to keep that little interaction to myself.

“What happened with my uncle?” Luther demanded.

“Nothing,” I mumbled.

“Did he speak to you?”

“It’s none of your concern.”

“*Tell me*,” he growled.

I propped a hand on my hip and glared back. “Not until you tell me where my mother is.”

He noted the movement, his attention sliding down the vast expanse of skin at my waist.

His nostrils flared. “Was she involved in this? I knew you two were planning something. Your strange behavior at the palace, the way you flirted with me to distract me—”

“Flirted with you?” I shouted. “*Flirted* with you? As I recall, Luther Corbois, it’s always been you who can’t keep your hands off me.” He opened his mouth to respond. I silenced him with a finger jabbed into his chest, heat rising to my cheeks. “I wouldn’t flirt with you if you were the last living man on this miserable fucking continent.”

Sparks flew in his slate blue eyes.

Liar, they seemed to say.

We fell into a silent standoff. While I poured all my effort into maintaining my scowl, Luther seemed lost in my expression, as if searching

for some answer buried within. His hand rose toward me. When I flinched away, he stopped, his fingers curling in and dropping back to his side.

His focus traveled up, taking in the ethereal Crown. The sight of it seemed to ease his temper. As his breathing slowed, something unreadable shifted on his face. “You and your mother had nothing to do with the King’s death? You give your word?”

“Not that I owe *you* any explanation,” I huffed, “but no, I did not. I swear it. And if my mother did, I know nothing of it.”

He watched me, assessing, then took a step back and sheathed his sword. “Get dressed. I’ll take you to the palace.”

“Sorry, I’ll have to decline,” I said dryly.

“Do you plan to rule over all of Lumnos from a cabin in the woods?”

“I don’t plan to rule over anything. I told you, I don’t want your Crown. As soon as I find a way to take it off, you and your friends can fight each other for it.”

He frowned. “The only way to pass on the Crown is through death.”

“We’ll see about that,” I muttered, swiping my blanket from the floor and retreating into the lodge.

I stalked back to the fireplace and grabbed my damp clothes. Luther cleared his throat and awkwardly turned away while I dressed, and I felt a little thrill of triumph at having gotten under his skin.

“Even if you insist on remaining here, they’ll still find you,” he called over his shoulder. “The Crown’s gryvern is bound to you now, and Sorae won’t tolerate being separated for long. She’ll follow your scent the moment I return to the palace. My family will know to follow her.”

“Then perhaps I should kill you so you never return.”

He didn’t miss a beat. “Sorae will find you nevertheless. The Crown’s power calls to her.”

I thought of the stunning creature I’d seen on my prior visits to the palace—the legendary beast with the head of a sea dragon, the wings and talons of an eagle, and the body of a lion. To have such an incredible animal at my beck and call...

“If you come now,” he said, “you at least come on your own terms. You can reveal only what you wish to reveal. In our world, there is no greater advantage.”

I had to admit, begrudgingly, that he had a point. And I had just been scolding myself about facing my issues head-on.

With a sigh that was almost a groan, I secured my blade belt around my waist, then slipped my feet back into my boots, wrinkling my nose at the squelch of water that had pooled inside.

I walked back into Luther's line of sight and crossed my arms. "I presume Lily told you I was here?"

He met my gaze but didn't respond.

I arched an eyebrow. "She was meant to return here. I won't leave if there's a chance a young girl will arrive to an empty lodge in the dead of night."

His jaw tightened. "She won't be returning."

"So she *did* betray me," I grumbled.

"Don't be angry with her. She believed she was helping you."

"Why, because you promised her you would?" I snorted. "And then you showed up waving a sword and accusing me of murder. *Again*."

If I wasn't certain he was incapable of such an emotion, I might have believed I saw a hint of guilt behind the Prince's frozen stare.

I grabbed my things and motioned for him to put out the fire. With a flick of his wrist, a dark fog formed around the hearth and began to hiss. When the shadows dissolved, only a curl of smoke remained.

I couldn't help it—I *gawked*. I'd seen the terrifying violence Descended magic could cause, but to see it tossed around so simply, so casually... I wasn't sure I would ever get used to it.

"You could do that," he said, noticing my awe. He nodded his head toward the smoking embers. "If the Crown chose you, the strength of your magic exceeds mine."

"I don't have any magic."

"Still lying to yourself, I see."

My glare could have incinerated him alive.

"I *don't*."

"Impossible. And you'd be very wise not to say that to anyone at the palace."

I rolled my eyes and brushed past him, striding outside into the crisp evening air, where a horse was fastened to a nearby tree.

One horse.

Only one horse.

I jerked to a halt. "Absolutely not," I said, shaking my head. "I am not sharing a horse with you."

“It’s only a brief ride.”

“Then I’ll walk. Actually, I’m the Crown. *You* can walk.”

“You’ve taken to authority quickly for someone who swears she doesn’t want it.”

I shot him my nastiest scowl and caught the corner of his mouth twitch upward. Was that—was he—*smirking* at me?

“You couldn’t have brought two horses?”

“I didn’t expect to need more than one.”

“Because you didn’t think I would come with you, or because you planned to kill me first?”

He walked past me without responding.

The horse was an enormous beast, its back rising nearly a head above me. It had a glossy white coat that gleamed like starlight in the evening darkness, marred only by a tuft of black on its head.

As I admired the beautiful creature, I felt a tug at the hem of my memory. Something about it seemed familiar. But that was impossible—I’d never seen a horse like *this* before.

Its saddle was predictably ostentatious, embroidered in brightly colored patterns and studded with precious stones throughout. A crimson saddlecloth of quilted silk hung with tassels of miniature pearls, and solid gold stirrups dangled at the sides. Like so many Descended-made objects, it was stunningly beautiful—and impractical to the point of absurd.

I swallowed my mocking comments, if only because I was too busy scoffing at the hand Luther offered to help me mount. With a considerable amount of effort and a mortifying grunt, I managed to heave myself up and over the saddle.

I stiffened as his hand grazed across my hips to grip the saddle’s ivory horn between my open thighs. In one fluid, graceful movement, he mounted and seated himself behind me.

The curve of the saddle forced our bodies to slide together, his muscular thighs pressed tightly to my own. His arms slipped around my waist to reach for the reins, and as he leaned forward, his chin nestled against my temple.

The familiar scent of him overwhelmed me. He should have smelled like wealth. He should have reeked of exotic incense and spices no mortal could ever afford, all the hallmarks of his privileged status.

Instead, his intoxicating musk hinted at cedar, leather, and moss. He smelled like the forest—my favorite place in the world, the only place I felt truly alive.

He smelled like *home*.

It made me hate him even more.

“You’re shivering.”

“I’m fine.”

His arms tightened around me anyway, and I barely managed to hold back a groan at how nice the searing heat of him felt as it seeped through my soggy clothes.

He nudged the horse into a trot. Our bodies rocked together in a steady rhythm with no chance at putting any distance between us. His hips ground relentlessly against mine, made worse by the way he seemed to pull me closer, closer, closer. I felt every swell of his chest as he breathed, heard every thunderous beat of his heart—racing even faster than my own.

I wondered if he, like me, was plagued with memories of our last interaction: his hands on my waist and my blade at his throat—then his lips on my mouth and my fingers in his hair.

Guilt washed through me as I thought of Henri. Though we’d never been officially courting, his marriage proposal had left no question that he believed we were more than casual lovers. If he knew about that kiss...

Then again, that might be the *least* of our worries. No one hated the Descended more than Henri. He might drop to his knees and thank the Old Gods for revealing my monstrous nature before he had chained himself to me in marriage.

Hot tears pricked at my eyes. Despite the rift that had formed between us, I was not ready to lose Henri from my life—and certainly not for some Crown I had no intention of keeping.

I was grateful for the wind that whipped at my face and dried away the evidence of my emotion. Every part of my life was a hot, steaming disaster, but I was determined to keep my confident facade in front of Luther and whoever awaited me at the end of this ride.

We cut a sharp turn, and Luther’s hand slid lower to grip my hip and hold me steady. My protests couldn’t quite take form in words amid the maddening brush of his lips against the shell of my ear.

The path straightened, and the horse broke into a gallop. My hair whirled in the breeze, tickling Luther’s face, and he gently tucked it behind

my ear, his fingers lingering against my skin as they trailed the curve of my neck. This time I could not blame the cold for the shiver that rolled down my spine.

As our pace quickened, my eyes caught on a flash of light where strands of golden tinsel had been woven into the horse's silky mane. An old conversation floated to the surface of my thoughts.

The biggest horse I've ever seen. I'll never forget it. White as snow, with a patch of black between its eyes, and as tall as a house. Gold ribbon in its mane.

The realization struck. I knew why this horse seemed familiar. I hadn't seen it before—but Henri had.

He'd watched the horse and its cruel rider trample a mortal boy to death in Lumnos City, a tragedy that had inspired him to join the Guardians' war against the Descended.

When I told him the boy was dead, he sat there in his gold and finery and he looked at that boy's corpse like it was nothing. He just brushed the dust off his horse and rode away.

Luther—it was *Luther* Henri had seen, *Luther* who slaughtered that boy without feeling.

My blood boiled so hot, it might have been steaming. I fixated on the horse's hooves flying across the gravel beneath me—hooves that had stomped the life out of an innocent child.

How could I have ever believed, even for a moment, that this man was not my enemy? I'd seen his ruthlessness with his own guards, the ease with which he'd shed their blood for disobeying his orders, and he'd admitted his fondness for the late King, a man responsible for countless atrocities against mortals.

I'd been so stupid, so naive, to allow a handsome face to woo me right into his lethal hands.

He needed to pay.

They *all* needed to pay.

Perhaps I'd been too hasty in rejecting the Crown. What if I could balance the scales between the oppressor and the oppressed? I could bring them to justice—Luther and all the rest. I could make them suffer like my people had suffered and finally, *finally*, give the mortals a fighting shot at taking back what had been stolen from us so long ago.

Cold determination settled deep in my soul. I'd always dreamed of something bigger for my life, and this was my chance. My destiny beckoned, clear and unmistakable.

Survive the Challenging.

Complete the Rite of Coronation.

And destroy the Descended.

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Chapter

Three

Luther's horse had barely set foot on the mosaic stone walkway leading to the palace doors when I swung my leg over the saddle and leapt to the ground.

I couldn't stand one second longer with that *murderer's* body pressed against mine. I had plotted his downfall with every hoofbeat.

He shouted something, but his words went unheard as I strode toward the entrance, eyes fixed on the high landing of the gryvern's perch. Though it was empty with the beast nowhere in sight, somehow I could sense her. Her heartbeat was a voice that hummed my name even from miles away.

The Crown's power calls to her, Luther had said.

Perhaps the gryvern's power called to me in return.

"Come, Sorae," I whispered. The words seemed to emerge not from my throat but some new well of authority deep within that I had yet to explore.

A distant howl cut through the brisk night air.

"I'm here," I murmured, my eyes searching the obsidian sky.

Seconds later, Sorae swooped into sight, circling the palace in wide, sweeping arcs. Her shrill cry rang out across the grounds like trumpeting fanfare announcing the arrival of her Queen. The thump of her powerful wings felt synchronized to my pounding heart.

Any chance at arriving unnoticed vanished as a crowd of dark figures formed in the palace windows, silhouetted by golden light spilling out from within. The royal family had gathered to watch.

Good.

"Come, Sorae," I shouted. Commanding her felt surprisingly natural, as if it had always been the two of us together, bound in this soul-deep, ancient bond.

Her trajectory shifted. She shot toward me with lightning speed, then slammed into the ground in a cloud of dust, the stone tiles cracking beneath

her at the impact. Her wings flared wide, dark feathers quivering, before snapping back against the sleek lines of her leonine body.

She arched her neck and let out a deafening bellow. The small group of guards that had gathered took a few steps back in alarm.

To my ears, it might as well have been a purr. The sound of it soothed some innate wildness in my soul, the answer to a question I hadn't even known I'd asked.

I strode forward, hand extended.

Luther called out to me again—a warning, perhaps. I was certain the gryvern wouldn't hurt me. Sorae would rip out her own throat before she would harm a hair on my head. I had no idea how I could possibly know such a thing, but I was as certain of it as my own name.

Sorae's narrow snout lowered to meet my hand. I smiled as she let out a soft trill of recognition.

"You knew, didn't you?" I stroked my fingertips along the rough, jagged skin beneath her jowl. "Even before the King died, somehow you knew what I would become."

Sorae huffed once and gave a slow blink of her golden, reptilian eyes.

I took another step forward, my hands cradling her massive jaw as she towered above me. My fingers skimmed over her dark scales, down her long, spike-tipped neck, until they faded into the fur-coated steel of her powerful body. Her dense muscles twitched under my touch.

As if in response, she nudged her head against my hip, tucking me in close at her side. She turned her stare toward Luther and the guards with a deep, rumbling growl.

A warning, to any of them foolish enough to threaten her Queen.

"Incredible," I laughed breathily, unable to keep the grin off my face. "You are... *extraordinary*."

I felt the fierceness of her devotion to me, earned only by the Crown atop my head. I wondered how deep her loyalty might run. Would she defend me from the entirety of the Descended? From the other Crowns—from their own gryverns?

Would she do even more—would she go to war to defend the mortals, if I asked?

She must have been able to sense my thoughts as readily as I could sense hers. She threw a razor-sharp talon into the air with a piercing cry.

Yes, she would defend. Yes, she would attack. I need only call, and Sorae would answer.

I shivered at the sobering reality.

I glanced at Luther, surprised to see a look of curious wonder on his face. He had grown up with the gryvern at his uncle's side, and he'd once spoken of her like a quirky pet. It must be strange for him to see her cleave so quickly to the next monarch.

Perhaps he was wishing he'd killed me at the lodge, when I was easier prey. With Sorae as my guardian, ending my life had just become a far trickier task.

She snorted in response.

I smiled and stroked her chin, then turned to the palace. I strolled toward the entrance with my chin high, eyes fixed on the crowd of silhouettes tracking my every move. Luther fell into step a pace behind as he trailed me into the foyer.

The guards who had once assaulted me for daring to wear weapons in the palace now gave me a wide berth. They avoided my eyes as they beat their fists against their chests in formal salute.

I made my way deep into the chamber before I was forced to admit I had nowhere to go. Luther had asked me to come, and I'd relented. Now what?

I spun to face him, hands perched on my hips. "Well, I'm here," I said plainly.

A hint of amusement warmed his typically cold stare. "That was quite an entrance."

I smirked. "I think Sorae and I are going to be great friends."

"Be careful there. Gryverns are loyal to their Crown, but they can act of their own will. If you fear someone, or even dislike them strongly, she might take their life in an effort to please you."

I sauntered up to him and leaned in close. "Sounds like I'm not the one that should be careful."

His eyes sparked at my threat. "I asked Lily to gather the family upstairs. I presumed you'd rather meet them all at once, but if you'd prefer to spend the next few days making private introductions..."

I'd rather sink to the bottom of the Sacred Sea than do either of those things. "A single introduction is fine."

He nodded, then hesitated as he looked me over. “This meeting is very important, for both you and my family. If you wish, I can tell them we will reconvene tomorrow, and I can offer you my counsel on how to proc—”

“Your counsel is unnecessary.”

His jaw tightened. “Very well, but perhaps some sleep and a change of cl—”

“I’m fine,” I snapped.

I knew I was being rash. If anyone in the nine realms could properly advise me, it was Luther. This was his family, and he’d surely spent years planning the maneuvers a new Crown would need to take.

But I couldn’t trust him.

Not with this, not with anything.

“As you wish,” he said coolly. “Follow me.”

We walked in silence through the palace until we came to an arched doorway. The massive oak doors were carved in Sorae’s image, depicting the gryvern’s elegant body twisting and turning across the ripples of wood. Her talons and wings were outstretched, fangs bared as her mouth opened in a silent roar.

Luther’s posture shifted, transforming into the imposing statue he so often embodied. Shoulders back, spine straight, jaw set. The sudden change took me by surprise—I hadn’t realized how relaxed he’d become in my presence.

He gazed down at me. “Ready?”

I tried to subtly mirror his movements, rolling my shoulders and lifting my chin to a defiant point.

I nodded once. “I’m ready.”

He placed a palm on the door, then stilled.

“You saved my sister’s life, and for that, I owe you a debt that can never be repaid. Although I don’t imagine you’ll take it, allow me to offer you some advice that may save your own life.” He paused, his tone darkening. “Tell them as little as possible—about yourself, your plans, your magic. And especially about your mother.”

Before I could respond, he waved his hand, and twined branches of light and shadow curled along the door and pushed it open wide.

I took a deep breath, and I stepped forward to claim my throne.

Chapter Four

It took me one blink to realize I'd made a mistake in rushing into this meeting unprepared.

The royal family was large. *Very* large. No fewer than a hundred Descended were crowded into the spacious sitting room, and more were still flowing in from doors in the back.

They were dressed in the finest clothing, the room awash with silk and satin, velvet and brocade. Men and women alike had hair in a rainbow of unnatural hues woven into elaborate plaits, sweeping updos, or elegant curls. Arms glittered with eye-popping baubles, any one of which was worth enough to feed a mortal family for weeks.

On my previous visits, the Descended I'd met were exceedingly formal, clad in attire more fit for a ball than a casual day at home. Tonight, though, many of the royals—particularly those who looked close to me in age—wore scandalously little. I'd seen more modest outfits on the sex purveyors in Paradise Row.

Nearly all the adults stood taller than me, an ocean of eyes gazing down their perfectly straight, perfectly pert noses. I had always been tall for a mortal woman, but if I was indeed a Descended, I must be petite for my kind, a fact that rankled my nerves. I hadn't appreciated how much my height had fed my confidence until it was ripped away from me.

As usual, each of them was a work of art, breathtakingly beautiful in their own way. Their ubiquitous blue eyes ranged from deepest midnight to radiant cobalt to a pastel so pale it was nearly white. After a lifetime surrounded only by the brown eyes of mortals, I found each gaze more transfixing than the next.

Even the room was sumptuously dressed. An entire wall was dedicated to a hand-painted depiction of King Ulther on his throne, a black sash of mourning already draped across his face. Scattered among the chairs and

settees were tables littered with gilded goblets and heavy-bottomed cut crystal decanters that sparkled in the glow of an enormous chandelier.

And then there was... me.

Soggy and mud-stained, wearing ill-fitting clothing that stunk of brine. Messy hair, half-escaped from its sloppy braid. Dull, colorless eyes rimmed red with exhaustion. Mortal weapons that were as useful as twigs.

In the mortal world, my ego had been nurtured by my parents. My father had taught me to be strong and fearless, adept with weapons of all types. My mother taught me to be clever and independent—and most of all, unafraid to use my own voice.

But here, among the children of the gods, I'd never felt more mediocre.

I stared at them, unmoving, unspeaking, quietly regretting every choice I'd made. I debated how bad it would look if I fled the palace and sprinted all the way back to Mortal City to try this again some other day.

The back of Luther's hand brushed against mine—just for a moment, but too long, too lingering to be unintended.

He dipped his chin low. "Your Majesty, it is my honor to introduce my family, House Corbois." He gestured to the room. "House Corbois, I present the heir to the Crown, Her Royal Majesty Diem Bellator, Queen of Lumnos, Realm of Light and Shadows."

Silence.

Not a soul moved.

Luther's eyes narrowed slightly, his voice growing louder. "Our King is dead." He swiveled to face me, then closed his fist and beat it once across his chest with a furious thump. His chin dropped as he lowered to his knees. "Long live our Queen."

Lily followed almost instantly. Then, one by one, others joined in, even the servants who had been quietly filling glasses and craning their necks for a peek, the room falling still in wait for my acknowledgement.

I gazed out at the room of kneeling bodies. My petty side wanted to leave them there and let them marinate in fear that their influence had come to an end. But if I wanted to dismantle the Descended's power on my own, I'd need to do it from within. For that, I needed them to trust me.

For now.

"You may rise," I called out.

An older man with dark hair, pale skin, and a well-groomed beard stepped forward. “Your Majesty, I am Remis Corbois, younger brother of our late King Ulther, may Blessed Mother Lumnos guard his soul. I have the honor of ruling the realm as Regent until your Rite of Coronation.”

He paused, his expression expectant.

I said nothing.

He cleared his throat, then turned and beckoned. A woman with thin lips and long black curls stepped forward to join him, followed by Lily, who studiously avoided my eyes.

“Allow me to introduce my wife, Avana, and my youngest, Lilian.” The two ladies curtsied in unison. He gave a curt glance to Luther. “It appears you’ve already met my son.”

Luther’s parents—and Lily’s. I wondered what kind of people they must be to have raised such different children. My head cocked as my gaze washed over them in bold appraisal.

Remis noted the gesture with a tightening of his jaw. “May I also present my eldest brother, Garath Corbois, Warden of the Shadows, his wife Freah, and their sons, Aemonn and Taran.”

Four of the most beautiful people I had ever seen, two older and two younger, emerged from the throng. Together, they looked carved from marble and dipped in liquid gold.

The elder couple were stunning in their elegance, floating forward as if carried on air. The elder man had tan skin and dark blond hair, lightly touched with grey, pulled into a single plait. The woman seemed otherworldly with her fair complexion and platinum tresses that fell in a silken sheet to the curve of her waist. Both had angular features that accentuated their cold, cunning eyes. I noted how they offered only a subtle dip of their chin as they approached.

Their sons, on the other hand...

The younger one, Taran, stepped forward first. I recognized him as the blond man who had been at Luther’s side at the armory fire. He was a wall of muscle upon muscle that should have been intimidating, but his quirky half-smile and relaxed posture instantly put me at ease. His simple white tunic and leather breeches almost made him look mortal, if it weren’t for his colossal size.

He bowed, low and quick, hands resting casually on the hilts of his blades. They, too, were plain, prioritizing function over beauty—a rarity

among the Descended. He must have seen me note his grip on them, as he swiftly dropped his hands to his sides with a sheepish grin. "Pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty."

He was abruptly edged out by his older brother, Aemonn, who stepped in front of Taran and gave a dramatic bow.

I couldn't deny that Aemonn was gorgeous. More svelte than his brawny brother, he moved with the same fluid grace as his parents. His short, golden hair was styled into a perfect swoop, not a strand out of place, quite the contrast to his brother's messy shoulder-length waves.

Aemonn reached forward to take my hand, his fingers soft as they curled around mine and pressed my knuckles to his lips.

"Long live the Queen," he purred.

From the corner of my eye, I caught Luther and Taran share an annoyed glance.

In truth, I found Aemonn's flirting rather shameless, but the discovery that Luther was not fond of him had my devious side flaring. I fluttered my lashes and offered Aemonn a charmed smile.

"How gallant," I cooed.

Luther frowned deeply.

The next hour was a blur of rapid-fire introductions. Each Corbois was polite, if cold, though I expected nothing less. Their faces merged together in my wearied head, and when the receiving line ended, I could remember only a handful of names.

A young woman named Eleanor had been a bright spot in the dispassionate crowd. Her bubbly laughter was unexpected and contagious, and I found myself matching her enthusiasm as we chatted. Her voice struck a chord in my memory, though I couldn't seem to place where, and I didn't have the nerve to ask.

And then there was Alixe. Like Taran, she had been at the armory the night of the attack. When Luther had forbid me from going in to save the stranded guards, she alone had believed I could do it. I saw the same gleam of recognition in her eyes, and we shared a nod of mutual respect.

Alixe was... I hardly had the words to describe her. She was pure warrior. With a lithe but toned body, numerous piercings, a half-shaved head and a calculating stare, Alixe looked born for the killing fields.

But not as a mindless grunt soldier. No, Alixe looked like the person you'd send to strike down an enemy king in the heart of his own war camp

—and still expect her to return home without a scratch. Alixe was the mighty heroine I had merely played at being in every mock war Teller and I had staged as children.

Half of me idolized her and debated how to convince her to shape me in her image. The other half thought of my hidden goals and wondered if I would have to find a way to kill her before she killed me first.

Luther stayed at my side through the night, his demeanor unflappably calm. He offered few comments, only cutting in to pull me away when a relative's questions turned uncomfortably probing.

Occasionally, he stepped away to give orders to various servants or guards, and I was annoyed at myself for how anxious I grew in his absence. Despite my distrust of him, he had become my tether in this odd new world, and I wasn't ready to float into the dark expanse of it alone just yet.

Once I'd met everyone, Luther's father Remis stepped forward to usher me to a settee in the center of the room. He took a seat directly opposite me with his wife and daughter. Luther's uncle Garath and his family joined us, reclining on various chairs and ottomans nearby, while the rest of the family milled about, poorly pretending not to eavesdrop.

Only Luther dared to sit beside me.

"My son announced your surname as Bellator," Remis said. "I'm afraid I'm unfamiliar with that House. What region of Lumnos do you hail from?"

I almost laughed. Among mortals, my father's name was legendary. For Remis to be Regent and not know the name of a famed mortal war hero who lived in his realm... it only further confirmed my plans.

"I hail from this region," I answered. "In fact, I've spent my life a stone's throw from this very palace."

Luther tensed.

Remis lifted his eyebrows. "Surprising, indeed. I thought I knew all the Houses of Lumnos City."

I smiled coldly. "Perhaps you're not as familiar with the inhabitants of our great realm as you thought."

A vein twitched along Remis's forehead. He returned the smile and nodded. "A flaw I will endeavor to correct immediately."

Alixé edged closer to the group. "Are you any relation to Andrei Bellator?"

"My father," I confirmed.

Remis turned to Alixe. "You know him?"

"I know of him. I thought everyone did."

I was beginning to like her more and more.

"He's a highly respected army commander," she continued. "The highest-ranking mortal in our history. He's been retired for some time, but they still tell tales of his leadership."

I couldn't suppress a proud smile.

"A mortal?" Garath practically spat the word, as if saying it left some foul taste on his tongue. "You have a mortal parent?"

I debated my response. I had not forgotten Luther's cryptic advice—*Tell them as little as possible*—but I also knew I could only hide my lineage for so long. Soon enough, it would become painfully clear how little I knew about the Descended and their culture. Attempting to hide the reason why would only generate greater suspicion.

"Two of them, in fact," I answered finally. "My mother is mortal, as well."

Gasps and whispers floated through the room.

"You're... mortal?" Remis said, frowning.

"No, she isn't," Luther cut in before I could respond. "Andrei Bellator is her adopted father."

My head whipped to him in surprise. Even the people in Mortal City didn't know that, and I certainly had never told *him*.

"And your birth father?" Garath asked.

I gritted my teeth. "He died before I was born. I do not know his identity."

More shocked noises and twittering voices. I kept my face stony and offered no reaction.

"Forgive our surprise, Your Majesty," Remis said. "Children of mortals and Descended are..."

"Forbidden," I said flatly. "I'm aware."

"We'll have to... that is, many will demand..." Remis shifted in his seat. "The other Houses will expect there to be an inquiry into your parentage."

"It's unlikely to be fruitful. My father has no knowledge of my sire, and my mother is..." I hesitated. "...no longer with us."

The whispers had turned to outright cacophony. Remis looked nauseous. Garath and his wife were sneering like I'd grown horns. Luther's

friend Taran was grinning.

Luther rose and straightened his doublet, then cleared his throat. The talking silenced instantly, the entire family looking to the Prince with hushed respect.

“I admit that our new Queen’s upbringing is unusual,” he began.

“You mean appalling,” Garath muttered.

“However,” he went on, “this creates a unique opportunity. An Unhoused Descended has never successfully taken the throne. Ruling a realm is difficult even with the support of a large House. Doing it alone would be...” He turned to me, his chin lowering. “Dangerous.”

My eyes narrowed. Was that a *threat*?

“But if you were to claim House Corbois,” he continued smoothly, “we could be powerful allies.”

Remis sat up straight as he caught on to his son’s scheme. “Indeed, Your Majesty, we would be honored to welcome you as one of our own. House Corbois has held the Crown for centuries—no House is better suited to help you meet the demands of the role. We can offer you a wealth of resources, as well as our protection in the Challenging.”

“Protection?” I asked.

“No member of House Corbois would dare to Challenge you... *if* you were one of us.” Despite Remis’s smile, there was an edge in his tone. Another threat, just like his son.

Garath stiffened. “The other Houses won’t allow her to claim House Corbois without a blood relative. If they discover she’s selecting a House at whim, there will be chaos. Worse yet when they discover she’s a half-breed.”

My irritation flared at the derogatory slur.

“We’re all half-breeds, Father,” Taran said with a hint of mischief. “We all descend from Lumnos and her mortal consort. Unless, of course, you’re suggesting the Blessed Mother engaged in incest with her Kindred brothers.”

“But that would be heresy,” someone added cheerfully—Eleanor, the woman I remembered from earlier. “And no Corbois would ever blaspheme our patron goddess, right Uncle?”

Garath glared at them both, and Eleanor and Taran shared a wicked grin.

“Besides,” Taran said, shrugging, “we’ve got hundreds of dead cousins. Surely there’s one we can pin as her father.”

That answer seemed to appease the group, and a silence fell over the room as their faces turned to me.

I wasn’t sure what I’d been expecting—I’d been operating on adrenaline and near-constant confusion ever since the dying King had grabbed my hand and started shouting prophetic gibberish.

I had no interest in allying myself with this wretched family, who had ruled over so much of the very oppression I wanted to undo. And I *definitely* had no interest in allying with Prince Luther.

But if I declined the offer and Luther Challenged me on behalf of his House... despite all my bravado, I’d be dead in a heartbeat.

And I knew nothing of the other Descended Houses. Perhaps they were just as bad—or worse.

I looked over at Luther, his expression dark and unreadable. Had he proposed this plan to repay the debt he claimed he owed me, or to set me up for failure so he could claim a Crown he wanted for himself?

He sat back down beside me—close enough that his thigh pressed against mine, alighting a flutter of eyebrows throughout the room.

“This is a significant decision,” he said. “Perhaps Your Majesty would like some time to consider it.”

Time. Yes, I needed *time*.

“Yes,” I answered quickly. “I... I’ll think on it.”

Remis nodded, then rose and looked out at his family. “Until then, none of us shall speak of our Queen except to those in this room. Is that understood, House Corbois?”

A murmur of agreement drifted from the crowd.

“Let me be clear, family. If you wish to have any hope of keeping your home, your titles, and your royal status, you will say nothing of this to anyone. Am I understood?”

Another, louder, ripple of acknowledgement followed.

His words made me realize with a start that this was no longer the royal family. Princess Lilian, Prince Luther... without a blood relative on the throne, they would merely be citizens of Lumnos like any other.

No wonder Luther had proposed this deal—he stood to lose *everything*, including his precious title. It was almost enough to make me reject the offer on the spot.

But my plans were bigger than one man. House Corbois would meet its demise soon enough.

Along with every other House in Lumnos.

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Chapter
Five

As the night wore on, most of the family excused themselves, bored with me already, while others loitered and chatted quietly, no doubt gossiping over their new Queen's scandalous heritage.

I walked over to Lily, who had been taking great pains to avoid me all night. "Princess Lilian," I said firmly. "May I speak with you alone?"

She finally looked up at me, her eyes round with fear. "Um... of course, Your Majesty."

I felt the burn of Luther's stare as I brushed past him and led Lily to an empty corner of the room.

She shook her head and began to stammer. "I'm so sorry. Please... please don't be m-mad."

I sighed. "Lily."

"I know I said I wouldn't tell him, but Luther, he—he can understand—he can help you. He swore he would help you. He told me—"

"Lily."

"Oh Blessed Kindred." Her voice broke. "I betrayed you. You're my Queen, and I betrayed you at the very first test of loyalty."

"Lily."

She buried her face in her hands and burst into tears, body quaking with each sob. Across the room, Luther shifted toward us, then paused.

"Look at me," I commanded. She obeyed, her dark sapphire eyes red and weepy. I placed my hands on her arms and gave a gentle squeeze. "I'm not angry with you."

She sniffled. "You're not?"

"No, I'm not. Now dry those tears."

She swiped her cheeks and straightened. "But... but I promised."

"When you sent your brother, you believed you were helping me?"

She nodded emphatically. "He's a good man. And he can understand you—more than you think."

I very much doubted *that*, but I also understood the blinding power of sibling love.

“Then I can’t be cross with you. If the roles were reversed, I couldn’t have kept such a secret from Teller, either.” I brushed away a stray tear from her cheek and smiled. “You’ve been a very thoughtful friend, and I’m going to need that friendship in the days ahead.”

Her face brightened. “Oh yes, I’ll do anything you need!”

“Do you know of any way to bring Teller here without anyone in the palace seeing him?”

“Easy,” she said, a smile finally breaking through. “I sneak in and out of the palace all the time.”

I laughed. Teenagers would be teenagers, Descended or mortal. “Perfect. Bring him here tomorrow. I don’t mind if Luther knows, but please, tell no one else.”

“My lips are sealed—really this time.” She threw her arms around my neck, crushing me against her. “Thank you so much, Di—um, I mean, Your Majesty.”

“None of that. Call me Diem.”

I returned the hug with a warm squeeze. Lily was a good soul, and I suspected my brother cared for her more than he let on. I would have to protect the Princess from my plans as much as I possibly could.

But destroying her brother, her entire family—there would be no way to spare her the pain of those consequences.

Luther finally joined us. “Lily, it’s getting quite late and you have school tomorrow. You should get to bed.”

She rolled her eyes. “We have a Queen for the first time in centuries, and you expect me to *sleep*?”

“I can order him to let you stay up,” I offered. “If he says no, I’ll have him beheaded.”

Lily giggled. “I suppose I’ll have to decline. He does love to say no, and I’m rather fond of his head.”

“Lucky for me,” he said dryly.

Lily raised up on her toes to kiss his cheek, and he hunched over to give her an easier reach. It was, to my deep irritation, rather adorable. She ambushed me with a final hug, then threw Luther a coy grin as she headed out of the room.

Once she was gone, Luther eyed me carefully. “She seemed happy.”

I shrugged. “She’s a happy girl.”

“You didn’t punish her.” An observation—and a subtle question.

“Of course not. She’s still young. Misplaced as her faith in you may be, I’m not such a monster that I’ll hold it against *her*.”

A shadow crossed over his face. “Thank you for that,” he said quietly.

A long, awkward silence passed. I glanced around the room, looking for someone, *anyone*, to save me from this conversation.

“You handled the meeting extremely well,” Luther said.

My chest warmed at his compliment, and I internally scolded myself for it.

“I meant what I said earlier,” he went on. “Whatever your plans with the Crown, we can help. *I* can help.”

“An hour ago, you tried to threaten me into choosing your House.” I crossed my arms. “In fact, that’s the third time you’ve threatened my life since dawn.”

“I didn’t—” He scrubbed his face, his calm facade beginning to fracture. “Those were misunderstandings. I have never intended you any harm. What I said earlier was a warning, not a threat. If the other Houses find out about you, they’ll be breathing down your neck.”

“Maybe that’s what I want.” I shrugged. “Maybe they’ll have a better offer for me than House Corbois.”

He worked his jaw. “If that’s your wish, I will set up some meetings discreetly—*without* my family’s knowledge. But if you choose another House, you’ll be entirely alone. At least here, you have allies.”

I snorted. “Like who, you?”

“Yes,” he growled. “And Lily. And others—people who are not loyal to House Corbois or to my father. People who will be loyal to you, if you get to know them.”

I studied his face, scouring it for some trace of the scheme I was sure he must be hiding. “How did you know the truth about my father?”

“I didn’t. I guessed.”

And now I’d just confirmed it.

I groaned and rubbed my temples. “You just announced my biggest secret to your entire family. What happened to telling them as little as possible?”

“You left me no choice. If you try to pass yourself off as the first-ever mortal Crown, you’ll be dead in a week. Telling them you’re half-mortal

isn't ideal either, but they can't punish you for it now that you're Queen. It was the safer option. Besides..." His head cocked in a predatory tilt. "We both know you have far bigger secrets than that."

I stilled, my voice dropping to a low hiss. "And what of your secrets, Prince? You stole one of mine. I think I'm owed one in return."

His expression shuttered as he silently looked away.

"Where is my mother, Luther?"

More silence.

My anger spiked, hands fisting. "*Where is she?*"

His head whipped toward me, his gaze hard and dark as night. He leaned his face down to mine and opened his mouth to respond, but before he could speak, a third figure sauntered toward us, and his lips snapped shut.

"Your Majesty," Aemonn said smoothly, coming to stand so close beside me that his knuckles grazed the edge of my hip.

Not an accident, I suspected.

He gave a deep nod, though his glittering eyes never left mine. "I pray your introduction to our family was not terribly overwhelming."

"Not at all," I said, my smile tight. "Your father was particularly charming."

Aemonn clicked his tongue. "Calling you a half-breed... such vulgar words. I beg your forgiveness for his behavior. The events of the day have been a shock for him." His gaze flicked to Luther, and his expression turned smug. "For all of us, I imagine."

"Interesting," Luther said icily, "given how often I've heard those same words from your mouth."

Aemonn didn't flinch, his brilliant smile only growing. "You're mistaken, cousin. Perhaps your own involvement with the half-mortal children is coloring your memory."

I glanced between the two men, fascinated by their frozen glares and tense posture. These two *definitely* didn't like each other.

Aemonn's attention returned to me and warmed. "I'd be happy to give you a tour of the palace grounds tomorrow. That is, if you can escape the clutches of your royal babysitter here."

Luther stiffened. "That won't be necess—"

"What a kind offer," I interrupted. "I'd love to. After all, if I'm to accept this proposal, I should get to know my future cousins." I smiled

sweetly at Luther. “Don’t you agree?”

He stared at me with that stony look of his, a silent warning in the flare of his nostrils. “As you wish, Your Majesty.”

“That settles it,” Aemonn chirped. “I’ll come find you after lunch.”

“Perfect.” I beamed back at him, relishing in Luther’s discomfort. “And please, call me Diem.”

Aemonn took both my hands and pressed his lips twice against each set of knuckles. “Until tomorrow, Diem.”

He gave me a roguish wink before strolling away, and I had to bite my cheek to keep from laughing. For a people who were infamously impassive, these Descended were eager to posture before their new Crown.

Luther watched me, looking as if he had an entire library of words he was feverishly trying to hold back.

“Something to add?” I asked in my most innocent tone.

“You made it quite clear you do not desire my counsel.”

“That’s never stopped you before.”

He gave me a long stare, then his eyes roved downward, pausing on my daggers before rising again. “I presume you intend to stay in the palace this evening.”

“I *intended* to stay in the hunting lodge. Far away from—” I gestured at the remaining crowd. “—all of this.”

“The lodge isn’t secure. You won’t be safe there.”

“Believe me, I can defend myself.”

“No, you can’t.” The words were firm—not an insult, just a fact. “Against a mortal perhaps, but not against a Descended. Not until you’ve mastered your magic.”

My pride rankled. “I told you, I don’t have any magic.”

“We can discuss that tomorrow.”

“There’s nothing to disc—”

“The King’s body is lying in state in the royal suite, but there are guest quarters you can use for now. I’ve already made the arrangements.”

The discussion of where to sleep had my body catching up with my brain, and I was suddenly, overwhelmingly aware of just how exhausted I was.

“Fine,” I muttered, my eyelids drooping.

We marched without speaking through a twisting, turning path of dark hallways lined with more doors than I could count. I knew the palace was

large from its grand exterior, but inside, it became a labyrinth I couldn't imagine understanding, let alone ever calling it home.

"You grew up here?" I asked as we walked.

"We all did. House Corbois has held the Crown for as long as any of us have been alive."

I wondered vaguely if Teller and I would have liked being children here, sliding down the polished wooden stair rails, hiding behind the ornate furniture and making up stories for the stuffy, pretentious-looking ancestors whose portraits lined every wall.

I tried to imagine Luther as a child, giggling and wrestling with Lily in the way my brother and I had. My mind came up utterly blank.

"Did you enjoy being raised in the palace?" I asked.

"To be raised Corbois is a great privilege." His tone was stiff, almost mechanical. "All our children are well cared for and protected, with every opportunity provided to them. I am very grateful for those blessings."

"That wasn't my question. Were you *happy*?"

He stayed silent for a while, the sound of our footsteps echoing off the stone walls. "I was presumed the King's successor from a very young age. My childhood, and all the years since, were dedicated to preparing for that duty. There was little time for much else."

Despite myself, I felt a twinge of sympathy. I knew how it felt to grow up thinking one's fate was already drawn in ink.

"My mother began training me as a healer when I was a toddler," I said quietly. "That was the only future I ever expected to have. It was nothing like being the King's heir, of course, but..." I shrugged and looked down at my feet. "Mortal women have so few opportunities. Everyone always told me I was lucky to be born onto a wider path."

He glanced at me, his expression softening. "But it doesn't feel wider when it's a path you didn't choose."

"No," I agreed. "It doesn't."

Luther's eyes roamed across the expansive palace hallways, his stance relaxing as his features turned pensive. It reminded me of the side of him I had glimpsed the morning after the armory fire—unguarded, unpretentious, and disarmingly genuine.

"There were some happy moments here," he admitted. "This is the only home I've ever known. Nearly all my memories take place within these walls, good and bad alike."

“Is that why you’re helping me now, because you don’t want to leave?”

“No. Though I’m glad you’ve finally admitted I’m helping you.”

I wrinkled my nose. “That’s not what I meant.”

In the dim glow of the firelit sconces, I could just make out the upward curve of his lips. There it was again—he was *smirking*. I tried to muster some energy to be indignant, but I had nothing left to give.

I made a mental note to be angry with him again after I slept.

“I’m not afraid of House Corbois losing its royal status, if that’s what you’re asking. Whatever choice you make, we’ll survive.” He paused. “Though if you do find a way to pass on the Crown, I ask that you not force the children out of their home, in case it returns to a Corbois.”

I frowned. “I don’t want to kick anyone out of their home. There’s been too much of that by the Descended already.”

“Indeed, there has.”

My steps faltered at his unexpected agreement. I swore I caught a flash of surprise blink across his own face, as if he hadn’t intended to say the words aloud.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I prodded. “I’m not asking what your family wants. I’m asking what *you* want.”

He looked over at me, his gait slowing as he scanned my face.

“Everyone expected that you would inherit the Crown,” I said.

“And you believe that I’m disappointed I did not.”

“Are you?”

He stopped walking and turned to face me fully. His arms crossed over his chest, the action widening his already broad frame.

I’d never thought myself small, not by any meaning of the word. But something about standing in front of this man, with all his size and strength and magic, his refinement and knowledge and ego... It made me feel minuscule. A speck of dust floating through a mighty ray of sunshine.

“If I had been called to serve as king, or if I am in the future, I would accept the role with honor.”

Words hung in the air, something still unspoken.

“But?” I pressed.

Luther frowned. He seemed to be looking through me, rather than at me, as if visualizing some long-buried memory. “No, I’m not disappointed. I’ve always believed it’s my destiny to serve the Crown, not to wear it.”

Again, I searched his face for the truth. I wondered how gullible I must be that I found myself believing him.

His palm curved into the small of my back to nudge me forward, his touch sending a hot knife of adrenaline slicing through my fatigue. I couldn't miss how his hand clung to me long after I fell back in step beside him, only falling away as we turned into a hall crowded with guards.

"This is the Crown's wing. The family wing can get quite lively with cousins coming and going at all hours. I presumed you'd prefer something with a bit more privacy."

He'd presumed right. The idea of my every movement being watched by all those new, curious faces made me extraordinarily jumpy.

Luther motioned to two doors situated on either side of the corridor, one unguarded and the other flanked by four armed guards. "You can stay here until the royal suite is empty," he said, gesturing to the manned door, then pointed at the other. "And these are my chambers. If you need anything, feel free to knock."

Of *course* he would set me up somewhere he could hover close and keep watch.

I scanned the guards' faces, relieved to find that none of them were the same Descended I had tussled with on my previous visits. My brows arched at Luther. "You really think this is necessary?"

"Until you accept my family's offer—yes, I do."

I shot him a pointed stare. "Are these guards aware the only resident of this palace that's tried to kill me thus far is *you*?"

Judging from their shared expressions of unease, they were not.

Luther had the wisdom to look uncomfortable. "As I said, that was a misunderstanding."

"You wanted to know if I killed the King."

"I..." He tensed, seeming to hold back. "Yes."

"And if I said I had? Would you have killed me then?"

"No."

"Liar."

His hands twitched at his sides, his fingers curving inward. "If my plan was to kill you, Diem, I wouldn't stab you in secret. I'd take you on in the Challenging, where everyone could see it."

It turned out I was not too tired to get angry after all.

My blood rose to a simmer. The mysterious *voice* inside me, the one that had been provoking my temper ever since I stopped taking the flameroot, shuddered as it stretched from its dormant coil.

Fight.

“First of all,” I clipped, “since you’ve always insisted on the importance of titles, you may refer to me as Your Majesty or my Queen.”

His mouth tightened. “Of course. Apologies, *my Queen*.”

“And why wait for the Challenging? I’ll take you on any day, any time, *Prince*.” I unsheathed a dagger from my hip and tilted its point toward him. “I’ve shed your blood once today. Why not make it twice?”

Luther’s temper snapped.

Quick as an asp, his hand wrapped around my wrist and yanked it forward, forcing me to stagger closer until the tip of my blade pressed to his chest. “What are you going to do with this ‘*piece of tin*,’ Your Majesty, trim my hair? I doubt it’s sharp enough even for that.”

To prove his point, he jammed the knife further. The edge sliced easily through the thick layers of his clothing—I kept my blades razor sharp, *thank you very much*—but my pride was short lived, as his skin only dimpled at the pressure.

“You need your *other* blade,” he scolded.

I made a show of dropping my eyes to my calf, hoping to trick him into believing I still had the Fortosian steel dagger sheathed in my boot.

Without releasing my wrist, he pulled back his jacket, revealing my lost dagger tucked into his belt.

“Looking for this?” he said, a taunting note to his tone.

I darted my free hand to grab it. Luther snatched that wrist as well, pinning it behind my back and using his grip to pull me closer. He kept my other hand steady, the point of the blade still pressed to his heart.

The guards gawked nervously, hands on their weapons, unsure how to react. Unsure which one of us they even needed to protect.

Fight.

The *voice* pushed me into action. My father’s training burst from my muscles in a familiar dance of movements. I twisted, rotating my arm until Luther’s grip was at too awkward an angle to maintain, and my wrist slipped free of his fingers.

So many of my father’s lessons had prepared me for this—out-manned in size, strength, and weaponry. In some ways, I was more comfortable

taking on an enemy like Luther than a foe half my size.

But Luther was fast and well-trained in his own right. Hands and limbs went flying on both sides as he countered my strikes with ease. When we finally stilled, I wasn't even sure what had happened.

My dagger clattered to the floor. My body was trapped against his, my back pressed flush to his chest. My right arm was twisted in his grip, the other immobilized at my side where his arm was strapped across my ribs.

A hot breath caressed my neck as he leaned down and whispered, "If I wanted you dead, Your Majesty, you would already be dead."

A muffled, high-pitched screech reverberated through the halls, sounding as if it came from the King's bedroom.

Sorae. I felt her panic ripple through the mental bond that connected us. She could sense that I was fighting—and losing.

One of the guards unsheathed his sword slowly, tentatively, looking as if he wasn't sure whether the greater sin was interfering or staying put. "Sir?" he asked.

Luther ignored it all. The faint stubble on his chin tickled the sensitive curve of my shoulder, and my traitorous body arched in his arms. His grip tightened around my waist.

"Tell me how to prove to you that you can trust me," he murmured, his lips grazing my skin.

"*Trust* you?" I choked, relieved to see that my temper had not surrendered to him as easily as my body had. "Are you out of your gods-damned mind?"

I pushed against his grip, but he didn't budge.

Fight.

Gods, I wanted to *murder* him. Mostly for the embarrassment of being so easily bested, but the list of reasons was growing longer by the hour.

Mindful of the guards hanging on our every word, I dropped my voice low. "If it's my trust you want, you can start by telling me where *she* is."

He knew who I meant. His whole body stilled.

Sorae roared, and the walls of the palace shook with a shuddering boom. A cloud of dust trickled from the ceiling. Another enraged howl sounded a second later, followed by another.

Luther released his hold, and I stumbled away, snatching my mortal dagger from the ground.

"Call off *Sorae*," he ordered.

“Bite me.”

“Call her off, or she’ll destroy the royal chambers trying to get to you.”

“Good. Let her smash this entire fucking palace.”

The walls rumbled with another blast of the gryvern’s wrath. Luther’s steely eyes narrowed. “Call Sorae off, and I’ll tell you what I can.”

I paused. “You’ll tell me where she is?”

“I’ll tell you what I’m at liberty to share. That’s the best I can offer.”

Though I glared at his carefully chosen words, I relented. My eyes closed as I reached out blindly into the darkness, where the gryvern’s presence floated somewhere in the abyss of my tangled mind.

I speared a thought in her direction: *I’m not in danger.*

The booming stopped, replaced by an unhappy trill. I sensed her reticence—she wanted to see me and confirm for herself I was unhurt.

I’m safe, I told her. *It was just an argument.*

Across the bond, her panic ebbed in favor of grumbling acceptance.

I looked at Luther expectantly. “Well?”

“Tomorrow.” He gritted his teeth at my answering look of outrage. “It’s late and neither of us is in the right state of mind.”

“If you don’t keep your word, Luther Corbois, you’re gryvern food.”

“At least *that* would be a fair fight.”

I threw every ounce of fury I had into the two middle fingers I flung in his direction. I stalked past the slack-jawed guards into my room and slammed the door behind me.

I stood frozen for several seconds, my chest heaving with livid breaths. The voice was still chanting in my head, riling me up, urging me to *fight, fight, fight*.

Suddenly, I went still.

On the other side of the door, Luther’s voice thundered in the hallway. He was more irate than I’d ever heard him—more emotional than I’d believed him capable of being. I leaned my ear against the wood to listen.

“I should put all four of your heads on a pike for treason. I just assaulted the Queen, and you cowards stood there and watched me do it. The next time someone lays a hand on her and you don’t kill them where they stand, I’ll carve out your eyeballs and feed them to the fucking hounds. It doesn’t matter if it’s me or the Regent or Blessed Mother Lumnos herself. Do your damn jobs and protect our Queen.”

Quiet, muffled acknowledgements.

“Am I understood?” he bellowed.

“Yes, Your Highness,” they answered in loud unison.

A thump of angry footsteps, followed by the slamming of a nearby door.

Interesting, I thought.

His words rattled in my head as I headed for the washing room. My skin was inflamed with the burn of my own wrath and the lingering heat of having Luther’s body so close to mine. As I splashed cold water on my face, I half expected to see steam rise from my dripping cheeks.

What I did see robbed every thought from my head.

A large, bronze-edged mirror hung above the water basin. It was the first time I’d seen my full reflection since...

The Crown.

There it was, pulsing and glittering, floating with unearthly grace a mere inch or so above my head. It was just as I remembered seeing it on King Ulther—not a static object, but a kind of living creation. The shadowy, thorn-dotted vines were in a continual state of growth, twining and budding new offshoots as others withered away. The scattered stars of light twinkled and flared, nearly blinding at their full intensity.

I was a wreck—my eyes bloodshot, my clothes rumpled, my skin sallow and crusted with mud—but the Crown was a thing of perfect, incomparable beauty.

A laugh leapt up from my throat.

Had I really walked into a room of sophisticated nobles looking like *this* and declared myself their ruler? And they had just... accepted it?

All because I, Diem Bellator, poor mortal healer, wore the Crown.

I was the Queen of Lumnos.

My eyes snagged on a clawfoot tub full to the brim with steaming water. I muttered a prayer of thanks for whatever servant had seen my pitiful state and run a bath—whether out of kindness or judgment, I didn’t care.

I stripped off my clothes and sank into the soapy water, groaning as the warmth soothed my tired muscles. I washed my hair with an assortment of gardenia-scented concoctions, then scrubbed at my skin until it was pink and raw. When I was done, I leaned my head back against the curved porcelain rim and closed my eyes, allowing the dam of my exhaustion to finally give way.

At some point I must have dozed off, because the water was cold when a swift knock rang out from the hall.

Reluctantly, I pulled myself out of the tub and wrapped a thin drying cloth under my arms, securing it in a knot between my breasts. I had no energy left to care about the stream of water that followed my slow trudge to the door. I slumped against the wall, barely staying upright to pull the door open wide.

Luther.

His cool composure lasted all of two seconds as he gazed down at my dripping, barely covered body, his eyes darkening to pitch.

I really had to stop answering doors without my clothes on.

“We’ve discussed this, Prince.” I pointed at my face. “Eyes up here.”

His throat strained. He stood straighter and offered me a lumpy linen sack. “I brought you a few things.”

I took it, blinking in surprise at its heft. “What’s in it?”

He gestured for me to look for myself. I pulled at the drawstrings and peered inside at a jumble of Fortosian steel knives, each in its own sheath, many discreet enough to be concealed beneath clothing. He’d even tossed in a variety of straps to wear them in different ways. Though some had handles of ivory or exotic woods, not one of them was bejeweled or gilded.

“I thought these might make you more comfortable here,” he said.

Wholly against my will, something warmed in my chest.

“And here I was thinking you all only carried weapons as jewelry,” I said, nodding at the ornate sword hilt peeking over his shoulder.

“This sword is a family heirloom. It can cut as well as any blade in Emarion—and it’s seen plenty of battlefields.” He sounded a little defensive. It was, disturbingly, a little cute. “However, I knew you would prefer something less... conspicuous.”

I grunted in acknowledgement. Fine, I could admit it was a thoughtful gesture. No sense in telling him that, though.

“I suppose I also owe you this.” He opened his jacket and pulled out my dagger, offering it to me, handle first.

I stared at the knife without moving. It was clean and polished, no longer coated in his blood. My eyes slowly dragged up his arm to his neck, where I’d sunk the blade’s edge—not quite intentionally—into his flesh.

Right before the most passionate, all-consuming, world-forgetting kiss I’d ever had. A kiss made of fire and lust, hatred and hurt, and perhaps

something more. Something that lit a spark in my chest... and between my legs.

He watched me in silence. I could see the words forming in his eyes, hovering on his lips, the muscles on his face twitching with the effort of holding back.

His voice softened. “Diem, about what happened earlier—”

I snatched the knife from his hand and shut the door in his face.

Luther was a threat, that had become *abundantly* clear. Whatever might have passed between us before, it had to end. This was war.

And he was my prime target.

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Chapter

Six

Someone was in my room.

I woke up to the shuffle of feet and the distant click of cabinets opening and closing.

I didn't dare open my eyes.

Last night, with my final dregs of energy, I had stashed a handful of the blades Luther brought around the room—behind the door, near the bathtub, in the small drawer of the nightstand—before slipping between the silken bedsheets and falling asleep, clutching Brecke's knife to my chest.

Now, however, my hands were empty. I must have lost my grip on the dagger, and I couldn't risk losing the element of surprise by fumbling for it.

The footsteps grew louder. As quietly as I could, my fingers crept under my pillow and closed around the knife I'd stashed there.

And then I waited. Listened.

The whisper of fabric against fabric. The screech of wooden chair legs dragging against the stone floor. A long, drawn-out sigh. A slight weight leaning against the corner of the bed.

I pounced.

I threw the bedding to the side, unsheathing the blade and lunging forward in one seamless move, hurling myself into the air toward—

A shriek rang out, followed by a flash of light so dazzling I was momentarily blind.

I yelped and stumbled back across the mattress, my back cracking against the wooden headboard.

"Oh *shit*—I mean—Blessed Kindred, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to use my magic. Are you alright?" A female voice, frantic and subtly familiar.

I blinked through the spots dancing in my vision. A woman stood beside the bed, holding a pile of clothing and looking horrified.

"How did you get in?" I barked.

“Luther let me in. He said you might need some clean clothes.” She looked pointedly down at my naked body, now on full display after my towel had dislodged in my sleep.

Seriously, *how* did I keep ending up undressed in front of these people?

“We met last night,” she said with a tentative smile. “I’m Eleanor. One of the many distant Corbois cousins.”

That’s right—Eleanor, the cheerful woman whose bright energy had stood out among the severe faces.

I dropped the knife and sank to my knees, clutching the bedsheet to my chest and blushing bright red. “Yes, I remember you. Hello again.”

“Sorry I scared you.”

“Sorry I tried to stab you.”

“No problem,” she said with a shrug. She tossed the clothing she was carrying onto the bed and eyed the sack of blades I’d left beside me, the contents of which were now scattered across the sheets. “Do you always sleep with a pile of knives?”

“Luther brought them by last night. I think he believes one of you is going to try to kill me.”

Eleanor snorted. “That’s ironic.”

“Why?”

“I mean, if anyone was going to try...” She caught herself and blanched. “Not that he would ever... I don’t mean...”

“You mean if anyone had a motive to kill me, it would be Luther?” She nodded sheepishly, and I laughed. “That’s what I tried to tell *him*.”

She rolled her eyes and shoved some knives to the side before plopping down beside me. “Good luck trying to tell him anything.”

I liked this woman already.

“If Luther armed me to the teeth and then snuck you in while I was sleeping, he either doesn’t think much of my self-defense skills, or you must have done something to make him mad.”

She grinned. “Oh, I’m sure it’s the latter. I do my best to provoke him on a daily basis.”

I *really* liked her.

“But,” she continued, “he did tell me not to wake you. I’m just not very good at following his orders. I thought you might like someone to accompany you to breakfast, since you’re all alone here.”

All alone here.

The words throbbed like an open wound. I was indeed alone—not just in this palace, but in this world of Descended. My family, Henri, Maura, everyone I loved... although they were only a few miles away, they might as well have been in another realm.

“Yes,” I forced out. “That would be nice.”

She began to rifle through the garments she’d brought, and I realized with a start that they were all dresses. Not just any dresses, but elegant, floor-length gowns.

I hadn’t worn a dress since I was a child. Once Teller was old enough to play with me, I’d grown jealous of how the breeches he wore made him faster at climbing trees and running through the forest. One night, I threw a tantrum and hurled all my dresses into the fireplace, demanding that my parents outfit me no differently than my brother.

As I grew older and more aware of the attention of boys, I began to regret my decision. I was jealous of the way the pretty girls at school would dress to enhance their feminine curves, but my stubborn pride kept me from admitting my desire to be like them. Over time, that developed into an embarrassing fear of all things girlish.

The stunning dresses that lay before me now felt like weapons I’d never been trained to use, a power I wasn’t yet worthy to wield. My cheeks burned at the idea of explaining that to someone like Eleanor, who wore her womanhood with effortless grace.

She shot me an apologetic look. “Luther said you’d prefer pants, but dresses were all I had on short notice. I can try to find you some for tomorrow.”

I forced a stiff smile. “These are lovely. Thank you.”

I ran my fingers over them, my touch trailing over the delicate lace, the glittering gems, and the colorful embroidery. Anxiety rose like a lump in my throat.

I’m a Bellator, I reminded myself. And I will not be intimidated by a dress.

Something Eleanor said sparked a memory. “You took care of me after the armory fire, didn’t you?”

Her brows leapt. “You remember that?”

“Bits and pieces. I remember Luther asking you to help me.”

Her face bloomed bright scarlet. “I hope you don’t mind that I bathed you. You were in rough shape, and he wanted me to check your wounds.”

I frowned. I’d woken up that morning with no signs of injuries—not even a bruise. Somewhere in my head, the nagging of my conscience grew louder.

Eleanor sighed. “I would have put you in something nicer, had I known you would end up in front of the whole family. Luther was in a panic, so I did the best I could.” She leaned back on her hands and gave me a curious look. “I’ve never seen him that worked up before.”

My frown deepened. “What do you mean?”

“I never thought the great Luther Corbois would be the type to *fuss*, but he hardly left your side. He kept checking your pulse every few minutes to make sure you were still alive. When I finally convinced him to go bathe, he made me swear not to take my eyes off you.”

“He didn’t... he—he wouldn’t... I’m sure he didn’t *fuss*,” I protested as warmth crept up my chest. “He must have felt guilty for letting me go into the building.”

“Perhaps.” She pursed her lips, a suspicious gleam in her eyes.

Suddenly I felt awkward, unsure what to do with my face or my hands. I plucked the plainest dress in Eleanor’s collection—a dark blue velvet sheath with a straight neckline that dipped below my shoulders and a trickle of silver embroidered stars cascading upward from the wrists. Modest enough, other than a high slit that allowed a single thigh to peek through.

I hurriedly dressed, then Eleanor brushed out my hair and secured it with a silver hairpin she pulled from her own curly brown tresses.

I dared a peek in a nearby mirror and nearly jumped. It felt like looking at a stranger. With the benefit of sleep, the darkness had vanished from beneath my silvery eyes, my skin glowing with warmth and color. The Crown cast a faint light over my face, highlighting the apples of my cheeks and the slightly upturned nose I’d always hated for making me look far sweeter than I really was.

My ice-white hair, having spent the better part of twenty years braided and out of the way, was joyfully unbound in gentle waves across my shoulders, while my curves, hidden for so long under tunics and baggy trousers, were boldly pronounced beneath the clingy fabric.

I felt somehow more exposed than when Eleanor had walked in on me wearing nothing at all. It felt like putting some part of me on display that I

normally kept locked up and hidden away, even from myself.

But strangely enough... I didn't hate it. There was an undeniable strength in the woman looking back at me. Perhaps she couldn't wrestle nimbly in the dirt or scurry up a tree, but she looked like she could best a man in a thousand other ways. Much more *interesting* ways.

"You don't normally dress up, do you?" Eleanor asked as she touched a few dots of floral perfume to my throat.

"I don't even own a dress," I admitted. "In my normal life, all this would only get in the way of defending myself."

Eleanor ran a hand along my hair, fluffing it gently. "Words can cut as deeply as a blade, you know. So can titles, or influence, or one's appearance. Especially here at court. Some Corbois refuse to even wear weapons, because they think it makes them look weak."

My eyebrows flew upward. "Really?"

She nodded and met my gaze in the mirror. "To be honest, in House Corbois, I fear those who don't wear weapons much more than those who do."

"You don't wear weapons."

Her grin was pure mischief. "Exactly."

I laughed and grabbed a leg strap from the collection Luther had given me, then found Brecke's knife tangled in the sheets and secured it high on my thigh, plainly visible through the dress's slit.

"I'll keep my weapons for now, but I appreciate the advice." I sighed. "I have a lot to learn, I think."

Eleanor looked hesitant. "I could teach you, if you'd like. Tell you what I know about royal life and protocol."

My skepticism prickled. "But only if I claim House Corbois?"

"You'll need help even if you don't claim my House. *Especially* if you don't claim my House."

"And you want to secure your place with the new Crown," I said, my tone chilling.

Eleanor avoided my eyes and fidgeted with the folds of her skirt. "I won't pretend it didn't cross my mind. I've spent my life at court. Dealing with the politics and the rumors, the unspoken rules—it's the only thing I'm any good at. I can't fight like Alixe, I don't have powerful magic like Luther." She finally looked back up at me, and I could read the humble

honesty in her features. “It would be nice to feel useful. Especially to someone who matters to all of *them*.”

I understood her then. Like me, she’d been born into a box with a tight lid and hard walls, designed to keep her small and insignificant. And, like me, she’d dreamed of being more—of being someone who mattered.

I shrugged. “Alright.”

She lit up. “Alright?”

I took her hands. “Eleanor Corbois, do you agree to serve as a loyal advisor to the Crown on all matters of politics, rumors, unspoken rules, and whatever other embarrassing mistakes I’m surely going to make?”

She looked so overjoyed she might cry. “Yes, Your Majesty, I would be honored to serve you.”

“Wonderful. And please, call me Diem.”



MAKING Eleanor my first advisor was turning out to be a very wise idea.

She took to her role with impressive enthusiasm. For the next few hours, we walked through the palace while she pointed out every room, every hiding place, and every back stairwell or servant’s corridor for sneaking around unseen. She introduced me to many of the workers, gushing in their presence over the most talented among them, and warning me in private of the ones with loose lips and wandering eyes.

She knew all the guards as well, counseling me which of them would fall asleep while on watch and which had received their posts through bribery rather than merit. The guards on my detail, she assured me, were four of the best—and the most discreet—notwithstanding Luther’s dressing down of them the night before.

By noon, the palace had begun to feel less like some foreign land and more like... not a home—not yet, maybe not ever—but something closer to familiar. I could already tell I would need to keep Eleanor close.

I supposed I would have to find a way to spare her, too, from my plan of destruction.

Most helpfully, she dished without reservation on her family and its complex dynamics. We discussed the subject over a lunch of finger sandwiches and fruit, which we’d brought to a small table in the garden to

take advantage of the unseasonably warm day—and to avoid the prying eyes and ears of the packed dining hall. Soraе sprawled on a patch of grass nearby, sunning her outstretched wings.

“So Remis and Garath hate each other?” I asked as I nibbled on a wedge of tart green apple.

“Not exactly. They’re brothers, so they would certainly choose each other over anyone outside of the family, but Garath never got over King Ulther choosing Remis as Regent. Garath believes that, as the elder brother, the title should have gone to him.”

“Why didn’t it?”

She looked down, chewing on her lip. “Uncle Garath has... *issues* managing his anger.” She shot me a look. “Besides, you met him. Did he come off as particularly diplomatic to you?”

“Good point. Why does he care so much about the title? What does being Regent even mean?”

“The Regent acts as the Crown when the Crown cannot. For example, when Ulther fell unconscious, Remis effectively took his place as King.”

I arched an eyebrow. “And no one wondered if Remis had something to do with the King’s illness?”

“Oh, they did. Especially the other Houses. Everyone suspected Uncle Remis was trying to get his brother out of the way so he and his son could take over.”

“Was everyone truly so certain that Luther would be the next Crown? I thought the magic could choose anyone.”

Eleanor nodded as she sipped her wine. “It can, but with Luther, it was never really a question. No one else’s magic even came close. He tries not to use it often—I’ve only seen him let loose a couple of times, and wow.” She blew out a breath, then looked at me with a sense of wonder in her eyes. “If your magic is stronger than his, it’s incredible you were able to stay hidden for so long. When we were teenagers, if Luther got angry, he could accidentally take out an entire building. They even pulled him out of school because they were so afraid he would hurt someone. He had to have a tutor alone.”

I started to correct her and mention that I didn’t have any magic, but the memory of Luther’s warning stilled my tongue.

“Doesn’t it bother you that your family members might be killing each other?” I asked instead.

“It would, if I believed it. I doubt Remis was in a hurry to see Luther on the throne. Those two aren’t as close as they seem.” She popped a raspberry into her mouth. “They put on a united front for the family’s sake, but I’ve heard them fight when they think no one is around. They have *very* different plans for Lumnos.”

I tried not to look too curious. “And what are those plans?”

“Whatever they were, they blew away once you walked in the door.” She grinned and refilled my wine, nudging the glass closer to me. “Your plans are the only ones that matter now.”

Indeed.

I slumped back and closed my eyes, tilting my face up to the sunny warmth. I had to grip the arms of my chair to steady myself as the world kept tilting—and tilting, and tilting. It seemed I’d had more wine than I thought.

“Is there any more pleasing sight than two beautiful women basking under the Lumnos sun?” a man drawled in a voice as smooth as satin on bare skin.

“Already trying to charm our new Queen, Aemonn?”

“Looks like you beat me to it, Ellie.”

I sat up, blinking a few times to steady Eleanor’s face in my woozy vision. She was glaring at Aemonn with her nose scrunched.

“I hate that nickname.”

Aemonn smirked at her. “Why do you think I use it?”

She tossed a strawberry at him, which he deftly dodged. “Don’t you have someone else to bother?”

“Actually, Her Majesty and I have plans.” He turned his attention to me, his smirk softening into something more alluring. He offered the crook of his arm. “Shall we?”

I pushed to my feet and gripped the edge of the table as I swayed. Aemonn raised a brow and looked as if he was biting back a laugh.

“Good wine,” I explained sheepishly.

The sound of a door closing drew my attention. On the other end of the terrace, Luther stood by the palace, his focus heavy on me as his eyes drank me in. His body was stone still—he didn’t even seem to be breathing.

My face heated. Though he’d seen me unclothed a mortifying number of times, in this dress, I felt more laid bare before him than ever.

The effort not to storm over and demand the answers he'd promised was palpable, but I was in no condition to have that conversation until I'd sobered up, and I couldn't be sure that I wouldn't sloppily attempt revenge for how he had so effortlessly subdued me last night.

And I had even less trust in the flutter in my stomach at the way he gazed at me, hands flexing at his sides.

Sorae pulled to her feet and arched her neck toward Luther as her tail whipped angrily. She gave an indignant huff through her scaled snout, curls of smoke billowing from her nostrils.

I grinned. Apparently, I wasn't the only one still holding a grudge over last night's spar.

I slipped my arm through Aemonn's before looking back at my new advisor. "Thank you for this morning, Eleanor. Perhaps we can make it a regular occurrence?"

She beamed. "I'd love that. Although, next time I'll think I'll try knocking first."

Chapter

Seven

A emonn and I strolled into the garden, Sorae launching to the skies to keep an eye on us from above. He led me onto a gravel path lined with frilly lavender flossflowers and vibrant pink and white petunias, their sweet fragrance permeating the air.

“Luther sewn to your hip, Eleanor as your drinking companion, and now a private tour from yours truly. Dare I take this as a sign you intend to claim our noble House as your own?”

“I’m considering it,” I said. “You and your cousins are certainly going to great lengths to welcome me.”

“Can you blame us? We have everything to lose if you say no.” I blinked at his bluntness, drawing a wry smile from Aemonn. “Do you disagree?”

“No. I’m only surprised to hear one of you admit it so plainly.”

He gave an elaborate sigh. “I admit, being forthright is not always a family virtue.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

I glanced over my shoulder. Luther remained on the terrace, his attention fixed on where Aemonn’s arm and mine were joined. I quickly looked away.

“Is that why you asked me to take this stroll with you—to convince me to accept your uncle’s offer?”

His answering smile was enthralling. “I confess, I had an even more selfish motive in mind.”

He turned me onto a new path that led away from the palace and out of Luther’s line of sight, this one tiled with a mosaic of white flagstone and dotted with fancifully shaped topiaries.

“I was hoping you might allow me to be your escort to the Ascension Ball,” he continued. His eyes twinkled at my look of confusion. “It’s your formal introduction to the Houses of Lumnos.”

My heart stopped. “A ball? To introduce me?”

“Yes, but it’s nothing terribly unusual.” He waved his hand absently. “Music, dancing, uncomfortable clothes, vicious gossip. The standard fare.”

I instantly felt queasy—either from the wine or the prospect of being paraded in front of the Descended of Lumnos and expected to dance.

“When is this ball?”

“The day after the King’s funeral.”

“And when will that be?”

He gave another exaggerated huff. “We tried to keep Uncle’s death secret until your decision was made. Unfortunately, the servants were not as tight-lipped as we’d hoped. Mourning sashes have already begun to appear in the city. We’ll only be able to put off the funeral for two or three days at most.”

I gripped his arm to stay upright as the world wobbled around me. I would be presented as the Queen in two or three days.

At a ball.

With *dancing*.

“Traditionally, the Crown is escorted by their consort, but as you are unmarried—you are unmarried, aren’t you?—you’re free to choose whomever you wish. I hoped I might convince you to give me the honor.”

My stomach churned. I stumbled a step.

Aemonn moved in front of me, hands sliding to my ribs to hold me steady. The warning bells that urged me to pull away were drowned out by the clamor of alarms I was already reeling from.

“Is everything alright?” he asked.

Words wouldn’t come. My mouth was dry as cotton, my throat full of cinders.

“Luther didn’t tell you any of this?” Aemonn frowned. “He’s not a very dutiful advisor.”

“He’s not my advisor,” I choked out. “He’s just my...” I stopped. I didn’t really know *what* he was to me.

“Diem, look at me.” Aemonn’s fingers curled under my chin, tilting it upward. My eyes met his, and he rewarded me with a heart-stopping smile that dulled the edge of my panic. “It’s nothing to worry about. I can help you through it.” His thumb traced a slow line on my jaw as his gaze dropped to my mouth.

Drunken adrenaline bloomed through my chest, overwhelming my senses, and for a minute it was all I could do to keep breathing. Then a different, slimier emotion sliced through my thoughts—guilt.

“I’m with someone,” I blurted out, jerking away from Aemonn. “Not married, but... Henri—we—it’s, um, very serious.” It felt like a lie as it left my lips.

Aemonn stilled, his head angling a fraction of an inch. “Is he... mortal?”

I nodded.

“Hmm.” His gaze narrowed. “And precisely how serious are things with this *Henri*?”

I frantically tried to cobble together a response that didn’t give me away entirely. Aemonn took a step closer, a feral cat slinking toward the cornered mouse, and the words burst out before I could stop them.

“He asked me to marry him. I... I haven’t answered him yet.”

I winced.

I should not have revealed that.

Really, *really* should not have revealed that.

Aemonn studied me shrewdly. He was still wearing that dazzling smile, but it no longer met his calculating eyes.

“Well then,” he said evenly, “Henri will have to join us at the ball. The Houses of Lumnos will be *very* eager to meet him.”

“No!” I shook my head, my heart hammering. “He won’t be attending.”

“Diem, whatever lucky man you marry will become King Consort. If you are betrothed, or expect to be, and the other Houses find out you concealed that from them, the consequences for the Challenging would be catastrophic. Every House in Lumnos would rise against you.”

Oh gods. This was bad. So very bad.

“May I be honest with you?” Aemonn’s expression lightened, his features trading their sharpness for a look of pity I wasn’t sure I believed. “I’m sure this Henri must be a wonderful man. But relationships between mortals and Descended...” He grimaced. “Mortals die so quickly and so easily, and of course the children are forbidden, and—”

I bristled. “You do realize *I* am the child of a mortal?”

“And if you were not the Crown, you would be put to death as a result. Is that the life you want for your offspring?”

I flinched at his words. I wasn't even sure I wanted children, but the idea of a child of my blood being executed merely because of its father...

I staggered a few steps back. "I need to go. I need to talk to Luther."

I had no idea why I'd said it. Luther was the very last person in the world I wanted to discuss Henri with, and I was already cringing at the lecture he would surely give me for ignoring his advice.

"Luther?" Aemonn gave an incredulous laugh. He smoothed a hand over his hair, careful not to disturb his perfectly coiffed appearance. "Yes, perhaps you should," he said coldly. "He knows best what becomes of half-breed children."

I tensed. "What do you mean?"

"Diem darling, Luther is the Keeper of the Laws. It's his job to enforce King Ulther's rules."

I shook my head, beginning to understand but refusing to believe. "En... enforce them?"

His smile turned cruel at last. "Who do you think carries out the executions of all those children on behalf of the Crown?"

"*What?*" I gasped.

Aemonn tutted softly. "He must have killed dozens of them over the years. Those poor creatures. Most were infants who couldn't understand what was happening, but some of them..." He clutched at his chest and dipped his chin, his voice falling to a whisper. "How terrified the older children must have been as Luther's sword cut through their necks."

My vision went red.

Murderer.

That evil, soulless, irredeemable *murderer*.

No wonder he'd been so unmoved when Henri had seen him trample that child to death. What was another slain mortal child to a killer like him?

My rage awakened with an explosion, filling my chest with white-hot fire.

Fight.

For once, that gods-damned *voice* and I were in complete agreement.

"I need to go." I spun away from Aemonn and stormed toward the palace.

Above me, Sorae let loose a shrill cry, the flowers in the garden quivering under the downdraft of her beating wings. As I broke away from the manicured pathways, she slammed down on the grass ahead of me with

an inferno in her eyes. Her heavy breathing tracked my own, her smoke-tinged breath ruffling my hair.

Tell me who to kill, she seemed to be saying. *Unleash me upon them, and I'll make them pay.*

And she would do it, I realized. She would tear Luther into ribbons of flesh if I asked—perhaps even if I didn't, given my fury.

Had Luther used *her* to kill those children? I felt sick at the thought. So many Crowns had commanded Sorae before I had—there was no telling how much mortal blood she'd spilled at their request.

That was the problem with blind loyalty. It could be wielded by evil just as easily as good.

My eyes fell to the gilded chain on her neck. It wasn't really loyalty that drove her. Her obedience was slavery, and nothing more.

Did she ever grieve her orders? Were her dreams plagued by the screams of innocents as they begged for a mercy she was powerless to give?

I gazed into her golden eyes, but Sorae didn't answer. When I reached out to her across our bond, I felt only her deep and unconditional desire to destroy whoever had caused me such distress.

"Leave him be," I commanded as I routed around her.

She snapped her jaws in frustration.

"Sorry, girl," I muttered. "If anyone's going to kill Luther Corbois, it's going to be me."

Chapter Eight

When I returned to the palace, Luther wasn't on the terrace, nor was he in any of the common rooms Eleanor had pointed out to me earlier.

This turned out to be a good thing, because over the course of the hour that I searched for him, my temper chilled—*slightly*—and I remembered with no small amount of frustration that I couldn't kill him.

Yet.

At the very least, I still needed answers about my mother. And killing the Regent's son would probably not bode well for getting through the Period of Challenging with my head intact.

The realization had done little to soothe the *voice*. After I'd surrendered to its call the night I received the Crown, I thought it might be gone, but the events of that night had only emboldened it. Whatever strange force it represented had taken to punctuating every breath with the same word: ***Fight. Fight. Fight.*** The chant was a steady metronome, keeping the tempo of my racing thoughts, and I felt my patience grinding to an edge with every stroke. I was anger embodied, and I was in no state to be around anyone, let alone a palace full of people I didn't care for to begin with.

I was still stalking up and down the halls, having blown off a number of Corbois kinsmen who tried to corner me "*just to chat*," when Lily popped her head around a corner.

"Your Maj—I mean, um, Diem," she whispered. She beckoned me closer as her eyes darted around. "Your brot—uh, the thing you asked me to get. It's here. Well, not *here*, but—"

"Where is he?" I asked bluntly.

"I was going to bring him to your room, but there are so many people in the royal wing, I think because they're clearing the Crown suite for you, and then I was going to bring him to the library, but Elric is in there studying, and if there's anyone in this family who can't keep a secret, it's

Elric. Honestly, he tells everyone everything. So then I was going to take him to my room, but that seemed like a really, *really* bad idea—”

“Lily, tell me where he is. *Please*,” I added through gritted teeth.

“Oh, yes, right.” She grinned. “Follow me.”

I trailed her to a set of hefty iron doors with a complex web of latches and thick bars securing the outside, as if the locks were meant to keep someone in, rather than keeping intruders out. The doors gave way to a twisting staircase that got progressively darker as we descended. Lily waved a hand, and a set of glowing orbs appeared at our feet to illuminate the ground.

Wherever we were going, it was a miserable place. The walls were carved of jagged rock and brutally bare, empty of the tapestries or artwork that were so ubiquitous in the rest of the palace, and the humid air smelled vaguely of decay.

“What is this place?” I whispered, the silence almost too ominous to disturb.

“The dungeon. It hasn’t been used in years. We used to play games down here when I was little.”

“Lily, is that you?” My brother’s voice ricocheted off the expanse of damp stone.

“Teller!” I called out.

“D, I’m down here! Hurry up, this place is *terrifying*.”

I launched myself at him the moment I found him in the darkness, flinging my arms around his neck. It had only been a day since we last spoke, but it felt as if my entire world had inverted since then. So many plans had been born and died since that unexpected revelation outside our little home on the marsh.

Teller crushed me in his arms, then pulled back and gawked. “Are you wearing a *dress*?”

I smirked and flipped my hair theatrically over my shoulder. “Madness, isn’t it? This was all they had.”

“I think she looks beautiful,” Lily offered, watching us with soft eyes and a sweet smile. “She looks like a Queen.”

“You do,” he agreed. He looked me over with wonder. “You look like... like...”

“Say something nice, or I’ll sic my gryvern on you.”

His eyes flew open. “Gods, that’s right—you control the Lumnos gryvern now.”

“Sorae’s incredible, you’re going to love her.” I gasped. “And wait until you see the library, it’s enormous. You’re never going to want to leave.”

He blinked at me and raked a hand across his mouth, then took a step back and looked me over again. “You’re smiling.”

The last time I’d seen him, I was sobbing in his arms, begging for his help to find a way out. I reached inward and fumbled around for the shattered part of my soul that had wanted to give this all up and run back to my quiet, forgettable life, but the pieces were no longer where I’d left them.

“Did you find anything useful in your books?” I asked cautiously.

“Not yet. They all say the same thing—the Crown only passes through death. I’ll keep looking, though.”

“Yes—keep looking.” I wasn’t sure what to do with my expression, feeling a little ashamed that his answer hadn’t bothered me in the slightest.

“How did you end up in the palace?” he asked. “I thought you were going to some lodge to hide.”

Lily flinched. Her brows crowded together as she studied the floor. I could almost hear her guilty heart thumping away in her ribcage as she waited for me to reveal her betrayal.

“I decided to come to the palace and tell them,” I said instead. “The gryvern would have found me anyway, so there was no use in hiding.”

Lily’s look of surprise, then gratitude, was bright enough to light the realm.

I quickly recounted my introduction to House Corbois, setting out the proposal Luther and Remis had made. I could see the cogs of Teller’s clever mind churning as he evaluated my possible moves.

“It’s a smart offer,” he said, “for you and for them. Especially now, before the Challenging.”

“How does the Challenging work? Do I have to fight every person in Lumnos who thinks I’m not good enough?”

“No, thank the gods. If more than one House raises a Challenge, the Regent selects the strongest Challenger to fight. If you win, then you can be coronated.”

I shrugged. “That’s not so bad. Father trained us well. I can take on *one* Descended.”

Teller gave me a grave look. “It’s a battle of magic only, D. No weapons allowed.”

My stomach dropped. “Is there any possibility no one Challenges me?”

Lily jumped in. “Oh, yes! Especially if they believe you’re a Corbois. The other Houses won’t want to risk making an enemy of us.”

This proposition with Remis and Luther might be worth considering after all.

I frowned and rubbed my temples. The effort of thinking amid the voice’s endless drone—**Fight. Fight. Fight.**—had given birth to a brain-splitting headache.

“Diem,” Teller said slowly. “When are you going to tell everyone back at home?”

I ignored his question. “One of the cousins mentioned an Ascension Ball—do you know anything about that?”

“A ball?” Lily squealed.

Teller smiled at her happy outburst, the affection in his eyes reminding me so much of the way Henri sometimes looked at me. A knot tightened in my gut.

“It’s your presentation to the court,” he explained. “It’s the official beginning of the Period of Challenging.”

“Is there some kind of test at this ball, too?”

“The books didn’t mention one.” We both glanced at Lily, who offered a shrug in return.

A new voice, low and booming, reverberated through the cavernous chamber.

“Have you not realized that everything you do between now and the Coronation is a test?”

Teller froze.

Lily gasped.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes.

He spoke again. “The next time you organize a secret meeting in the dungeon, little sister, try to remember to close the door behind you.”

Lily chewed on her lip and gazed at the floor. Teller started to comfort her, then glanced nervously toward the stairs and pulled back.

“Go away, Luther,” I grumbled.

“Your Majesty,” he said coolly. “There are many people looking for you. What a blessing none of them thought to search this far downstairs.”

His patronizing tone was like waving a torch near a barrel of kerosene. The *voice* was no longer chanting—it was *screaming*.

In the distance, I sensed Sorae pacing her perch and screeching wildly.

“Calm down,” I mouthed, telling myself I was talking to the gryvern and not my own spiraling temper. “I’m fine. There’s no danger.”

Fight.

The *voice*, apparently, felt otherwise.

“What do you want?” I snapped at Luther.

“I believe you and I have some matters to discuss.”

I glared. “Oh, there are quite a few things I wish to *discuss* with you.”

When I looked at him now, all I saw was blood. The blood of so many children, slaughtered before their lives had even begun.

Luther’s emotionless eyes slid to my brother. “Is she normally like this?”

Teller raised an eyebrow. “You mean irrationally angry at everything and everyone?”

Luther nodded.

“Yes.”

Fight.

I practically snarled.

Teller shot me an apologetic look. “But she wasn’t always. Only recently. Only since...” His voice trailed off, the answer coming through our shared stare. *Since she stopped taking the flameroot.*

My blood was boiling. No, it had long passed boiling—it had been left to stew over a roaring fire and was now curling into steam from within. How dare they discuss me as if I wasn’t right here in front of them?

Fight.

I wanted to pummel them. I wanted to tear them to the ground. I wanted to drag my nails across their skin. I wanted to—

“You need to use your magic,” Luther said.

I squinted, fighting to focus on anything but my hunger for violence. “What?”

“The godhood—that’s what we call the source of our magic—it hates being trapped in a physical body. Being leashed for too long without release makes it angry. The longer you hold it in, the angrier it gets.”

“You describe it like it’s a living thing.”

“In some ways, it is. Don’t you hear it talking to you?”

Fight. Fight.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Between the dull throb of pain in my forehead and the vengeful chorus in my thoughts, I could barely follow the conversation.

Five minutes. I just needed *five gods-damned minutes* of peace and quiet.

Fight. Fight. Fight.

“*Shut up,*” I seethed under my breath.

Luther’s lips curved smugly at being proven right. “What’s happening to you is normal. Descended who are new to their magic are often overcome with anger because they don’t yet know how to soothe their godhood.”

“That explains why everyone at school is an ass,” Teller muttered. “Why isn’t Lily like that?”

“Luther trained me,” she answered with a proud smile at her brother. “He started before my magic manifested to make sure I was ready.”

Luther nodded. “For most Descended, even a few days without a release can be dangerous. If you’ve been suppressing your nature all these years...” He gave me a slow, appraising regard. “You’re a walking explosive.”

FIGHT.

I certainly felt like an explosive. Preferably one aimed in the general vicinity of his head.

I wondered if I’d said that aloud, because Luther uncrossed his arms and shifted into a battle stance. His gaze on me was purely tactical, a soldier assessing his foe.

“You need to burn some of it off. And you two,” he shot a hard look at Teller and Lily, “should be far away when she does.”

“Could I hurt them?” I asked.

“Possibly, until you learn to control it. Frankly, the fact that your brother’s heart still beats is owed only to his impressive ability to avoid pissing you off.”

“Then how are you still alive?”

That had *definitely* been aloud.

Luther’s joyless smirk rang with the promise of a battle. It was equal parts thrilling and immensely unnerving.

FIGHT.

“Leave us,” Luther ordered. Lily grabbed Teller’s hand, and they quickly scurried up the pitch-black staircase and disappeared.

I considered some horribly vicious jab about Luther’s commands, his titles, his very life being worthless under my new reign—but if I was being completely honest, all this talk of release had cracked open a tiny window of hope in my aching soul.

Once upon a time, I had been a person of happiness and joy. I’d laughed as deeply as I’d loved. I’d made lighthearted jokes instead of cruel insults or threats. I’d been patient and compassionate, quick to forgive.

This woman I had become now... I *despised* her.

She was strong, undeniably so, but in all the wrong ways. Strength could be fueled by love just as easily as hate. I had known that once, and I desperately wanted to find that part of myself again.

I wasn’t sure where that would leave me with my plan to tear down the Descended world, but I knew if I kept going like this, I would destroy myself before I could ever defeat anyone else—or end up losing myself to hate like Vance and the Guardians.

Luther and I glared at each other in wordless tension. His potent magic danced in his eyes, light and shadow twining like lovers embracing under the moonlight. Strands of darkness curved like barbed wire around his arms and chest while light slithered down the rippled planes of his torso, spiraling around his muscled thighs and leaving him encased in a glittering suit of armor.

Something stirred excitedly in my chest at the sight.

FIGHT.

“Why do you hold it back?” I asked, watching the magic pulse around him like a sentient force. “The Descended rarely use it when mortals are around.” My upper lip curled. “Afraid we might spot your weaknesses?”

“*Our* weaknesses,” he corrected. My throat burned with the urge to deny it. “We don’t like for mortals to see our magic, if we can avoid it. It can be... disturbing for them to witness.”

“Since when do the Descended care about disturbing mortals?”

He began to circle me in a smooth, predatory pace. “Do we not allow the mortals of Lumnos to live undisturbed? The Descended keep to our own cities and palaces.”

Something about his voice sounded false. Rehearsed.

I laughed harshly. “How very kind of you to *allow* us to live on land that was ours in the first place.”

FIGHT.

A low rumble that sounded suspiciously like Sorae’s growl shuddered through the thick stone walls.

Luther continued his path behind me and moved out of sight. I stubbornly held my stance.

“The mortals are free to live as they please, subject to the laws of the realm.” Again, his words sounded hollow.

“There’s nothing free about a life under laws we had no say in writing and have no real power to change.” I scowled. “Perhaps it’s time for the Descended to learn how it feels to lose everything *they* value for a change.”

I knew instantly I’d gone too far. Revealed too much.

Luther went preternaturally still, every muscle taut under the strain of his power. When he finally spoke, his voice was deadly soft. “You would be wise, Your Majesty, to keep those thoughts well-guarded. Even a Queen can bleed.”

Fight.

Kill.

Destroy.

The *voice* had changed.

Focused.

As if it sensed a threat and was protecting its host. It prowled inside me, infecting my veins with a searing heat. My hands twitched with an ache to give in to its ruthless call.

Far away, Sorae was downright apoplectic.

“No,” I said quietly, pleading with the *voice*, the gryvern, and my own feral wrath to curb their bloodthirst. I couldn’t kill him—not now, not yet.

“Enough talking, Diem,” Luther stalked in front of me. An orb of pulsating light formed in one palm, a barbed knot of shadow in the other. “Use your magic, or I attack.”

My own fingers contracted at the sight of his, yearning to respond in kind.

Destroy.

“You don’t get to use my name, remember?” I hissed. “I’m *Your Majesty* to you.”

“Make me, *Diem*.” He flicked his wrist and a spear of darkness launched in my direction. I barely lunged away before it sliced into the wall behind me.

“You could have killed me,” I shouted.

“So defend yourself.”

I reached to my thigh to pull my blade. A thorny black vine whipped at my hand, sending the knife tumbling out of my reach.

“No weapons. Only magic.”

“I told you, I don’t have m—”

A cloud of glowing scattershot rocketed toward me. I yelped and fell to my knees just in time for the sizzling points of light to sail above my head.

“Stop pretending. Get up and defend yourself.”

“I’m not pretending. I—*shit!*”

I rolled on my hip a split second before a shadowy axe sliced through the space I’d been sitting, leaving a jagged crevice in the stone floor.

“So many lies,” Luther tutted. “Next, you’ll try to claim you didn’t kiss me.”

“I didn’t,” I snapped. “*You* kissed *me*. I was an innocent bystander.”

“There was nothing *innocent* about that kiss. From either of us.” He wet his lips, and heat coursed through my blood. “I think I’ve still got a few traces of your bloody handprints on my skin, if you’d like me to prove it.”

Destroy.

I lunged for my fallen dagger and hurled it at his chest. Luther sighed and twitched his wrist. A wall of pale blue light appeared around him, the blade bouncing harmlessly off its edge.

“This is beneath you,” he muttered, rolling his eyes.

He *rolled his fucking eyes*.

Destroy. Destroy.

I climbed to my feet, grinding my teeth nearly to dust. “I’m done with this conversation.” I started to stomp past him, but an explosion of glittering sparks sent me stumbling back with a shout.

“Use your magic. I know it’s there, I can feel it building around you. The light burns and the darkness bites—call to them, craft them into the weapons you need.”

“I *can’t*.”

“I’m not stopping until you do.”

Destroy. Destroy. Destroy.

“I can’t control it,” I blurted out, a hint of desperation cracking through, but there was no compassion in his eyes.

“Try harder, Diem. Focus.”

“Fuck off,” I rasped, my chest near bursting with the effort of holding back.

“Then tell me why you’re so angry.”

Red mist veiled my vision.

No—*blood*.

Innocent blood.

“Tell me,” he barked.

Fight.

Kill.

Destroy.

“You killed them,” I screamed. “You killed all those children!”

“What children?”

“The half-mortal children, you murderous bastard. Aemonn told me all about it. You’re the one who executed them. You’ve been slaughtering them for years.”

Luther’s face paled. His ethereal suit of armor flickered in place. “You have no idea what you speak of,” he said softly.

“Are you not Keeper of the Laws?”

“Yes, but—”

“It’s your job to carry out all executions.”

“Yes.”

“Do you deny it, then? Do you deny you killed them?”

“There is more to it than you—”

“Do you deny it?” I snarled.

His nostrils flared, but he said nothing.

“*Do you deny it?*”

“Yes, I deny it!” he thundered back.

He hurled a volley of light-made arrows at me, then another, then another. I ducked and spun to avoid them, flinching as one came a hair from slicing my cheek.

Luther was panting now, his chest shuddering with harsh, ragged breaths. “Is this really what you think of me—that I’m capable of *that*?” Though he seethed through clenched teeth, something in it sounded almost wounded. “Is that why you hate me so deeply?”

Despite the chilly air, the heat building inside me felt as if it might consume me whole. I wiped at the sweat dripping from my face. “I have so *many* reasons to hate you.”

“Do you?” he growled. “Or is it easier to blame your anger on me than look in the mirror and confront the truth?”

Fight.

Kill.

Destroy.

My vision went hazy, my body at once too hot and too cold. Burning and freezing, scalding and crystallizing, incinerating and shattering.

“Stop running away, Diem. Face what you are and what you’re meant to become.”

I groaned and squeezed my trembling palms to my temples. The *voice* was screeching with its cries to be unleashed, dragging its claws down my throat and smashing its fists against my brittle skull.

I couldn’t take it, couldn’t *survive* it.

“I thought you were fearless.” Luther’s lip curled back over his teeth. “So stop being such a coward.”

FIGHT.

KILL.

DESTROY.

I snapped.

One moment I was shaking, panting, and then—

I was levitating. Hovering in the air, cocooned by a glowing white sphere that crackled and hummed as my hair danced around my shoulders in a churning breeze. Spiked tendrils of pale blue light twirled from the orb’s surface, slinking across the floor and transforming the dungeon into a luminous jungle of gnarled, sharp-tipped vines.

A hazy black liquid dripped from each thorn, as if bleeding from within. It swirled and swelled, the floor awash with it—a lake of shadows, then a sea, its ominous tide cresting in waves and lapping at the walls.

Luther yielded a step as the inky darkness splashed against his legs. He shielded his eyes at my blinding glow, but my own eyes had perfect clarity as they narrowed on him.

And he was grinning. *Grinning.*

The sight of it undid me.

I was a dying star, exploding and imploding, consuming all I touched.

My piercing screams were echoed by the roar of my distant gryvern as a blast of pure energy ripped from my chest. Luther cast a shield in a dome around me, and my power blazed past it like a fire through parchment. Magic crashed against the dungeon walls, fissures splintering across the rattling stone ceiling.

Luther grunted with effort and crafted another shield around me, then another. The silvery flames that shot from my skin burned through each one with ease, dissolving into a mist that froze as it landed and coated the obsidian waves with a foam of glittering frost.

I lost all sense of self. My body was no longer one soul but thousands of them. They flowed like roots from the soil beneath the palace, snaking through the stone and burrowing under my skin. They pulsed in rhythm in my core, each one lending their power to my own.

One stood out in particular, a spirit brighter than all the others combined. Its face wavered in my vision, too hazy to see clearly except for one feature: two grey eyes, so much like my own, staring back at me. Their corners crinkled as if in a smile.

A smile of promise. A smile of fate.

It might have lasted only a second, or an hour, or a lifetime. When it ended, I was on my knees. A starry glow still shone from within, my veins coal-black under luminescent skin. The floor had cratered beneath me, and between the cracks, sprouts were visible through the rubble.

And then I heard laughing.

I looked up. Luther's magic armor had vanished. His clothes hung in tattered shreds that smoked from where they'd been singed, the scar across his chest peeking through the ragged fabric. His bloody body was covered in a collage of cuts and burns, one eyebrow half-scorched from his face—but he was radiant. Practically giddy. His smile stretched from ear to ear, his eyes gleaming with delighted shock.

There was no more cold veneer—this was Luther unmasked, and he was boldly, unreservedly *happy*.

I barely recognized him.

"I knew you had it in there," he breathed. He shook his head and laughed again, a full-body ripple of childlike wonder. "Blessed Kindred, you're incredible—and that was just a hint of it. You're going to be unstoppable. I have no idea how keeping all that in for this long didn't burn you alive."

I stared down at my open palms. The same hands I'd always had. And yet...

"Do you feel better?" Luther asked. When I didn't answer, his smile faltered. "Did the release help?"

Yes.

And no.

He had been completely right. The explosion of power was a pressure valve for my anger. My mind was now clear, my heartbeat steady, my skin cool and refreshed. The *voice* was as silent as death.

But its crimson fog had lifted to reveal something I'd been hiding from for months—maybe since all the way back when I was a scared little girl having visions I didn't understand.

I was Descended.

I had magic.

I was strong, and I was fast. I could heal.

And I would live for centuries. Millennia, maybe.

But my family wouldn't. Henri and Maura, they wouldn't.

I would get decades with them at best—if I was lucky. And they would be painful, heartbreaking decades where I stayed young while I watched the people I loved wrinkle and weaken and wither to dust.

I would grieve and bury them, one by one, in the cold soil. I would watch helplessly as everyone who ever knew them died, too, until it was only *my* head, *my* heart, that still carried their memory.

And then I would be alone. So completely, eternally alone.

And no magic in the world could prevent it.

Alone. That was my destiny.

"I accept."

Luther tentatively edged closer and helped me to stand, his hands gently curling around my arms to hold me steady. "You accept what?"

"I'll claim House Corbois," I said hoarsely. "But only if you protect my friends and family for as long as they live. Even if I die in the Challenging." My hands began to tremble. "Promise me that, and I'll do it."

"Diem..." His voice was soft and painfully tender. He arched his head down in an effort to catch my gaze. "What's wrong?"

Everything.

I looked up, my fractured, bleeding heart reflected in his concerned eyes. "If you want my trust, then give me your word you'll protect them,

even if I can't."

A tear escaped, streaming like a river down my cheeks. I'd once been horrified at the idea of crying in front of him. Now, I was simply trying not to shatter.

"*Please*, Luther," I whispered, my voice cracking.

"Of course." He brushed the tear away and nodded earnestly. "I won't let anything happen to them. I promise."

Without another word, I pulled out of his arms and walked away, up the winding staircase, along the twisting corridors, through my heavily guarded chamber doors, and into my cold, empty bed.

I let the tears flow unchecked, and I wept until the world fell away.

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Chapter Nine

I was empty in every sense of the word.

After I left the dungeon, I surrendered to a deep, soul-rending despair that pulled me into a dreamless slumber, but by morning, I awoke feeling numb.

Expendng so much power in one explosive burst had drained my energy, leaving my body sore and my head spinning. I bathed and dressed as if swimming through oil, every action requiring twice the effort for half the speed.

My thoughts—and the *voice*—were quieter than ever. The chaos was still in there somewhere, rumbling under the surface, but for the first time in months, I could sit in silence and just *be*.

Tears, anger, panic, hope—they all seemed oddly foreign, objects that belonged to someone else. Even when I dared to let my mind drift to my darkest thoughts, the fears hiding within were no more than broken trinkets on a dusty shelf.

I had always imagined the Descended as emotionless shells with magic where their hearts should be. That's exactly how I felt now—powerful beyond measure, yet depthlessly void.

I'd been up since dawn, sitting in an armchair and staring blankly at the wall, when a knock on the door broke the quiet.

I opened it to see Luther holding a tray piled high with flaky pastries, fluffy steaming omelets, glistening fruits, and an array of juices and teas. He studied me warily, the way you might eye a wounded beast that was as likely to rip your throat out as to keel over and die.

"I thought you might prefer to take breakfast privately this morning."

I stared at him.

Angry—I was supposed to be angry at him, wasn't I?

"And I owe you information concerning..." His eyes darted to the guards. "...our mutual acquaintance."

Yes. My mother.

I did want to know those things. Badly.

I could still feel that, at least.

I stepped aside and watched as he laid out the food on a small table, then I sank into a chair across from him.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. His eyes jumped across my face. “Did using your magic help?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but—had it helped? Was *this* better than being angry?

“You were right,” I said. “About the release.” I began to pile food on a plate, less out of hunger than just to give myself something to do.

His posture eased as he watched me take my first bites. “The things I said last night... I only meant to provoke you so you would use your magic. I didn’t really mean—”

“It’s fine.”

He leaned forward. “You are *not* a cowa—”

“Will you pass the tea?”

Luther frowned. He lifted the teapot and poured it into a delicate porcelain cup, then handed it to me. “You must know, you are the last person I would ever—”

“And the sugar, as well?”

His chin dropped. He slowly slid the bowl forward. “If you would just let me—”

“Why do you feel different today?” I plunked a sugar cube into my tea. “Normally, when you come in a room, I can feel your magic. Today, I can’t.”

He leaned back with a heavy sigh. “Because I drained my magic last night trying to keep the palace from coming down on our heads. You should be proud—normally it takes me hours to burn out. You ran through my reserves in minutes.”

Any other day, that would have made me tremendously smug. *Obnoxiously* smug. I should have been making sexually charged innuendos about his *stamina* with a wicked smirk.

Instead, I stirred my tea. “I think I’m empty, too.”

“No, you’re not. Not even close.” He smiled wryly. “I can feel yours. It’s weaker than normal, but still stronger than any Descended I’ve ever met.”

I stilled at that revelation. “Can every Descended sense my magic?”

“No. Only the most powerful can sense each other. In Lumnos, there’s only a handful that might feel it. Even those who can won’t know it’s coming from you unless you get close.”

“I see.”

Luther paused, waiting for me to say more. I leaned back and sipped my tea.

His brows pulled inward. “My father issued a formal announcement of the King’s death. He feared waiting would look like we were hiding. I’d hoped to hold off longer, give you more time to settle in...”

I nodded. “I understand.”

“The funeral will be held in a few days. You’ll be expected to be there, but you won’t need to speak or greet anyone. Not until—”

“The ball. Aemonn told me.”

His lips pressed to a thin line. “How *helpful* of him.”

“He asked to be my escort.”

Luther looked away, staring at some distant point. The muscles in his jaw twitched.

“I made a mistake,” I said quietly. “I revealed something I shouldn’t have.”

His eyes snapped back to me. He leaned his forearms on the table, hands clasped. “Tell me.”

I set down my cup and took a long, slow breath. “Aemonn was flirting, and I’d been drinking. I got flustered.” My eyes dropped. Even the numbness couldn’t keep this from being painfully awkward. “I told him the mortal man I’m seeing asked me to marry him.”

Luther sat deathly still.

“Is that... true?” he asked, with some effort.

“Yes.”

A heavy silence passed.

“Have you given him an answer?”

I winced. “Not yet.”

My eyes closed as I braced for his response. For a long time, there was only an excruciating quiet. Then I heard his sigh, and the creak of jostling leather as he shifted in his chair. Then more silence.

Gods, this was worse than a lecture.

He drew in a breath, and I tensed.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll handle Aemonn.”

I looked up to see a face empty of judgment or reproach. Instead, his expression was... gentle. Understanding.

And perhaps a little sad.

“My charming cousin has a strange talent for ferreting out information others would rather keep hidden. It’s happened to everyone in the family at some point. Consider it a House Corbois rite of passage.”

I blinked. Old habits had me wondering at Luther’s motives, but my suspicion quickly dissolved into apathy. Whatever the reason, it felt nice to have a conversation with him that didn’t seem doomed to end in bloodshed.

“Is there any chance Aemonn also has a strange talent for keeping information to himself?” I asked.

Luther huffed a laugh. “I’ll speak with him. I can be quite *persuasive* if I need to be.”

I sagged back in my chair with a sigh. “Thank you.”

The softness faded from his expression, returning to his trademark focus. “This mortal—does he know about the Crown?”

“Not yet.” I shrugged and looked down. “I don’t even know if he’ll still want to marry me.”

“Now that you’re Queen?”

“Now that I’m a Descended.”

“You’ve always been a Descended.”

“He didn’t know that. *I* didn’t know that.”

Luther frowned. “You truly didn’t know?”

“Not until last night. I suppose I had suspicions, but I never really believed it.”

“Is that why you were upset?”

I didn’t answer. Couldn’t—not without tearing down the walls my psyche had so carefully built to keep myself together.

I cleared my throat. I needed a change of subject. “Tell me about my mother.”

His demeanor shifted. He sat up straighter, his hands gripped together, knuckles white where his fingers were interlaced. “Tell me what you know first.”

“That wasn’t our agreement.”

“I agreed to tell you what I can. I made promises to your mother to keep certain things from you. If I know what y—”

“My mother wanted *you* to keep secrets from *me*?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He gave me a curious look. “Isn’t it obvious? She must have known what you were.”

“She wouldn’t have kept that from me,” I protested, but even as the words fell from my lips, I no longer believed them.

“She was adamant that you be kept away from our world.”

“Because it’s dangerous.”

“Then why send your brother to a Descended school? Do you truly believe she cared less for his safety than yours?”

I couldn’t answer. I had asked my mother the same question a hundred times, and her response had always been the same: *You’re just going to have to trust me, my little warrior. I know what I’m doing.* At the time, I had blamed it on an unjust double standard in the parenting of boys and girls, but now...

“I’m only surprised she got away with it for so long.” Something intense and heady gleamed in his gaze. “I knew the truth the second I saw you. Though, I admit, when Maura swore you were born with brown eyes, I began to doubt. I should have known she would lie to protect you.”

“Maura didn’t lie. I *was* born with brown eyes.”

His head tilted sharply. “That’s not possible.”

“I remember my own eyes, Luther. And my hair. They were the same color as Teller’s. Besides, the Descended have blue eyes, even the half-mortals.”

“Only the Lumnos Descended. Each of the nine lines has a distinct eye color. Arboros is green, Montios is violet, Fortos is red—”

“Are any of them grey?”

His jaw worked, looking as if he was chewing on thoughts he wasn’t ready to spit out. “No,” he said, the word feeling unfinished. “But you’re wearing the Blessed Mother’s Crown. And I saw you wield her light and shadows.”

“Maybe the magic made a mistake.”

“The magic doesn’t make mistakes.”

“If it’s so infallible, why does it require that I fight someone to the death to prove myself worthy?”

“It doesn’t,” he said simply. “The Challenging is a modern creation. Before the Blood War, the Houses were constantly assassinating the Crown to gamble at being the next one selected. For a time, it threw the realm into chaos. The Challenging was the compromise that put an end to it. Now the Houses get one shot at taking out a new Crown, and if they fail, they must accept that Crown’s reign without interference.”

“And if I refuse to go along with it? Am I still the Queen?”

“Yes.” His answer was quick and surprisingly forceful. “You are the Queen now and for as long as your lungs draw breath.”

“But?” I pushed.

“But...” He sighed. “It will be near impossible to see your plans through with no support from the Houses, the other eight Crowns, and the Emarion Army.” His features darkened. “And I have a feeling you have a great many plans you intend to see through.”

My eyes thinned as I weighed his response. Were those words of advice—or another coded threat?

He rose and strolled around the table, then leaned down to brace his hands on the arms of my chair, caging me in place. My heartbeat stumbled at his nearness.

“Whatever those plans are, Your Majesty,” he rumbled, “I can help. I will find a way to prove that to you.”

I pressed against the high back of my seat, fighting to keep distance between us. “You have the most to gain from my failure. Why should I trust you?”

“Your mother trusted me.”

“No, my mother *blackmailed* you. And now she’s likely dead because of it.”

“I helped your mother long before she knew my secrets. And I very much doubt she is dead.”

Deep within my spirit, a faded spark glowed back to life and sliced through the shadows—a hope reborn.

I laid my palms against his chest and pressed him back as I shot to my feet. “She’s alive? You’re sure?”

“I know nothing for certain. But knowing where she was headed when she left... yes, I’d bet she’s still alive.”

My pulse picked up so quickly the room began to spin. “Where did she go? Is she still there? Is she—”

He grasped my shoulders, gently nudging me back toward my seat. "Tell me what you know first."

"Luther, please—"

"Sit."

My eyes were pleading, desperate, but his steely resolve warned me begging would gain me no ground.

I slumped back into my chair.

"Tell me what you know," he said again.

"I know you arranged the bargain between my mother and the King so Teller could attend the Descended school, but only if my mother worked for the King for the rest of her life. Not just as a healer, but whatever the King demanded."

He looked at me oddly. "And?"

"And I know you were arguing with her the day she left. She threatened to release your secret if you didn't agree to her demands."

"And?"

I swallowed. "And that's all."

"*That's* what you know?" His brows drew low. "You don't know the secret? Or how she found it? Do you even know who she was working with?"

My cheeks turned hot. How could he know so much more about my mother than I did?

He scrubbed at his jaw, his calm beginning to fracture. "I thought she would at least... when you said you were taking over for her, I thought..." He raked a hand through his hair, several black strands falling loose from where he'd tied it back.

"Luther," I snapped, once again on my feet. "Tell me where she is."

He began to pace, hands clasped tight at his back. Every time I tried to block his path, he simply changed course. He wouldn't even look me in the eye.

"I thought there was at least *something* I could tell you without breaking my promise," he mumbled. "Fuck, you're going to hate me for this, but I can't."

The numbness gave way to panic as I felt the answers I so deeply longed for slipping out of my grasp. "But—but you said—you *swore!*"

"I said I would tell you what I was at liberty to share. I didn't realize..." He looked genuinely pained. "There's too much you don't know."

Anything I say would betray her.”

Last night’s despair roared back to life, opening a pit at my feet and dragging me toward its edge. I shot forward and threw myself at Luther. I clutched at his chest, his muscles hard as granite beneath my frantic grip. He was my only tether to my mother, and I clung to him like a lifeline in stormy seas.

“Please, Luther. She’s my mother. I *need* her.”

Something in both of us broke.

I felt it viscerally. On Luther’s face, I saw a darkness so profound, my heart squeezed at the sight. Something in my words had awoken a buried trauma that haunted him as profoundly as my mother’s loss haunted me.

His heart hammered beneath my trembling palm. He spoke haltingly, like each word was a battle he had to fight and win, one at a time.

“There was no bargain. Auralie wanted your brother in a Descended school, and I agreed, because—” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. There was never a payment. The agreement was a pretense so no one would ask questions. The King didn’t even know about it. Only me. Then...”

He hesitated, and I held my breath. I didn’t dare move for fear that he would change his mind.

“I caught your mother spying. She was collecting information from the palace. I discovered it and confronted her.”

“The argument,” I gasped. “When I saw you—”

“No. This was earlier, months before. I was furious with her. I wanted to ban her from the palace, but she and I had—” He looked down, his throat working. “—a mutual goal I couldn’t ignore. So I let her stay, and I helped her.”

My mother was spying on the King.

And Luther had helped her. He could have had her killed for treason—but he’d *helped* her.

His hands curled gently behind my arms, our bodies woven together in a strange, intimate embrace. He held me in place as firmly as I clung to him, each of us silently begging the other not to run away.

“The day you saw us arguing, she asked for my help. She wanted to visit a place where mortals are forbidden, and she knew I could get her there.”

“Where?”

The light guttered in his eyes. "I cannot tell you. I'm sorry. That's a line I will not cross."

"No!" My fingers bunched in the folds of his shirt. After all this time, I was so close to finding her. I would beg, if I had to. I would cry or humiliate myself, I would throw myself at his feet. For this, I was above nothing. "I'm your Queen. Shouldn't your loyalty be to me?"

"It is to you. More than you know." His piercing stare burned with a fierce insistence. "I will accept whatever punishment you give. Lash me. Throw me in the dungeon. Banish me from the family. Exile me, if you must. But I made a promise." His face lowered almost imperceptibly to mine. "And I keep my promises, my Queen. Whatever the cost."

The Diem of yesterday would have annihilated him. With words or blades or magic, or maybe all three. I would have screamed and sworn to make him pay.

But the Diem of yesterday had asked Luther to make a promise, too—a promise that guarded everything I held dear. Luther's word was the only guarantee I had that, even if this damn Crown got me killed, the people I loved would be safe.

And as hard as I tried to summon the rage I had grown so accustomed to, I couldn't do it. I could not hate Luther for keeping his promises. Not anymore.

"There's nothing I can do to convince you to tell me where she is?"

His head gave the slightest shake. "I'm sorry."

His grip resisted as I pulled away, though he let me go. I turned my back to him and walked to the table where the breakfast spread lay forgotten.

"Go. Leave me be."

A long moment passed with no words and no movement from either of us. Finally, his footsteps crossed the room to the exit and paused, followed by the sound of a door cracking open.

"I will not break my promise, but I can give you this," he said. "If she isn't back by year end, I'll go get her and bring her to you myself. You have my word."

My heart leapt. The end of the year was two months away. If I could survive the Challenging and make it through the coronation...

I whirled around to respond, but Luther was already gone.

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Chapter

Ten

Eleanor and I spent the morning plotting a plan of attack for the Ascension Ball. More accurately, I sat in a stupor, mentally processing my conversation with Luther, while Eleanor kindly pretended not to notice as she deliberated over the most strategic combination of dresses, jewelry, and hair.

I didn't tell her about Henri or Aemonn, the latter because I was embarrassed, and the former because I had no answers for the questions I knew she would ask.

The need to tell Henri—and my father—about the Crown was growing heavier by the second. The last thing I wanted was for either of them to find out through idle gossip, but no amount of standing in front of the mirror and wishing it away had made the Crown so much as flicker, and I couldn't very well walk into Mortal City with the Crown on my head and a pack of Royal Guards at my hip.

I had to find a solution... and soon.

Eleanor and I had moved to our favorite spot on the back terrace of the gardens, basking in the afternoon sun. After confiding that she'd always wanted to be an artist, I'd coaxed her into showing me her work. Her drawings were impressively realistic, so vivid they seemed to move across the page.

Having then begged her to sketch me a portrait of Sorae, the one thing about the Crown I was unequivocally grateful for, we'd lured the gryvern to the terrace with a barrel of waxy green apples that I was now waving enticingly to hold her attention.

"Tell me about your cousins," I said.

Eleanor squinted, studying Sorae's features. "Which cousins? I've got hundreds."

"Just the important ones."

"Who do you consider important?"

“I’m more interested in who *you* consider important.”

I jerked away from Sorae’s snout as she nipped at the apple in my hand. She huffed and whipped her tail in frustration. Despite her menacing appearance, the beastly tantrum was so endearing I gave in and tossed her the fruit.

“She’s spoiled enough as it is, you know,” Eleanor warned with a laugh. “Speaking of spoiled... I know you’re already familiar with cousin Aemonn.”

I shot her a look at the suggestive eyebrows she wiggled in my direction. “He’s been very welcoming, though he doesn’t seem to be popular around here.”

“On the contrary, he’s *very* popular. Just not with the male cousins. They’ve lost many a prospective lover to his winks and smiles—and Aemonn never lets them forget it.”

The memory of our unsettling garden stroll had my smile fading. “Is he trustworthy?”

She shrugged. “He’s ambitious. His magic is weak, so he’s had to make up for it with charm and wits.” She flipped her hair back and smirked. “Just like me. I’m not surprised he was the first to try to get in your good graces. He knows how to court power.”

“And should I let him in my good graces?”

She chewed thoughtfully on the tip of her pencil. “He could be helpful to you. He knows the other Houses well, and he always has the best court gossip—other than me, of course. But everything with Aemonn is an exchange. Whatever he gives, he always demands something of greater value in return. It may be enough for him that you’re the Queen and he wants your favor, but he could just as easily sell gossip *about* you as sell it *to* you.”

I groaned. How had I managed to spill one of my most sensitive secrets to a man infamous for selling them?

“What about his brother?” I asked.

“Taran? Oh, they’re opposites in every way. Aemonn is always polished, always planning. Taran is a wild boar let loose in a glass maze.” She smiled fondly. “You’ll like him. He doesn’t care one bit about court scheming. With his strong magic and his father being the King’s brother, he could have had any title he wanted, but he refused them all. I’ve always

wondered how he came from that family line—it drives his father mad that he has no interest in power.”

Sorae impatiently pawed at the soil, clawing a divot into the grass. I tossed an apple into the air, and within a blink, it disappeared between her jaws with a juicy crunch.

“Who else?” I asked.

“There’s Lily of course. She’s a sweetheart. Though I worry she may be too naive about what it means to be the only Princess.” Eleanor rolled her eyes. “I’m sure Remis is plotting to marry her off the moment she comes of age.”

A knot formed in my gut at the thought of Lily being sold off like chattel—and what I knew it would do to Teller. “Luther would let that happen?”

“Luther would burn the palace down before he’d let her get forced into it.” She gave a deep sigh. “But Lily is devoted to making her parents proud. If Remis wants her to do it, I fear she’ll convince herself it’s what she wants, too.”

It reminded me so much of my brother, who had always been quick to accept my parents’ demands without complaint. I still wasn’t sure he even wanted to attend the Descended school, but my mother had proposed it with such conviction that I suspected he’d agreed just to make her happy.

It was no wonder, then, that he and Lily had become so close. But it also made their bleak future all the more inevitable.

“What about Alixe?”

“She spends all her time with the Royal Guard, so we aren’t very close, but she’s certainly worth knowing. She would behead me for saying this—*literally*, I think—but she’s just as ambitious as Aemonn. She’s simply more interested in earning her way up by merit rather than scheming or birthright.”

I scratched at Sorae’s scaly jowls, and she leaned into my hand with a contented trill. “What’s her story? She seems more like a soldier than a lady of court.”

“Her father is highly ranked in the Emarion Army. Her mother died young, so her father used to take her along on his assignments. I suppose she got used to being around soldiers and battle. She told me once that she dreamed of leading an army someday. I still believe she might. No one would stand a chance against her.”

I swallowed tightly. If Alixe *did* lead an army, I was likely to be on the wrong side of it.

“Are female soldiers common among the Descended?” I asked. “That’s rare for a mortal.”

She nodded. “Since we fight with magic, even a petite woman can overpower a big brute. Though I’d wager Alixe could take a man out with her bare hands just as easily as her magic.”

Even from what little I’d seen, I had no doubt that was true. Alixe reminded me so much of myself—or at least the me I’d dreamed of becoming.

“You haven’t mentioned Luther,” I noted.

Eleanor gave me an intrigued look. “I didn’t think I needed to. You two already seem so close.”

“We’re not,” I shot back a little too quickly. “I barely know him.”

She arched one of her delicate, expressive eyebrows. “Luther is... hmm, how to explain him? Sometimes I think he was born one thousand years old. He had the future of Lumnos on his shoulders even before his magic came in. Every now and then, I see glimpses of the man he might have been in another life, but it’s buried too deep under his obligations to the realm and the Crown and the House. He’s so consumed by duty, there’s no room left for anything else.”

There was a sadness in her tone that tugged at my heart. The picture beginning to form of Luther’s upbringing was a grim one, lacking in the affection and joy that had been such a staple of my family home.

It explained so much about him—his coldness, his obsession with titles and protocol—but it also made him an enigma. If his lifelong loyalty was to his family, why help my mother? Why help *me*?

Eleanor grinned cheekily. “Every year I tell him the only birthday present I want is to see him get so drunk that he finally lets loose. Taran’s the only one who has seen it, and he swears it’s a riot.”

I tried to picture the brutally serious, eternally brooding Prince as a giggling drunk. My mind came up blank, the prospect too impossible even to imagine.

But there had been moments...

The luminous thrill in his eyes when I’d released my power. The morning after he’d rescued me from the armory—his casual smile and

candid stories about Sorae. The smirk that peeked through whenever he found a way to get under my skin.

Eleanor was right—there was something else hiding beneath Luther’s facade. *Someone* else.

Perhaps he had been telling the truth when he said he intended to serve the Crown rather than wear it. Maybe seeing my power unleashed had been a confirmation for both of us that this was real and not some dream that we would awake from.

For me, it had been like finding iron chains on my wrists, anchoring me to the undying ground while my mortal beloveds drifted away in the current of time. But for Luther, perhaps it had been like discovering his chains were finally broken.

Or perhaps I was buying too easily into a carefully crafted lie he wanted me to believe.

“He must have been looking forward to being King and not having to answer to anyone,” I said. “I can’t imagine he’s pleased that his father’s bargain means he can’t raise a Challenge against me.”

A guttural rumble rolled from Sorae’s throat at the implication.

Eleanor set her sketchbook in her lap. “If you believe that, why do you allow him to advise you so closely?”

“Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer, I suppose. And closer still if you don’t know which is which.” It was the most honest answer I dared to give.

She tapped her pencil to her temple and smiled. “You’re catching on to the rules of court very quickly, Your Majesty.”

I laughed, though my chest puffed with pride at her compliment. “Besides, Luther isn’t my advisor. You’re my only one.”

The pencil dropped from her hand like a stone. “I am?” From the way she gaped at me, one would have thought I’d told her I was rebuilding the palace with leaves and paste.

“Why, did Luther tell you otherwise?” My eyes rolled upward. “Just because he follows me around and tells me what to do at all times does not mean—”

“N-no,” she stammered, blinking rapidly. “I just—I assumed... Luther, Aemonn, they’re members of the Crown Council, and I...” Her shoulders curved inward, as if she feared she was taking up too much space. “I’m truly the only one?”

I sat beside her on the low marble bench and nudged her with my knee. “They might have advised the King, but I need advisors *I* can trust. When I asked you why you offered to help me, you didn’t give me the story I wanted to hear. You told me the truth. I won’t soon forget that, Eleanor. If those men want to advise me, then they’re the ones who should be taking lessons from you.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, barely audible. Her curls fell into a curtain that hid her face as she hunched over her sketchbook, but not before I caught a glint under her long lashes.

She sniffled softly. “No one has ever believed in me before. All I’ve ever been is a silly, frivolous girl with weak magic and nothing to offer.”

Something in her response plucked a string inside me, its low note resonating in my ears.

“They want us to feel small, Eleanor. They want us to be quiet, be predictable, be unimportant, behave. Then they make us think we deserve it. But I think they’re just terrified we’ll stop listening to them and start listening to each other. And do you know why they’re so scared of women like us?”

Our gazes met, two sets of glittering eyes shining in shared determination.

“Why?” she asked.

My answering grin was positively wicked.

“Because they damn well should be.”

Sorae snapped her teeth with an insistent yip. Though she might only have been impatient for me to toss another apple, a part of me wondered if my clever gryvern wasn’t listening—and agreeing.

Eleanor swiped at her cheeks and gave me a smile that radiated the light of Blessed Lumnos herself. “Diem Corbois, I’m so very glad that you’re my Queen.”



MY DISCUSSION with Eleanor had improved my spirits. Though my head was still buried with the grief I’d felt the evening prior, somewhere under the dark soil, a seed of hope was sprouting to the surface.

As Queen, I could *help* people. I could help mortals, of course, but I was starting to realize that I could help the Descended, too. The good ones—the worthy ones, however few they may be. Centuries of archaic, unjust traditions ruled this realm, and perhaps I alone had the power to end them.

If I could survive the Challenging.

Those thoughts circulated in my head as I walked through the palace. Eleanor had left to meet with friends in another House, promising to return with news on what rumors of the new Queen were being traded among the elite social circles. Luther, my persistent shadow, had gone curiously missing, and it was still hours before Lily and Teller would be done with school.

Even my usual escort of guards was gone, having been scaled back after my official acceptance of House Corbois. I found myself, for the very first time, free to roam the gigantic estate that had become my new home—alone.

That was my fate. Life in this palace. *Alone.*

As alone as one could be, surrounded by hundreds of strangers vying for my attention.

“Ah, there you are, Your Majesty.”

“Remis,” I said, giving him a polite nod in greeting.

“What a pleasant surprise. My son claimed you were too busy to meet with me today.”

So Luther was trying to keep me from his father.

Interesting.

I kept my reaction casually indifferent. “Is there something you need to discuss?”

“I wanted to formally welcome you to House Corbois.” He gave a stiff bow. “Blessed Mother Lumnos has honored us with many generations of service to the realm. We all look forward to continuing this great tradition at your side.”

Remis was a consummate diplomat. His features radiated cordiality, and the rich smoothness of his voice could put anyone at ease. His posture was approachable, yet still deferential. By all appearances, he looked thrilled to have me around.

It was only the flicker of tension in his jaw—a trait he shared with his son—that exposed what I knew to be the truth.

“I’m sure you do,” I said with a sweet smile.

Low on his cheek, a muscle twitched.

“I take it my son informed you that the King’s funeral will take place in two days’ time.”

“He has. Aemonn was kind enough to tell me of the Ascension Ball, as well.”

His smile was warm caramel, thick and honeyed. Nothing like the brightness of his son’s, rare as it might be. “I’m pleased to hear they have heeded my orders to make themselves useful to you.”

“So many of my new cousins have been eager to offer their help. I wasn’t aware I had you to thank for that.”

Another twitch.

“As your Regent, I only wanted to—”

“The *late King’s* Regent,” I corrected. “I’ve not yet chosen mine.”

His mask faltered at last. His lips remained curved, his eyes crinkled, but the warmth in his features dissipated as if chilled by a winter gust.

“If you *get* to reign, Your Majesty. There are many obstacles to overcome to ensure such a happy day comes to pass.”

I raised an eyebrow. “So many? I hear a Challenge to a Corbois Crown is almost unheard of. I hope you’re not suggesting your House can’t provide the protection our deal promised.”

Something wild and dangerous flashed briefly in Remis’s eyes—another trait I had seen too frequently in his son.

“It isn’t the Corbois name alone that wields such influence. It’s the depth of our relationships across all nine realms. The many enemies one stands to make, if one dares to cross us.”

He delivered the threat with the same offhanded lightness as he might discuss the weather.

A true diplomat, indeed.

“And, of course,” he rushed on, “we have wisdom acquired through our many years of service. While our youngest members may be helpful, the elder Corbois have much sage counsel to offer, should you be open to it.”

The urge to continue provoking him was strong. It was hard not to look at him and think of all the injustices done to the mortals under his watch as Regent.

But timing was everything. While I wanted to keep Remis and his kin unsure of their position so they focused more on winning me over than

digging into my mortal life, I didn't want to go far enough to make an enemy of them.

Yet.

I gave him my most grateful smile. "Only a fool would turn down such a valuable gift. I always welcome your guidance, Regent."

The tension dropped in his shoulders, his expression regaining its charm. "I'm pleased to hear that. Shall we meet tomorrow to discuss strategy for the House Receptions?"

I faltered a beat.

"House Receptions?" I repeated.

"Private meetings with the heads of each of the Twenty Houses. They are the most vital step in avoiding a Challenge." He arched a single brow. "Surely my son has begun preparing you for them."

"He has not," I clipped. "All the more reason to more closely heed your counsel, it seems."

It was the right thing to say—at least if Remis's triumphant smirk was any indication.

"I beg you to forgive my son's error, Your Majesty. I'll have a stern word with him."

"Please do. Let him know that his Queen does not appreciate him withholding vital information that she would dearly like to know." I flashed a smirk of my own. "Be sure and use those *exact* words."

He gave another exaggerated bow, the dip of his head barely concealing his smug self-assurance. "Until tomorrow, Your Majesty."

I spun on my heel, rushing for the nearest door. Even I could only feign so much confidence in one day before I succumbed to the mess I felt on the inside, and the idea of meeting with the most powerful Descended in Lumnos—meetings so important that Remis thought we needed a *strategy*—had me close to my limit.

A throat cleared behind me. "Your Majesty—I believe that way leads to the servants' passages."

Shit.

"Yes, I'm aware," I lied cheerily, waving a hand in the air as I disappeared behind the door. "A Queen must know every inch of her palace!"



I FOUND myself halfway down a dark, nondescript hallway. Cabinets lined each wall, overflowing with buckets and rags, piles of crystal glassware and silver cutlery, linens in a kaleidoscope of colors, and fat, waxy candles of every size. Windowless walls stretched left and right, lit with glowing orbs that floated at far intervals.

I walked up to the nearest one and gazed at it, struck by the odd feeling of familiarity that thrummed in my chest. It felt like a tiny part of me had been plucked from my ribs and hung from the ceiling.

Whose magic fueled these lights? Was there a servant somewhere whose job it was to illuminate these halls with their powers? Or did it all somehow stem from the very Crown atop my head?

“I heard she’s already sleeping with Aemonn. Didn’t take her very long.”

Footsteps drifted from my left, along with the quiet murmur of voices.

“I heard she killed the King. One of the guards said she attacked him the day he died.”

My jaw clenched. A group of servants was approaching—and evidently gossiping about *me*. A part of me wanted to hold my ground and confront them, but a far larger part filled with panic as I searched for an exit.

“The King was already dying. If she did finish him off, it was a mercy. Everyone knows he’d been wanting to go ever since his mate died.”

The voices grew louder. Through a cracked door, I caught sight of walls lined with divided shelves, many bursting with folded parchment or twine-wrapped boxes.

A mailroom—I remembered this from Eleanor’s tour. An opening on the room’s opposite corner led to the palace’s front halls.

“Well, I think she’s up to something. How is it possible she’s more powerful than Prince Luther, yet no one’s heard of her? She has to be a—”

I slipped out just in time to avoid the servants as they passed down the hall. My lungs burned with a deep exhale of relief. As I crept out of the mailroom, I grinned to myself at my narrow escape from certain humiliation, then turned to make my way to the foyer.

And ran straight into the chest of Henri Albanon.

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Chapter
Eleven

Once, when I was a young girl, I almost died.

Teller and I were in the throes in a months-long tree-climbing duel, and I'd set my sights on a towering cypress edging the marsh that was nearly twice the height of his tallest conquest.

A third of the way up, the spindly branches grew too thin to support my weight, but pride—and my brother's teasing—goaded me into ignoring my instincts. Up and up I ascended, until a fateful *snap* had me tumbling head-first into shallow water.

It's hard to say whether it was some benevolent god, my secret Descended blood, or just dumb luck that kept my neck from snapping in that collision into the rocky shores. When I finally came to, my lungs were full of water and my limbs were too numb to move. I watched in horror as the world slipped slowly away and a cold, hollow dread took its place.

Stumbling upon Henri, my mortal best-friend-turned-lover, in the middle of the royal palace with the Crown of Lumnos on my head felt *exactly* like that moment.

I stared helplessly as emotions rotated across his face like spokes on a carriage wheel.

Shock, then confusion.

Realization.

Grief.

Then anger. So much anger.

I said something—his name, or maybe some feeble explanation—but I couldn't hear it. I could feel my mouth moving, feel the throb of my pulse, feel my gauzy dress turn to lead and pull me down, down, down into the dark, but the only sound in my ears was Henri's voice and the words he kept repeating.

"You're one of them. You're *one of them*."

I staggered a step toward him. He recoiled as if I were some noxious disease he might accidentally contract.

“You lied to me.”

The hate in his eyes was tangible. I could swim through it. Drown in it.

“I didn’t know,” I pleaded. “I swear, Henri.”

“*Didn’t know?*” he spat.

I took another step. He dropped the sack he was carrying, piles of letters spilling across the marble floor. He must have finally convinced his father to let him take over some of the palace courier duties.

Just my luck.

Henri’s hand went to the hem of his tunic and slid toward his navel—toward the small, flat blade that I knew he kept concealed in his waistband.

A knife the guards at the front would have missed when they searched him for weapons.

He was going to stab me.

Henri. *My* Henri.

He saw me note the gesture, and he froze. For a brief moment, we both understood each other in the most wretched, painful of ways.

Guards near the entrance took notice of the open hostility on Henri’s face and closed in around us, swords sliding from their sheaths with an ominous scrape. Nearby, nosy servants pretended to busy themselves with an invisible task, while a pair of Corbois cousins unabashedly gaped from an adjacent room.

Too many curious eyes. Too many honed ears and sharp blades.

I straightened, raising my voice with manufactured haughtiness. “You there, courier. I have something I’d like you to deliver. It’s a message to someone I value very dearly.” My eyes flared wide. “Will you follow me to my study so I can retrieve it?”

Every quivering atom begged him to hear my unspoken plea: *Give me a chance. Don’t give up on me yet.*

My knees almost buckled at his barely discernible nod.

Two guards stepped forward to join us. “No escort is necessary,” I commanded, waving them off despite their wary stares of disapproval. “We’ll go alone.”

The problem, I realized, was that I had no idea where the Crown’s offices were. Though Eleanor had mentioned them on her tour, the only two

rooms in the palace that I could both find on my own and remain in undisturbed were the palace dungeon and my bedchambers.

Neither was ideal, but I suspected if I led Henri to the dungeon and its dark, caged cells, his blade would be embedded in my side before I had a chance to explain.

My chambers it would have to be.

I kept my face forward as I marched down the halls, too scared to look back and see the hatred in his eyes. With my thoughts so flustered, I made it almost all the way to the royal wing before I realized I no longer heard the click of his footsteps behind me.

I turned to see him fifty feet away, his focus glued on a door set slightly ajar. Whatever he was watching had captured him so completely that he didn't even notice me as I came up beside him.

I followed his line of sight into a small reading room. Nestled in a back corner, Luther and Aemonn were arguing heatedly in hushed voices.

My insides lurched. If Aemonn saw Henri sneaking into my bedroom... I doubted whatever secrets Luther held over him would be enough to buy that level of discretion.

I grabbed Henri's arm. "We have to go. They can't see you here."

A thunderous crash came from the room. When I looked back, Aemonn wore a vicious smile despite hanging from the wall, legs dangling, held in place by the hand Luther gripped around his throat.

That conversation was not going well.

I yanked on Henri's sleeve. "We really, *really* have to go."

"It's him." He was transfixed, breathless. "The man I saw—the one who killed the mortal boy. That's *him*."

My chest squeezed tight.

Though I had already mentally convicted Luther for the horrific crime, a piece of me had clung to the hope that it was all some misunderstanding.

Now, it was a truth I couldn't escape. Henri would never forgive me if he knew I was working alongside the man he despised so fervently that he'd been willing to die to bring him to justice.

"He'll pay," I said. "I swear it—I'll make sure he pays. But I can't do that if he sees you here."

Henri glared at me, then looked back to the room, rage smoldering in his narrowed eyes. "Fine."

I pulled him toward the royal wing, but I spotted a crowd of guards chatting outside of my rooms and froze. No matter how discreet Eleanor and Luther considered them, I wasn't willing to bet Henri's life on it. I tugged Henri around the corner and yanked him into the first bedroom I saw.

When I turned back, Henri's face had shifted. He stared at the Crown floating above me, his anger giving way to something far more devastating.

"You're the Queen," he murmured.

I wanted so badly to throw my arms around his neck and bury my head in his chest. To turn back the clock until we were no more than two naive youth, discovering what friendship could grow into with trust, honesty, and a little time.

A little time meant something very different for each of us now.

"I didn't know," I pleaded. "I swear to you on my life, on *Teller's* life, I had no idea."

His eyes snapped to mine, dark with distrust. "How is that possible? How could you not know?"

"I have the same questions myself, believe me. When the King died, this thing just... appeared. I thought it had chosen a mortal, until..." I flinched at the memory of the dungeon. "I didn't truly know until last night."

The hardness in his expression eased—just barely. "It was your birth father, then?"

"That's the only explanation. My mother has brown eyes, and she has aged too quickly to be Descended."

"Do you think she knew?"

That was the question I wanted more than anything to be able to ask her—and the question I most feared hearing the answer to.

"She had her secrets, but I have a hard time believing she would keep this from me. She always told us the big things, the things that mattered."

Henri looked away, an indecipherable expression scrawled on his features.

"What about the flameroot powder?" he asked. "Was that part of all this?"

I started to deny it, but—was it?

I'd never told anyone, not even Teller, the full story. I'd only claimed that I had wild hallucinations and the flameroot had made them stop.

But my mother knew.

All those years ago, as a scared little girl, I'd confessed the entirety of it only to her.

I'd told her that, in my visions, I could make the glow of candlelight paint a picture across the ceiling. I could persuade the shadows into leaving the corners of rooms and curving around me like a warm quilt. I could make them dance together, light and darkness, in a jaunty waltz. I'd told her that the bright and the dark were my friends, silent companions that answered to my beck and call.

In return, she'd told me I had a *disease*, and the crimson powder would make it all go away.

And it did—until I stopped taking it two months ago. Right before the voice that Luther called the godhood had begun urging me to *fight*.

"I think I'm going to be sick," I whimpered as the full breadth of my mother's betrayal sank in. I staggered to a table and gripped the edge for support, blowing out air to keep myself from retching.

Henri's hand gingerly touched my back. I focused on the feel of it, clung to it like a rope dangling off a cliff.

"The flameroot powder must have blocked my Descended side somehow," I forced out between gasps. "And my mother knew. She knew my magic was coming in, and she—"

"Can it negate *everything* about the Descended?"

I looked up at Henri. His face had taken on a shrewd glint.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The other Descended traits. Strength, healing, hard skin and bones, long life. Could the flameroot block those, too?"

I was still struggling to breathe, fighting to keep my stomach from turning inside out. "I'm not sure. I don't th—"

"Where did she get it? Do you have any more?"

"I destroyed my supply a few weeks ago. I don't know where she got it, but I—"

"Could you get more of it? Or show me how to make it?"

My lips parted as realization dawned. "You want to use it as a weapon."

Henri stilled. His eyes jumped to the Crown, then dropped back to me.

An awkward awareness passed between us—and a question.

Henri was a Guardian of the Everflame, a group devoted to infiltrating, even killing the Descended. He'd shown me the rebels' faces, their meeting spots, the tattoo they used as a secret mark of membership.

And I was not just their enemy, but their enemy's *Queen*. I could have every Guardian rounded up and executed for treason. I could even have their friends and families killed as a deterrent. The Descended laws set no limits for the punishment of mortal traitors.

Or I could let him go—forget I knew him or the Guardians or any of it, and pray their maneuvering never targeted me. I could watch my best friend, the man I cared for as deeply as I'd ever cared for anyone, walk out of my life forever.

Or...

"I can try to get some more," I offered weakly.

Simple enough words, but they said everything: *I choose you*.

He frowned, carefully studying my reaction. "You're still willing to help us?"

I slowly raised my hand to his face. I was terrified he would stop me, or recoil as he had earlier, but he held stone still as my fingers grazed his cheek.

"I'm still me, Henri. I'm still Diem. And... I still love you."

I'd never said those words to him before.

And, if I was being honest, saying them now filled me with something closer to shame than affection.

But I was desperate. So terribly, urgently desperate.

My mother was gone, maybe forever. I'd already caused my career as a healer and my relationship with my father to implode. Life as I knew it in Mortal City was over. If I lost Henri, too—what would even be left of me?

Though Henri said nothing, his eyes betrayed the melee between his heart and mind. It was a seed of hope I frantically began to cultivate.

"You asked me to marry you," I said. He winced. It would have hurt less if he'd punched me in the chest, but I pushed forward. "If you'll still have me, we could do this together. I could use this Crown to help you—and help the mortals, too."

The battlefield of his expression shifted—slowly, cautiously, toward a possible future.

"There's a ball in a few days' time. I'll be presented as the new Queen to the most powerful Descended in Lumnos. All the Twenty Houses will be

there.” My voice was rushed and breathy. “You could come as my escort—maybe you’ll overhear something useful, or—”

“Or we could attack.”

The words were a challenge. Another unspoken question: *How far are you willing to go?*

“Gathered all in one place, they’ll be easy targets,” he said. “We could decimate their numbers in one strike.”

My mind jumped to the attack on the armory. The guards I’d tended, their faces burned beyond recognition. The man I’d found inside, his throat slit open so savagely that even his healing abilities couldn’t save him. Perthe, who would have burned alive if I hadn’t pulled him out.

My stomach felt oily and thick. “It’s too soon. I won’t have authority as Queen until I’m coronated. We should wait until then.”

I wasn’t sure if he bought my excuse.

I wasn’t sure if *I* bought my excuse.

Slowly, Henri nodded. “You’re right. We can’t play this hand too quickly. A Guardian Queen is too good an opportunity to waste.”

I whooshed out a relieved breath—a bit too loudly. “So you’ll come with me to the ball? As my betrothed?”

He hesitated again.

All at once I was overwhelmed with the possibility of losing him and the need to lock him at my side, in body and in spirit. I latched my arms around his neck and pressed my body close, straining my face upward until our foreheads met.

“I need you. I can’t do this without you.”

His eyes jumped around my face, ablaze with an explosive mix of new uncertainty and old desire. His fingers curled around my waist, then paused.

“Please, Henri,” I begged. “Stay with me. Rule with me. *Be my King.*”

The words ignited us both.

All at once we were kissing, touching, gasping, pleading.

My lips crushed against his, then roamed across his skin as I pledged him my immortal loyalty with my mouth and tongue. His fingers twisted in my hair, and I could tell he was feeling for the Crown, marveling as I had at how it could be so vivid and yet as untouchable as air.

His hands slid to the filmy fabric straps along my shoulders and pushed them down, his palms rolling over my peaked breasts. I let out a soft

moan, my pleasure stemming as much from his touch as the relief that he could still desire me, even in my tainted, repulsive Descended body.

“Say it again,” he said gruffly.

“Be my King,” I rushed out, cupping his face in my hands. “The first mortal King of Lumnos.”

He shuddered with a groan, then hauled me up and wrapped my legs around his waist so he could carry me to the bed. I was feverish, barely breathing, too scared that if I paused for even a moment to listen to the doubts needling at my thoughts, Henri might change his mind and give up on me forever.

“We can finally make them pay,” he murmured between kisses. “They’ll never take anything from us ever again.”

Clothes began to slide away. First his tunic, cast absently to the side as I greedily clutched at his solid shoulders. Then his waistband was low on his hips, his hunger for me rumbling in my ears. Then my skirts were rising as his coarse palm grazed my calves, my knees, my thighs, up and up until my breath caught and—

A throat cleared in the doorway.

Luther was standing at the entrance.

Chapter Twelve

Luther closed the door behind him, staring directly at Henri. His eyes were cold and soulless, the consummate icy Prince. His jagged scar twitched like a bolt of angry lightning threatening to strike.

Henri rolled off me and hauled his pants up, his eyes bouncing between Luther and the floor. His face and bare chest were flushed a splotchy scarlet—embarrassment at being caught or fury at seeing Luther, or perhaps a mix of both.

The heat of shame coursed through my own cheeks. Neither man looked at me as I yanked my dress back to my shoulders and smoothed the skirts down my legs.

What Henri and I had done wasn't wrong. I was a grown woman. I had every right to be intimate with the man I had just convinced to marry me.

So why did I suddenly wish I could take it back?

Henri grabbed his tunic and pulled it over his head. Luther's sharp focus marked every movement

I remembered the blade hiding at Henri's waist, and the murderous hate that had dripped from his eyes in the hallway earlier. This could too easily turn into a bloodbath.

I slipped off the bed and took Henri's hand. "I'll walk you out," I said, my voice deceptively calm.

"I would not recommend that." Luther's tone was flat, his words clipped. He still wouldn't look at me. "A guard saw the two of you enter. He's waiting outside to escort Mr. Albanon from the palace."

Dread broke through at the easy familiarity with which Luther said Henri's name. I'd been so concerned with talking Henri out of slaughtering Luther—what if the feeling was mutual? If Luther recognized him from the day he'd killed that child, would he be willing to hurt Henri to keep it quiet?

I carefully positioned myself between the two men. “Can this guard be trusted? If anything happens to Henri,” I warned, my voice trailing off.

At last, Luther’s frosty glare slid down to rest on me, sending a chill down my spine. “It won’t.”

I took a deep breath and turned to Henri. “You should go,” I urged gently.

His eyes blazed. “Why should I go? I’m to be your King. These men should be answering to *us*.”

Luther’s spine stiffened so forcefully I could almost hear the steel-strong bones snapping beneath his bronzed skin.

“Please, Henri,” I pleaded. “Let me arrange some things first. I’ll send word as soon as I can.”

Though he nearly snarled with displeasure, he scowled and relented. I kept myself planted between them as Henri moved to exit.

I reached for his fingers, wanting to feel the familiar brush of his skin one last time, and his hand jerked away. He didn’t bother to look back as he followed the waiting guard around the corner and out of sight.

I stared down the hall. I could still feel his touch on my thighs, my lips still swollen from his kiss. But now, without the warmth of him against me, I felt...

Confused. Unsure.

The weight of Luther’s attention wasn’t helping. I didn’t dare look to see what judgment awaited me there.

“Whatever you’re thinking, keep it to yourself,” I snapped. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“You need to hear it.”

“My love life is none of your concern.”

“You are the Queen of Lumnos. Your love life is the entire realm’s concern.”

My jaw clenched so tightly my teeth creaked in protest.

“And you made it *my* concern when you—”

“I didn’t kiss you,” I hissed, whirling to face him, “you kissed *me*. Maybe I didn’t push you off as quickly as I should have, but that—”

“—wasn’t what I was going to say,” he said curtly. “You made it my business when you asked me to keep Aemonn silent about Henri.”

My face flushed.

“But rest assured, my Queen, when I do kiss you, there will be no confusion. You will know that I have claimed you—and I won’t have any desire to deny it.”

All of me flushed.

I swallowed. I hadn’t missed his choice of words. Not *if* I kiss you. Not *in the rare and unlikely event* I kiss you.

When I kiss you.

I looked away, unable to withstand the pale blue fire in Luther’s gaze. “Did Aemonn agree to stay quiet then?”

“For a price.”

“Of course,” I muttered. “What does he want?”

“You’ll bring him as your escort to the Ascension Ball. You’ll give him the first dance and stay at his side throughout the evening.”

“I can’t do that.”

“I don’t like it either, but it’s a simple enough req—”

“It’s not that I don’t want to—I can’t.”

Luther stilled. “Why?”

I cowered in the silence as long as I could bear, dreading the spring trap my next words would invariably trigger.

“I’ve accepted Henri’s marriage proposal. He’ll be escorting me as my betrothed.” I fidgeted with a dainty pearl bracelet Eleanor had insisted I wear. “I’m well aware how much you all despise mortals, but this choice is mine to make, Queen or not.”

Neither of us moved or spoke for several torturous, uncomfortable moments. Luther’s fists clenched and loosened at his sides. The air around him buzzed with angry magic, barely contained. His throat strained to hold back a deluge of disapproval.

I groaned. “Fine. Just say it.”

“Not here.”

Without warning, his hand closed around mine, his grip startlingly gentle despite his fury. He led me down the hallway to where our rooms sat in parallel. His palm pressed at the hollow of my back and nudged me to the right, away from my guards and into his private chambers.

He barked a command at the two men stationed at my chamber doors to reposition themselves at the far ends of the corridor. The door closed, followed by the metallic clink of a lock sliding into place.

Luther cast me a wary glance. “Wait here.”

I watched him stalk into a side antechamber, then turned to take in the surrounding space. I drew in a sharp breath—I'd been here before. I'd only passed through it briefly, but I recognized the room Luther had disappeared into as the bedroom I'd awoken in the morning after the armory attack.

Luther's bedroom.

My naked body soaking in *his* bathtub.

My hand in his as I lay tucked between *his* sheets.

I fought to cage my wild thoughts as I took a closer look at the room. It was lightly appointed, with none of the gilded, ornamental touches that embellished most of the palace's rooms, but despite its simplicity, the chamber had a warmth to it, a personalized comfort all its own.

Against one wall, a sturdy wooden desk was topped with half-written letters, its carved sides depicting the Kindred and their mortal lovers. Lumnos was featured at the center, locked in an embrace with the man she'd given up everything to follow into eternal night.

A sitting area with cozy leather armchairs was bordered by tall shelves of old books and small oil paintings on tiny easels. A framed charcoal sketch of Lily sat atop a mahogany liquor cabinet with bottles in varying shades of brown. A pair of muddy boots lay on their side in a corner, and a jacket lay draped across a footrest.

In short, it felt like a home.

The room smelled so strongly of his woodsy, masculine musk. The scent transported me against my will to the memory of our shared ride on horseback—his broad hands splayed low on my stomach, his breath hot on my skin.

I swore under my breath at the disloyal thoughts. My body was all too willing to remind me that my interrupted tryst with Henri had left me lonely and wanting.

Flickering candlelight drew my attention to a small alcove across the room. Tucked into an arched niche sat a glossy marble bust of Lumnos, recognizable by the crown atop her head—a twin to the one I currently wore. The bust was surrounded by candles, aged flowers, and smooth, colorful stones.

Luther's footsteps grew louder as he returned to the room and stopped behind me.

"I didn't realize you were so devout," I said.

He didn't answer for long enough that I turned to look at him. His gaze was fixed on the shrine, his face a portrait of reverence.

"Blessed Mother Lumnos spared me from death when I was very young. I vowed to give my life in service to her, to protect her realm and its people. I used to believe..." His eyes moved to mine, and just as before, he appeared to be looking through me, as if seeing something far beyond my gaze.

He stopped and shook his head. "It doesn't matter." He glanced at the item in his hands before offering it to me. "Here."

I took the book—small, barely larger than my palm, and bound in rich cognac leather. The paper inside was thin and crinkled with tiny nicks from being thumbed through many times over.

"What is this?" I asked as I opened it.

Luther said nothing.

Each page contained a rough sketch of a child's face, along with a list of names and a description.

Emmaline, newborn, daughter to father Piotr of House Benette and mortal mother Harriet Bilkings. Ice blue eyes, straight blonde hair, fair skin. Daughter and mother delivered safely to Meros.

Diedrick, eight months, son to mortal father Carell Jenks and mother Wilmora of House Althiena. Royal blue eyes, thick red hair, birthmark on left elbow. Father and son delivered safely to Umbros.

Zalaric, seven years, son to father Jean of House Hanoverre and mortal mother Penna Greystoll. Navy eyes with light specks, black curly hair, dark brown skin. Mother executed. Son delivered safely to Umbros.

There were pages and pages of them. Most were newborns, but a few were older—adolescents mixed with the rare teenager, and one that had passed into adulthood.

The thump of my heart grew deafening in my ears.

At the end of the book, a tattered scarlet ribbon separated a new section. At first glance, the contents appeared the same—faces, names,

descriptions—but each was marked with a thick red X across the page. And each was missing the final line: *delivered safely*.

“Luther, what is this?” I asked again, softer.

“My penitence.”

Our eyes met, and the pain in them sliced through me as sharp as any blade.

“You accused me of executing the half-mortal children as the Keeper of the Laws, and I denied it.”

“You smuggled them out,” I breathed. “All these children... you didn’t kill them—you got them out of Lumnos.”

He nodded silently, his shoulders falling as if letting out a breath he’d been holding for many, many years.

“And the ones in the back, with the red mark?”

His eyes dragged to the bust of Lumnos. “The ones I failed,” he said, the depth of his regret echoing in each awful word.

I flipped through the pages, unable to tear my attention from the miniature sketches. He had found a way to capture it somehow—their grief at the rejection by their parents, their King, and their homeland.

It could have been me. It *would* have been me, had my mother not hidden me among the mortals. Angry as I was over her secrets, there was no denying they’d kept me alive.

“This book is my death warrant,” Luther said quietly. “It’s evidence of treason a hundred times over. Even if you would forgive it as Queen, others would ensure I paid the price.”

“Never,” I blurted out, clutching the book protectively to my chest. “I would never reveal this, not to anyone. *Ever*.”

“I know. I trust you.”

I searched his face, his ever dispassionate features, trying to unearth some explanation for this man who continually defied my judgments.

“Luther, why show this to me now? What does this have to do with Henri?”

He worked his jaw, seeming reluctant to continue. “If your heart is set on this union, I will support you. But I would not be serving you with honor if I did not speak bluntly. The Descended will not accept a mortal King, Your Majesty. Not even as a Consort.”

I bristled. “I’m not asking their permission.”

His features turned sharp as glass. “Let me be clearer. If you present him as your betrothed at the Ascension Ball, Henri will not survive to see the Rite of Coronation. The Houses will stop at nothing to prevent a mortal taking the throne. They have killed Crowns’ mates for far less.”

My heart stilled, my mouth tasting of ash.

He walked closer and placed his hand on the book where it lay in my palms, his fingertips curling as they grazed my wrists. “I showed you this because I need you to know I do not speak out of prejudice. I would put my life on the line to protect a mortal. I already have—many times.” His voice softened. “But if you take this step, I fear the Emarion Army itself could not protect him. And I do not wish to see one more person in this realm buried because of their bloodline.”

I should have been arguing, screaming that I would not be intimidated by the violence of bigots, vowing to raze the realm to cinders if anyone tried to hurt Henri.

But perhaps somewhere, deep within, I already knew the truth, because all I felt was the unbearable heaviness of a heart grieving a loss that my brain still refused to accept.

“You’re saying I have to let him go,” I said numbly.

“That is not my place.”

“Stop trying to be my advisor, Luther. Be my friend.” I looked up at him, eyes burning. “Are you saying I should walk away?”

Luther shifted his weight. “I’m saying...” He paused. Frowned. “If you love him...”

He looked up and shook his head, as if he couldn’t believe his own words.

“Wait until you’re coronated,” he said finally. “Get through the Challenging, take the full authority of the Crown, then...” He let out a heavy, loaded sigh. “Then we’ll plan. If he is what you want, I’ll help you find a way.”

I wondered if he would make the same offer if he knew Henri had sworn to kill him. If he knew *I* had sworn to kill him, too.

Something told me he would.

“I never imagined you to be such a romantic,” I said, offering up a weak smile that he returned, though it was aching glum on both sides.

“There’s much you don’t yet know about me, Your Majesty.”

I’m beginning to see that, I mused to myself.

He looked over my shoulder to the marble bust that glowed in the flickering candlelight. “The Blessed Mother sacrificed her life to be with the man she loved. I fear she might strike me dead if I told you to walk away.”

He took a deep breath, then straightened and clasped his hands at his back.

“I was... mistaken. About the kiss.” He took a step away to put distance between us. “You were right. I kissed you, and you pushed me away. I owe you an apology.”

Now who’s lying? I thought.

His brows carved deep. “I won’t let it happen ag—”

A gasp burst from my lips. “Is this the secret my mother knew—the one she was using against you?”

“Part of it,” he admitted.

“But she never would have revealed this. She wouldn’t put these children in danger.”

“I know. She helped me get them out of Lumnos.”

My brows flew up. “My mother helped you with this?”

“There were times when I couldn’t get away for long enough, or when the children were too young or too injured to travel alone. She would escort them to my contacts in the realms where half-mortals are not so persecuted.”

So many times, my mother had left town on a moment’s notice, sometimes disappearing for days with barely a note. It had been such a common occurrence that I hadn’t questioned it—until the day she vanished for good.

“Did my father know?”

“Doubtful. Beyond a few others who helped us, we agreed to tell no one, not even our families.”

Panic speared through me. “Is this why she disappeared? If she was caught delivering a child—”

“No,” he said quickly, his tone emphatic. “She left for her own reasons, not mine.”

I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or disappointed.

“Why would my mother threaten to expose you if she was helping you?” I asked, frowning.

“Your mother had a habit of making grand threats she had no intention of following through on.” A spark of amusement gleamed in his eyes. “Just like her daughter.”

I shot him a scowl, though I couldn’t deny it—bravado and threats were my first resort when backed into a corner, and no one had seen more evidence of that than Luther. “If you knew she wouldn’t betray you, why help her? Why not call her bluff?”

“Because the work she and I did together was more important. Your mother and I did not always agree, nor did we often get along. But I respected her.” He took a step closer and leaned his face to mine with an earnest stare. “And I would never have hurt her.”

My mind whirled with all he’d just revealed. The highs and lows of my relationship with this puzzling man had become an exhausting sport. Luther was supposed to be the target of my plans. He, more than anyone, was supposed to fear my reign—and yet he had inexplicably, inconceivably, become my confidant. Even now, I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to strike him dead or throw my arms around his neck and thank him.

Despite every reason I had to consider him my enemy, something in me yearned to trust him. Like a moth to a flame, I was drawn to his glow, even as my wings burned and curled in the intensity of his fire.

I took one last look at the book in my hands. I offered a silent prayer for the children recorded inside and pressed my lips to the cover before handing it back to him.

“Tell Aemonn I will accept the bargain for his silence. I’ll take him to the ball.”

Chapter
Thirteen

My eyes traveled over the words I'd written. They were at once too much and not enough.

H,

It was a mistake to ask you to attend the event that we spoke of. It's not yet safe for you here. Please don't be angry. Protecting you is my only concern.

My hope for our future remains unchanged. I'll send for you as soon as I can.

-D

There was so much I needed to say to Henri, but delivering this blow by cryptic, coded letter was bad enough. And I didn't trust that Luther, or whatever courier he dispatched, would not find reading the Queen's correspondence too strong a temptation to resist.

I folded the paper twice. Small drops of molten azure liquid fell from the candle I tilted over the letter's seam. I did not dare use the royal seal. Instead, I pressed a small sprig of foxglove into the soft wax.

When we were young, Henri and I spent many afternoons wandering through the forest to collect foxglove for my mother's use at the healer's center while spinning tales of the great adventures we might have together someday.

I hoped Henri recognized the flower. I hoped he would understand what it meant—that I had not forgotten who I was. I hoped he had not

forgotten, either.

“Here,” I sighed, holding the letter in the air. “He’s not going to be happy, so tell whoever you send to deliver it and get out of there quickly.”

Luther plucked the letter from my hand and tucked it into a pocket inside his jacket. “I’ll deliver it myself.”

“No!” I sprang out of my seat. *That* was a bloodbath waiting to happen. “Have someone else do it.”

He raised an eyebrow.

I carefully steadied my features. “You’re too recognizable. I don’t want anyone seeing you and connecting him to the Crown.” Not entirely a lie.

His mouth tightened. I couldn’t tell whether he was offended or amused. “I do know how to stay unseen. Especially among mortals.”

I stepped up to him with a wry smile and patted his chest where the letter lay inside his pocket. “Consider it a direct order.”

His steel-blue gaze dropped to where my fingers grazed his coat, hovering for long enough that I snatched my hand away. “As you wish, my Queen.”

I busied myself tidying up the desk to avoid his too-heavy stare. “I need to go home. I have to speak with my father, and I don’t want to do it here.”

“I would not recommend that.”

“It wasn’t a request.”

“The entire realm is watching your every movement. If you leave the palace—”

“I’m sure you’ll find a solution.”

Luther made a quiet, rumbling sound. “At least wait until after the ball. The majority of guests will leave that morning, so there will be fewer gossips to avoid, and it will give me time to arrange a distraction.”

Not ideal, but there was no denying the spying eyes. I’d already sensed Sorae’s apprehension at the new faces arriving throughout the day, their intentions toward me setting her teeth on edge. As much as I needed to see my father, I couldn’t risk leading the Descended to his doorstep. I would have to hope Teller could keep him isolated a little longer.

I grabbed my overcoat and strolled for the door. “Fine. I’ll be in the dungeon. Try not to barge in and pick a magical fight with me this time, will you?”



IT TOOK me five attempts to slip into the dungeon unseen.

I had not fully appreciated how right Luther had been—how right he always seemed to be, to my *tremendous* irritation—about the influx of new guests. A constant stream of arrivals trickled through the palace foyer. Making it down any hallway without an awkward introduction was becoming nearly impossible.

When I finally slid through the dungeon doors and down the chilly depths of the spiral staircase, Lily and Teller were already tucked into one of the iron cells. They sat beside each other on a cot, speaking in voices too soft to hear. Their hands were just close enough to touch, Lily's pinky finger curled around my brother's. Even from a distance, I saw the adoration on his face as he watched her talk.

I cleared my throat. They leapt apart, both of their faces flushing with mottled scarlet. Teller shoved his hands into his pockets and stared everywhere but at me. Lily curtsied. Twice.

"Sorry I startled you," I said, biting my lip to suppress my grin. They looked incredibly guilty for two people who'd been doing nothing more than talking.

"It's, um, it's so very good to see you again, Your Majesty," Lily said, curtsying yet again.

"Really, Lily, you can call me Diem."

"Yes of course, Your Maj—sorry." She smiled sheepishly. "It's a hard habit to break. Luther has always insisted we use our titles, even with friends and family."

"Is that so?" I cocked my head, mischief brewing in my mind. "Well, I must be sure to use his titles when I address him. What are they, exactly?"

She drew in a deep breath. "His Royal Highness Lord Luther Corbois, Most Honorable Keeper of the Laws, Warden of the Light, High General of the Guard, Esteemed Member of the Crown Council, Personal Advisor to the Crown and Prince of Lumnos, Realm of Light and Shadows."

I snorted. "Oh, that's all?"

Teller launched into a coughing fit to hide his laughter from a very proud-looking Lily.

"Do those titles even mean anything?" I asked her.

“Oh, yes.” She rolled her eyes. “Everyone fights over them *constantly*.”

“I know a few,” Teller chimed in. “High General means he’s in charge of the Royal Guard. Crown Council is the Crown’s closest advisors.”

Lily scrunched her nose. “It’s supposed to be. King Ulther just put his brothers and their sons on it.”

“The Keeper of the Laws hands out punishments for those who disobey the Crown,” Teller continued. “And they handle the, um...” He shuffled his feet. “The executions.”

I thought of the children from Luther’s journal and my heart squeezed tight. “What is Warden of the Light?”

“That’s the big one,” Lily answered with a hushed, almost reverent tone. “There are two—Warden of the Light is the Crown’s representative in public. Warden of the Shadows handles more private matters.”

“But what do they *do*?”

“Anything they want, really. Whatever a Warden orders carries the weight of the Crown. Luther always played it down and said he was just a messenger, but Father says being Warden is like being another King. Unless the Crown contradicts them, their word is as good as law.”

I tried to imagine anyone I trusted enough to exercise that power on my behalf. A week ago, I might have looked to my parents. Now, in light of the secrets they’d kept, the truths of my identity they’d denied me... that betrayal was an open wound that still needed tending.

Teller would make a fine Warden someday. He had every quality a leader should—a bright intellect, a calm temper, and a compassionate spirit—and I trusted him without reserve. But he was young, and his eyes had not yet taken on the weary shadow of someone who has seen what evil the world contains. I would protect him from that for as long as I could.

And then there was Henri. I had asked him to be my King Consort. I wasn’t sure what authority that carried, but at the very least, it should mean I trusted him enough to rule in my absence... shouldn’t it?

I shoved away the unease nipping at my heels. “Who is Warden of the Shadows?”

“Uncle Garath,” Lily answered.

Aemonn’s father. The pompous, sneering jerk who had looked at me as if my *half-breed* blood tainted the Crown itself. He had the power to speak for the Crown—to speak for *me*?

“I thought the Regent had the authority of the Crown, not the Wardens,” I said.

She shook her head. “Father can only step in as Regent when the Crown is incapacitated or in the period before a new Crown is coronated. Otherwise, the Regent has no authority at all.”

No wonder Remis had been happy to throw his son to the wolves to win me over. He’d had a taste of power these past months during the King’s illness, and I very much doubted he wanted to give it back.

Teller cocked his head at me. “Diem, what happened after we left last night?”

Lily clapped her hands together and grinned, bouncing on her toes. “Oh yes! Did you use your magic? What kind do you have? Is it both light and shadow, like Luther?”

My throat went dry.

I’d spent all day sweeping the emotions of last night into the dark, dusty corners of my head, brushing the shattered bits of my grief into neat little heaps to be dealt with some other day. But Teller’s question was like a door left ajar on a windy day. The sudden breeze of it rushed in and stirred all my careful work into a suffocating cloud.

I felt the emptiness return to my eyes, the hollow weight tug on my heart. I wanted to be strong for Teller, but it was all so much, and I was still so tired.

“Do you have magic?” he asked, his voice softer. Nervous.

My chin dipped slightly. “It seems I do.”

Lily was jumping, squealing, congratulating me, firing off questions. It reminded me of her brother’s unexpected glee at my explosion of power. Even Teller, for a brief moment, seemed elated for me. His eyes widened in wonder, lips curving into an awestruck smile.

And then I saw it. The moment his thoughts aligned with my own, and he realized what this meant for me. For us. For our family.

For our future.

For the first time in my little brother’s life, I saw the light go out in his eyes. If I thought I’d hit my darkest moment before, I was so very wrong.

“Lily?” I rasped. “Would you mind if Teller and I spoke alone?”

Her celebrating paused, and she seemed to become aware of the shift in both of us. “Oh—yes, of course. I’ll just, um, go upstairs for a while.”

She left without another word, though I caught her reach out and squeeze Teller's hand as she brushed past him. He and I stood in the dim silence for what felt like a lifetime, locked in the dawning of one dreadful realization after another.

"So this is real," he said. "After the Crown, I knew it was, of course, but... I thought, maybe..."

"Me too." I swallowed. "Until last night, I didn't..." I couldn't finish. I didn't have to—we both understood.

He took a slow step forward, then another, then he rushed to me and threw his arms around my neck.

I felt his tears, warm and wet, against my cheek, or maybe they were my own. And I felt the tremors of his fear, the dying light of his hope.

Or maybe it was my own.

We held each other for a long time, weeping and processing, our hearts breaking in unison in the cavernous darkness. Under the weight of the exhaustion that had taken up permanent residence in my soul, all my walls splintered and shattered into a fine powder.

"I'm scared," I whispered, half hoping the words wouldn't reach his ears. "I don't think I can do this."

"If anyone can, it's you," he said roughly. "You've always been able to do anything, no matter how frightening."

"This isn't climbing a big tree or exploring some new cave, Tel. I'm *twenty years old*. I've barely lived. I have no business being Queen."

He pulled back and clamped his hands on my shoulders. His own eyes were wet and rimmed with red, but his voice was steady. "If Lumnos chose you, there must be a reason. There's something she sees in you, something you're meant to do. You have to trust her."

"Since when do we trust a Kindred?"

He grinned and squeezed my arms. "Since she had the good sense to pick a Bellator."

I gave a weak laugh between snuffles, feeling the crushing dread ease the tiniest bit. "I'm not so special, Teller. The Crown just goes to whoever has the strongest magic."

"And who gets the strongest magic? They've spent centuries trying to breed the most powerful offspring, and it never worked the way they wanted it to. Look at Luther and Lily—they're siblings, but he's powerful

and she isn't. Maybe that's not a coincidence. Maybe there's a reason you and Luther got so much more magic than anyone else."

I pulled away and dropped my face in my hands, overwhelmed by the glowing burden on my head. I'd done a fine enough job of putting on a grand display of swagger to the Descended, but alone with Teller, I felt like a child playing dress up in comically oversized clothing.

He pulled at my wrists. "How can I help?"

"No. I don't want you mixed up in this world with these people. They're dangerous."

"Mother said the same thing to you, and look how well that turned out. Don't give me that look, you know I'm right. Besides, I'm already in this world, and I have been for a lot longer than you. You're the one playing catch-up."

We exchanged the kind of smirk and glare that only a too-clever little brother and an exasperated older sister could fully appreciate.

"Let me help you," he insisted.

I blew out a shaky breath and tried to summon confidence back into my bones. "I'm meeting with the heads of the Twenty Houses after the ball. Can you gather some information about them? Especially how they feel about mortals and half-mortals."

A shadow of resentment drifted over his face. "That's easy enough. Before you, the kids at school would remind me daily how their families felt about mortals like me."

I froze. "What do you mean '*before me*'?"

"They know I'm the Queen's brother now." He saw my look of horror and shrugged with a wry smile. "It was obvious once every Corbois suddenly began treating me like their closest friend."

I swore under my breath. "Do you think the news has reached Father?"

His smile dropped away. "Not yet. But you need to tell him. If he finds out from anyone else..."

"I know." A lump rose in my throat. "Luther asked me to wait until after the ball. Can you keep Father away from town until then?"

"I'll try, but..." He ran a hand through his dark auburn curls, avoiding my eyes. "He hasn't been at home much. Ever since you two fought, he's been spending his time alone in the forest."

The knot inside me sank like a heavy stone. I needed to make things right with my father. The years we had left together now felt urgently

fleeting.

"I should go." I sighed, glancing at the stairwell. Somehow I felt safer and happier in the gloomy dark of the dungeon than the bright sunny hallways that awaited me upstairs. I pulled him in for a final hug. "Teller," I started, and my voice cracked.

"I know," he murmured, squeezing me with all his strength. "I love you, too."

"Even if I'm a soulless Descended monster like the rest of them?" I whispered.

"Even then." He pulled back and grinned. "Can I see your magic before I go?"

Using my magic was the last thing I wanted. The reminder of the loss it signified was still too fresh. But when I looked at Teller and saw a glimmer of curiosity shining through his sadness, I knew I had to at least try.

"Of course," I mumbled, forcing a smile. "You'll have to stand far away. I can't control it yet."

He obeyed, crossing the room and bounding halfway up the staircase, his face excitedly aglow.

I focused on the space in front of me and tried to remember what I'd done to pull the magic out, what trigger had finally uncorked the *voice's* bottled wrath.

It had been silent ever since. The thought of inviting it back into my head set my hands instantly trembling.

I flexed my fists, trying to conjure the icy heat I'd felt or the tingling thrum of the magic's energy, but my palms only felt clammy and bare.

I remembered how Luther had provoked me, how he'd played on my own guilt and insecurities until I'd snapped. I tried to summon those feelings again, internally goading myself for every stupid, reckless thing I'd done over the past few weeks. The list of options was long.

Nothing happened. Not even a flicker.

And I *loved* it.

No angry *voice*, no pounding magic. I felt blissfully ordinary. Not a Queen, not even a Descended, just... me.

And as much as I wanted to make Teller happy, I couldn't bear to let go of this feeling, however temporary, of being a normal, forgettable,

wholly unremarkable mortal. The very thing I had once feared becoming, I now clung to with feverish hands.

“I think I used it up last night,” I lied. “I guess I need more time to rest and restore it.”

“Oh. Right, of course.” He gave a casual shrug, though his disappointment was clear. “Another day, then.”

“Sure.” I offered a tight smile. “Another day.”

I couldn’t help hoping that day never came.

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Chapter Fourteen

With the funeral a day away, the hallways and gardens were teeming with visitors desperate to corner me and stake their claim before the Ascension Ball.

I'd taken refuge in the Crown's personal reading room, a sprawling wood-paneled salon on the top floor of the palace with a ceiling made entirely of glass. A drizzly storm bathed the room in a soft grey pallor while a lullaby of thick raindrops pattered against the windowpanes.

I had made a tentative peace with my predicament. After Luther surprised me with another breakfast tray in my suite—it was becoming a morning tradition—we'd even managed to have a pleasant meal together while he delivered his daily report on the status of the realm.

I'd grilled him on the key Descended of Lumnos, prodding for details on their relationships and weaknesses. I still felt a flutter in my stomach from the impressed look that had slipped through his flinty veneer.

My insecurity was far from banished, forever hovering in the wings, but between my budding friendship with Eleanor, the support of Henri and my brother, and Luther's claim that my mother was alive, my smile was feeling genuine at last.

After some bonding time with Sorae and a long lunch with Eleanor to go over the latest rumors surrounding the mysterious new Corbois Crown (apparently, I had either been kidnapped as a baby and raised by elk in the forest, or I was so hideously deformed that Remis had locked me away in the dungeon until now), I'd spent the afternoon curled up in front of a crackling fireplace with a soft quilt, a pot of steaming tea, and a stack of books on Descended culture.

"I understand I have my Queen to thank for the lecture I just received from my father."

I bit back a smile at the sound of Luther's voice.

“Oh?” I called out with feigned ignorance, stretching and sitting upright on the tufted divan. “How odd, I’m sure I told him how very helpful you’ve been.”

“I thought you and I had finally called a truce,” he muttered as he perched in an armchair beside me.

His face was solemn as always, but his muscles were bunched with tension. It seemed my chat with Remis had accomplished its goal of getting under Luther’s skin as well as his father’s.

“I wouldn’t dare go to war with His Royal Highness Prince Luther Corbois, Keeper of the Laws, Warden of something-or-other, Member of the Council of Self-Important Men, High General... wait, was it Grand General Supreme?” I frowned, stroking my chin.

His mask slipped briefly as he shot me a good-natured glare. “I’ve been instructed to beg forgiveness for failing to inform my beautiful Queen of certain ‘*vital information*’ that she would ‘*dearly like to know.*’”

I tried, and failed, to suppress my victorious grin. At least now I knew Remis could be trusted to deliver a message.

“Well imagine my surprise at hearing from your father that I’m to spend the next three weeks meeting with the Twenty Houses. All this after learning of the ball from Aemonn.” I tutted in disapproval. “If this is your candidacy to be my advisor, Prince, you’re going to have to do much better.”

“I never intended to keep those things from you. I only wanted to give you some time to adjust rather than overwhelm you.”

“Overwhelm me?” I sat up straighter. “So you thought I couldn’t handle it?”

His knuckles whitened where he gripped his armrests. “That’s not what I meant.”

I snapped the book in my lap closed with a loud thump. Through the glass panes, Sorae’s watery outline paused from her rain bath to cast a watchful amber eye our way.

“It sounds like you believed I was too fragile to be informed of my own schedule,” I said testily.

“I, more than anyone, know how *not fragile* you are,” he growled, his calm slipping. “But it is my sworn duty to protect you in whatever ways I can.”

“Protect me from what, myself?” I narrowed my eyes, expecting him to back down, but his gaze danced with a stubborn fire that matched my own. “I’m not a child, Luther, I am a grown woman.”

“Believe me, Your Majesty, I am well aware.”

His voice was low and rough, heavy with implication. My body flushed, tightening deep in my core. The *want* in his tone felt nothing like Aemonn’s empty flattery, and all at once I was too hot, too sensitive, too breathless.

I shoved the quilt from my lap, intending to storm off, but the fabric tangled with my skirts and lifted them away, exposing my bare skin from ankle to thigh. Luther’s eyes lingered there, branding my flesh, until he caught himself. His back straightened as his gaze jumped back to mine.

It shouldn’t have bothered me. He’d seen nearly all of me already, thanks to my habit of answering doors in various states of undress. But something about the recent secrets we’d shared made these interactions between us now feel dangerously intimate.

Luther always seemed to have the upper hand, some higher ground from which to toss me off my resolve to dislike him. For once, I wanted him to be the one squirming under my stare and questioning everything he thought he knew about me.

I lounged back against the divan and crossed my legs so the fabric of my dress slid even further, baring my thigh where it curved up into my hip. I arched my back and raised my chin in a silent dare.

Luther’s pupils dilated as he watched me, a predator on the hunt. I could see him fighting against his desire to take another look—or perhaps do more than *look*.

I was playing with fire, but the thrill of the game had me in its claws. Luther drew me in in a way I’d never experienced with anyone else. Fighting with him, teasing him—it was like lighting a fuse and closing my eyes, never knowing just how close I was to destruction.

Knowing he was watching me, I allowed my eyes to wander. I gazed far longer than appropriate at the sharp rise of his cheekbones, the swell of his lips, the square angle of his jaw. I took in the taut stretch of fabric in all the places where his body showed its power—his wide shoulders, his muscled limbs. I studied the large, strong hands resting on his knees—hands that had held me against him, hands that had explored my hips and thighs.

I wondered if he remembered those moments at inopportune times like I did. If they turned his mouth dry and set his heart racing like they were currently doing to mine.

To his credit, he didn't wither an inch. He remained preternaturally still. Even his breathing seemed to lie in wait. His only reaction was the spark of a question in his eyes, daring me to give my assessment.

Though I'd made a habit of mentally reciting all the reasons I was supposed to hate Luther whenever I was in his presence, the events of yesterday had me questioning each one. As I scrutinized him now, I came to a sudden, alarming realization.

I didn't hate Luther. Against my better judgment, I had begun to genuinely trust him. I was even—Everflame forgive me—enjoying his company. I liked the way he unsettled me, the way he challenged me. I liked that he was a riddle I couldn't quite solve.

I liked... *him*.

Oh, gods. I *liked* him.

Instantly, I needed distance. I shot to my feet and across to one of the many bookshelves that lined the walls of the room, their alcoves packed with rows of colorful spines. I trailed a finger along their edges as I strolled away.

"I have enough people in my life who tried to protect me by keeping things from me, Luther. I have no need for any more of them. Especially now."

His intense aura of power infused the air as he rose and fell into step behind me. When he was this close, his magic felt like a tangible thing, caressing me like fingers against my skin.

"Understood, Your Majesty. It won't happen again."

I glanced over my shoulder, and he met my gaze. Chin down, eyebrows up.

Deference. An unspoken apology.

I slowed my pace until he caught up to my side.

Acceptance. An unspoken forgiveness.

"Who will attend these House Receptions?" I asked.

"The heads of each House and the Crown Council. Until you appoint your own advisors, King Ulther's Council will sit in its place to send a message that your reign will be consistent with his."

I held back a retort. It certainly would *not* be consistent—not if I could help it.

“And you’re on the Council?”

Luther nodded. “Along with my father and my uncle, Garath, as well as his sons, Aemonn and Taran.”

I scowled. “Does Garath have to be there?”

“He’s unpleasant, but he is helpful. He knows the other Houses better than anyone.”

“Fine, I suppose. What about Aemonn, why keep him around?”

“I ask myself that every day.”

I stopped still. “Luther Corbois, did you just make a *joke*?”

“It’s been known to happen on occasion.” His hand slid to my back to nudge me forward and lingered there as I resumed my pace.

“What about Taran, why is he there?”

“Mostly to keep me from killing Aemonn.”

“*Luther*,” I gasped. “Two jokes in one day! You’re going to need a nap to recover from this excitement.”

He smiled at me—a new smile, this one warm and humble, but also a little bit triumphant. I was so surprised at the casual sweetness of it that I nearly stumbled.

I tried to look annoyed, though my own smile was peeking through. “How curious that King Ulther couldn’t scrounge up a single woman in all of Lumnos to advise him.”

“Lily would have joined the Council when she came of age, but you’re right. The King was very... traditional.”

“Well, I am not. And I want Eleanor on my Council and present for the House Receptions.”

“Eleanor doesn’t have a title or a formal role.”

“On the contrary. I made her my first advisor, so she’s the *only* person with a formal role.” I smirked. “The rest of you have yet to earn my favor.”

He nodded gravely, though his eyes kept their amused gleam. “Noted. I’ll ensure she’s invited.”

We walked for a few paces in silence. His hand finally dropped away from my back, though it paused as it fell, twining in the gossamer fabric of my skirts. He stared at it, a slight wrinkle between his brows.

“You dislike my dress?” I asked, feigning offense.

“Not at all. You look...” His eyes slowly lifted to mine. Muscles strained along his throat.

“Let me guess,” I teased, trying to ignore the warmth rushing to my face. “You preferred when I wore nothing but a towel?”

His expression heated, and the flush in my cheeks plummeted straight down to my belly.

I laughed nervously and looked away. “Or maybe you prefer me in muddy pants and a borrowed tunic.”

“Only when it’s mine.”

The warmth drifted... *lower*.

My thighs squeezed together, and I’d never been more thankful for the shield of loose, flowy skirts. “Eleanor brought me some simpler clothing,” I said, shrugging with a feigned calm I did not at all feel, “but she suggested I give this a try, so I’m taking her counsel.”

“You really made her your advisor?” he asked.

“First you object to my dress, now my choice of advisor?”

He glared affectionately. “I approve of your dress and your advisor. Eleanor is extremely clever, far more than our family gives her credit for. I only meant...” He paused. “If you are open to advisors that are less *traditional*, may I make a suggestion?”

“I already considered asking Sorae, but I’m afraid a gryvern won’t fit in the meeting room. And I suspect she’ll eat Garath on sight.”

Luther did his best to look exasperated. “I meant Alixe. She’s brilliant at military strategy, and she’s as well respected with the army in Fortos as she is among the Royal Guard here in Lumnos. Should any kind of armed conflict arise, she would be a valuable asset.”

All the easy smiles we’d been trading vanished from my face. With the Guardians plotting for war, the idea of Alixe meeting Henri in battle made my blood run cold.

“I’ll consider it,” I said stiffly.

He frowned at my abrupt change in demeanor. “I know you don’t yet know her, but I can vouch for her trustworthiness. Once given, Alixe’s loyalty is unwavering.”

“I already have a military advisor—my father. And I don’t need anyone to vouch for *his* trustworthiness.”

“The same father who didn’t tell you that you were Descended?”

I froze in place. “Careful, Luther. You may not be loyal to every member of your family, but I am to mine.”

He worked his jaw. The tension between us thickened, borne now of something darker than lust.

I started to pull away. “I should go. I’m meeting with your father.”

“May I escort you?”

He held his arm out, that veneer of indifference once again in place, shielding the true *him* from my sight. “So you can get through the palace uninterrupted,” he explained.

“Or so you can spy on me.”

He stiffened. “If you prefer privacy—”

“*Relax*. I make jokes sometimes, too.” I slipped my arm through his and set my hand on the corded muscles of his forearm, his shoulders easing at my touch. “Let’s just hope we don’t run into any more of my angry lovers on the way there.”



AS IT TURNED OUT, it was not *my* lovers I needed to be concerned with.

Luther proved to be an effective escort. His menacing glare scared off any would-be interruptions, allowing us to pass freely. He even whispered helpful notes about the new faces we passed, distinguishing the Corbois relatives from the important outsiders whose titles or court influence had earned them a place as palace guests. I was begrudgingly coming around to accept that Luther was not only my advisor—in practice, if not yet in title—but a very good one.

Though I had no intention of admitting that to *him*, of course.

We’d nearly made it to the meeting room undisturbed when a sultry female voice called Luther’s name.

The tendons of his arm clenched beneath my fingers. I shot him a questioning glance, but his cold stare was locked on the two women sauntering our way.

I recognized one as Alixe, but the other I knew was no Corbois, at least not one I’d met before. Hers was a face I was unlikely to forget, as she was one of the most stunning women I’d ever laid eyes on.

“Luther, darling,” she purred in a silky tone. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Like Alixe, she was slender but toned, her fair skin smooth over her lightly muscled arms. Both women wore skintight black fighting leathers fitted with armored plates. Their tops were cut low enough to reveal ample cleavage, a distraction that I suspected could be just as deadly as the many weapons strapped to their bodies.

Everything about her radiated confidence, from the sway of her hips to the smile that played on her pert, rosy lips. She looked like the kind of woman that was as deadly in a bedroom as a battlefield.

Though my wardrobe with now stocked with pants and tunics, I had continued to opt for dresses. The foreignness of the gowns had become oddly inspiring, as if being Queen was a costume, a part I could play.

But next to these two warrior women, the fluffy layers of my pale lilac frock had me feeling more like a frivolous doll.

Alixé’s dark navy hair, or at least the half of it that wasn’t shaved to the scalp, was trimmed into a short bob that ended in a point at her chin. The other woman had golden waves that cascaded unbound all the way down her back. Her eyes were captivating, the piercing cerulean of a cloudless summer sky.

Eyes that were scorching a hole at where my hand rested on Luther’s arm. I pulled it back and shifted my weight away from him, but he immediately took a step toward me to close the space.

Luther nodded in greeting. “Alixé. Iléana.”

“You’re a hard man to find,” the woman—Iléana—replied. “I had hoped you and I could catch up.” She flashed him a loaded smile. “In private.”

This was a first. Other than her initial glare, Iléana hadn’t even acknowledged my presence, though the Crown that blazed above my head made it undeniable that she knew who I was. Or at least *what* I was.

Alixé took notice as well, her elbow jabbing into her friend’s side as she gave me a low bow. “Your Majesty, it’s a pleasure to see you again.”

Iléana’s eyes flitted to me. Her chin dipped almost imperceptibly before she returned her focus to Luther and took a slow step toward him. “You’re looking as handsome as ever, Lu.”

Lu? Note to self—tease Luther mercilessly for that later.

He retreated a step and turned toward me. “Your Majesty, may I introduce Iléana, of House Hanoverre. Iléana, this is Her Royal Majesty Diem Corbois.” He shot her a reproachful look. “Our new Queen.”

“*Unchallenged* Queen,” she corrected, finally turning fully to me and looking me over. “Diem, was it? I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Iléana,” Alixe hissed in warning.

My temper prickled.

“You may refer to me as Your Majesty,” I said coolly. “I must admit, I’ve heard absolutely nothing about you.”

“You know what they say,” she said with a shrug. “Bad news travels so much faster than good.”

Alixé looked mortified. I refused to give Iléana the satisfaction of looking to Luther for his reaction.

“Iléana is a top commander in the Royal Guard,” Luther explained, then added under his breath, “though perhaps not for much longer.”

“You’re one of the palace guards?” I asked.

She scoffed. “The Royal Guard has far more important tasks to manage than palace duty.”

“Such as?”

She turned to Luther with an incredulous look. “She doesn’t even respect the Royal Guard enough to learn what they do?”

My confidence emptied like a punctured balloon. Rude as she may be, she had a point—that was something a Queen should know.

It was something *anyone* should know. My lifelong isolation from the Descended had left me ignorant about the realm outside my tiny mortal bubble. A realm I was now supposed to lead.

“Lu, sweetie,” Iléana cooed. She moved closer and ran her hand along his arm. “Can I please have a word?”

He took another step back. “Her Majesty and I have a meeting to attend.”

“It’s fine,” I mumbled with a dismissive wave.

Iléana didn’t wait for his protest. She smirked, then took his hand and pulled him down the corridor.

“My apologies for her behavior.” Alixe sighed when they were out of earshot. “If it’s any consolation, it makes her a very effective commander. The guards are all terrified of her.”

I gave a tight smile, too embarrassed to come up with a witty remark. I glanced over to see Iléana and Luther huddled close in an alcove. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but her fluttering eyelashes and coy smile gave me a pretty good guess.

"You all seem... close," I said carefully.

"Iléana has been a family friend since we were young. She and Luther have been courting off and on for years."

"Years?" I choked. Down the hall, Iléana brushed a stray lock of hair from Luther's face. I couldn't tear my eyes away.

"Everyone assumed they would marry so our Houses could formalize an alliance before he became..." She caught herself and winced. "*If* he became King."

"So what happened?"

She shrugged, light glinting from the many hoops and studs that adorned her face. "I keep out of it. I only know he broke it off."

I swallowed. "When?"

"Recently. A month ago, I think."

The peal of Iléana's laughter carried down the hall. She was shoved up against him now, preening as she smoothed the lapels of his jacket. Her fingers were inching up his chest, around his neck, snaking into his hair. Luther grasped her wrist, and she leaned up to him, eyes closed and lips parted.

I quickly turned away, heat flushing my cheeks.

The idea of Luther with a woman had my mind reeling, though I wasn't sure why. I couldn't deny he was an attractive man—fine, an *extremely* attractive man, if I was forced to be honest—and being the presumptive heir to the throne surely made him a prime target for any woman with dreams of becoming Queen Consort.

But he was so closed off, so reluctant to show any hint of emotion. It was hard to envision him as someone's beloved, curled up naked in rumpled bedsheets, laughing and sharing dreams and fears. The thought of it had my stomach twisting in a way that made me feel ill.

I wondered what secrets of his Iléana knew. Did she know he never expected to be King? Did she know he'd helped my mother, or that he'd saved the half-mortal children? Did she know that we'd—

"Your Majesty?"

I blinked as Alixe's voice cut into my thoughts. "Oh—apologies," I stammered. "Please, call me Diem. And I'm sorry, by the way—about earlier."

Her brows creased. "Earlier?"

"My question about the Royal Guard. I didn't mean to insult your job."

"You didn't, not at all. The truth is, the Royal Guard does whatever the Crown tells us to do. Only Luther, as High General, really knows what all that includes." She gave me a conspiratorial smile. "And the only reason Iléana isn't on palace duty is because she's not a Corbois."

"All of the guards in the palace are Corbois?"

"Every last one."

I dared another glimpse over my shoulder. Luther had both of Iléana's wrists in his grip, his neck craned down toward her, their faces mere inches apart. Her eyes slid over and caught mine, and a smug smile unfurled across her lips. Luther followed her gaze to me.

I snapped forward. "It was good to see you again, Alixe," I said quickly, moving to leave. "I hope we get the chance to talk soon."

She bowed low. "As do I. I've heard so many stories about your father. I'd love to trade some, if you're willing."

Pride and pain rose at the thought of him. "Of course. Perhaps you can come home with me one day and meet him yourself."

"I would be honored," she said with a genuine smile.

I excused myself and darted down the nearest hallway. I had no idea where the meeting room was, and I cursed myself for my ill-thought-out exit. Just as I was about to succumb to the humiliation of doubling back, I heard the thump of jogging footsteps. Seconds later, Luther came to my side, his expression stormy.

"You should have waited." Heat skittered down my spine at the darkness of his tone.

I shrugged. "I didn't want to break up the lovers' reunion."

"She's not my lover."

"Does *she* know that?"

A low noise rumbled from his throat.

"I thought my not inheriting the Crown would finally put her off me for good," he muttered.

"Maybe she thinks you'll get another shot. She didn't seem to have much confidence in me."

“Then she’s even more foolish than I thought.”

I looked up at him. He wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Well, she seems like a real peach,” I drawled. “You obviously have flawless taste.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

His voice dropped to a hush. “Last I saw him, your betrothed was stomping around calling himself King. I could see the plans already forming in his head.”

“I’ve known Henri since I was a child,” I said defensively. “I trust him. And may I remind you, he proposed when I was just a plain mortal girl.”

Luther halted, whipping around to face me. “You were never just a plain mortal girl,” he snapped, his temper cracking. “And may I remind *you*, you weren’t sure he would still want you.”

I opened my mouth to retort, but he leaned closer and continued, his voice frosty.

“A Descended mate is *forever*. We do not give our heart away unless we are certain, beyond all doubt, that the person we choose will stand by our side no matter what fate the Kindred have in store for us, in this life and all that comes after.” Shards of his magic clashed in his gaze. “I will not presume to tell you who to choose, I can only hope that you have friends, as I did, who care about you enough to tell you when you’re being a blind fool.”

The sound of approaching voices wafted nearby. Luther’s focus flicked toward them, then he took my hand and tugged me back into step.

I let his words sink in as we walked, despising how disloyal they made me feel, the buried doubts they lured to the surface. Back in Mortal City, I didn’t have many friends. My strange eyes, rough edges, and tendency to break rules made me too much of a liability to keep around for very long.

“Is Eleanor trustworthy?” I asked.

“She’s your sole advisor, and you’re asking me if you can trust her?” he asked dryly.

“Don’t be jealous, *Lu*,” I said, earning a glare in response. “Answer the question. Could I tell her about Henri?”

“Yes. She is loyal to you.” He grunted irritably. “She’s stopped talking to me entirely because she thinks you don’t trust me.”

I beamed. “Really?”

“You could try to look a little less pleased with yourself every time you turn a new member of my family against me. Sorae used to adore me. Now when I use the front entrance, she tries to take a bite out of my arm.”

I burst out laughing. Luther watched me, and despite himself, his sour mood eased at the sound, though as my thoughts returned to Henri, my spirits came tumbling back down.

“Will Eleanor care that he’s mortal?”

“Every soul in the realm will care that he’s mortal.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “And you... if you were my friend and nothing more, what would you tell me?”

His answer came without missing a beat. “That if a man made you doubt whether his love for you would survive *anything*, he does not deserve you.”

He dropped my hand and stopped abruptly at an open door, where Remis was already seated at a long table.

“Father,” Luther said curtly.

Remis ignored his son as he rose and bowed his head low. “Your Majesty.”

“Regent,” I said, walking in. Luther came around to pull out an elaborately carved wooden chair at the head of the table, gesturing for me to sit.

When he reached for the unadorned chair opposite his father, Remis raised his palm. “You can leave us, son.”

Luther’s jaw ticked. “If this concerns the House Receptions, I should stay. As Warden of the Light—”

“As Warden, you do the Crown’s bidding. And until our young Queen is coronated”—he nodded to me with a tactful smile—“I wield the authority of the Crown. And I say your presence is not needed.”

Their glares locked, the tension between them palpable. At this proximity, their blood relation was undeniable. Their faces were strikingly similar, a mirror of mutual disdain. Luther’s skin was darker and more olive-toned, his hair night-black compared to Remis’s warm brown, and his pale eyes were all his own, but otherwise, their handsome features were separated only by age and the slash of Luther’s scar.

Luther glanced in my direction. I said nothing, wanting to see how the father-son feud would play out.

“Surely you don’t believe Her Majesty is incapable of handling a simple meeting with her Regent on her own,” Remis crooned.

A masterful strike. Perhaps I hadn’t given Remis enough credit for how clever he could be—or how dangerous.

“Of course not,” Luther said, the words clipped. He pushed away from the table. “I’ll leave you both to it.”

With a brief look at me that was loaded with warning, Luther was gone, and I was alone with Remis Corbois, Regent of Lumnos.

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Chapter

Fifteen

“F orgive my son’s impertinence,” Remis said with a charming smile. He poured two goblets of wine and placed one in front of me. “When he was born, I named him after my elder brother, the late King, in the hopes they would grow close. It worked a little too well. Ulther took Luther under his wing and spoiled him terribly. Now the boy doesn’t know how to be told no.”

The edge of cruelty in Remis’s tone provoked an unexpected urge to defend Luther. Just yesterday I’d been happy to drive the wedge deeper between them. Why did I feel guilty it was working?

“Your son has been quite forthcoming with information today—thanks to your guidance, I’m sure,” I said. “But I’m far more interested in the information *you* can provide.”

Remis gave a deferential nod. “Consider me an open book.”

I smiled prettily. “I may be young, but I’m not naive. I’m well aware I am ill prepared for these House Receptions. I’ll need your help to ensure they go smoothly.”

He pressed a hand to his chest. “I’m honored, Your Majesty. I would be happy to go in your stead and represent your interests.”

My smile strained. I didn’t believe for a second Remis had misunderstood my meaning. Perhaps he assumed I would be too flustered or embarrassed to correct him.

He was very wrong.

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll be conducting my own meetings.” I took my goblet in hand and sank casually against the back of my chair. “But the counsel you give today will determine whether those meetings are successful. That will be instrumental to me in selecting my advisors.”

Remis didn’t falter, his smile holding steady. “Of course. The Receptions are an opportunity for the top echelon of Lumnos to learn more about you, establish new trade alliances, and—”

“And decide if they plan to Challenge me.” I arched a brow. “That is the real purpose, isn’t it? Not all the posturing and glad-handing.”

“With respect, Your Majesty, the posturing and glad-handing is precisely how the Houses will decide if they plan to Challenge you.”

I tilted my head but remained quiet, a silent order to continue.

“The Houses have little benefit in raising a Challenge,” he explained. “If they do so and fail, they not only lose the most powerful member of their House, but they also make an enemy of the Crown and House Corbois.”

I nodded. “And even if their Challenge succeeds, they still risk making an enemy of the ruling House, given that Luther would likely be my replacement if I am killed.”

Remis shrugged lightly. “Perhaps. My son’s magic was once believed to be unequaled. It appears he was severely overestimated. His status as the presumptive heir is not as certain as it once was.”

His implication—that I was so weak, my very existence as Queen diminished Luther’s strength—grated on me. “My power was unknown because I was raised among mortals, isolated from your kind.”

“Our kind,” he corrected.

My grip tightened on my goblet. “My upbringing was hardly normal. It’s unlikely there are others like me.”

But even as I denied it, I thought of the half-mortals Luther had smuggled to other realms. How powerful might *they* be? Perhaps Remis had a point—if the magic had chosen an outsider like me to wear the Crown, one of the exiled children could be next.

All the more reason to stick to my plan. I needed powerful allies, and who better than the children this realm had abandoned? If I could find them and convince them to fight at my side, we could be a force to be reckoned with.

“Regardless,” I said, “there is a risk to the Houses in bringing a Challenge against me, successful or not. So what reason would they have for doing so?”

“There’s only one reason, really.”

He paused, then took a torturously slow sip of his wine, seeming to savor the knowledge he had the advantage. I clenched my teeth and forced myself not to react.

“A Challenge would only appeal to them if they believe you will endanger the Twenty Houses.” His eyes flashed with a dangerous glint. “All of them. Including mine.”

I choked out a laugh. “You think they’ll Challenge me if I’m a threat to you?”

“Not at all. I’m sure many would be happy to see you threaten me, or even threaten House Corbois. We have held power for a long time, and there are many who wish to see a change.”

Oh Remis, I purred internally. You have no idea.

“But,” he continued, “there are some matters on which all the Houses are aligned. They may be willing to risk a Challenge if they believe House Corbois would not seek retribution for acting in defense of a mutual interest.”

I returned his penetrating stare, channeling all of my strength into the timbre of my voice. “Then it’s your job to convince them House Corbois will stand by its Queen—no matter what.”

Remis settled back and matched my relaxed posture. “The other Houses know us well. They have seen which of our priorities and goals have remained steadfast through many Crowns. Any deviation from those values now would be seen as coming from you alone, regardless of any assurances I make.”

“So I need to assure them nothing will change.” I idly traced a finger along the rim of my glass. “Fine. I can tell them what they want to hear.”

“If only it were so easy. The Houses may expect to receive certain... binding assurances.”

“What kind of assurance could they possibly expect? The last King did whatever he wanted without consequence—” His upper lip curled slightly at my words. “—I doubt they’ll expect any less of me.”

“They may ask you to enter into a bonded bargain.”

He said the final two words with a tricky smile, a gleam of arrogance as he toyed with me. I had no clue what a *bonded bargain* was, and I suspected he knew it.

For a moment, I regretted not insisting that Luther stay. He had a way of anticipating the things I didn’t know and slipping the answers to me in a way that never made me feel ignorant or ashamed. Luther probably would have goaded Remis to lay out everything he knew from the very beginning instead of engaging in this painful, prolonged tug-of-war.

But Luther wasn't the Crown—I was. And no matter what fondness might be growing between us, he was not part of my long-term plans. I needed to show everyone, including Remis—including *myself*—that I could handle the throne on my own.

I faked a yawn and idly swirled my wine. “This meeting is growing tedious. Get to the point.”

I took the tiniest victory from the way his smugness vanished. “Under a bonded bargain, if a party breaks an agreement, they lose their magic until they follow through on the terms. If they cannot, their magic is gone forever. The bargains are sealed using the Forging magic that created the nine realms, so even a Crown can't escape the consequences.”

“I'm not putting my magic at risk to ensure a House gets preferential treatment on some trivial concern.”

“Of course not, Your Majesty. A bonded bargain is a risk to both parties. They will only demand it for matters of the highest importance.”

“And what matters are those?”

He gave another lazy, half-hearted shrug. “It could be any number of things.”

“Be frank or stop wasting my time, Remis,” I snapped.

“Matters involving mortals,” he said curtly. “Rebel attacks are increasing in every realm. We had one on our own soil just days ago. The Houses will expect you to find and execute the terrorists responsible and suppress any further rebellion.”

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly as dry as the Ignios deserts. “If King Ulther couldn't stop the attacks, what do they expect me to do?”

“For all my late brother's accomplishments, his strength against the rebels was not one of them. The Houses have long complained that the Crown is far too soft when it comes to mortals.”

My shock was so visceral, so loaded with the memories of too many injustices to number, that my body reacted before I could stop myself.

“Soft?” I hissed. I gripped the arms of my chair and leaned forward, my fingernails carving into the polished wood. “There is not a mortal or half-mortal in all of Lumnos who would label the King's treatment of them as *soft*.” My face twisted in revulsion. “Especially all the children buried in the gods-damned ground.”

His dark blue eyes darted over my face and body, taking in the signs of my rage, and I was immediately aware of how fully I had shown my hand.

But I didn't care. The cold numbness following my explosion in the dungeon had finally faded, and my temper now filled my belly with a familiar fire. It wasn't the violence-loving malice of the godhood, but a reminder of who I was at my core—a woman who cared deeply and would fight tooth and nail for those who needed defending.

"What exactly would Houses have me do, round up all the mortals and execute them?" I seethed.

Instead of denying it, Remis looked thoughtful, and my anger spiked. I had the vague sense that might have been exactly why he did it.

"Many feel that we should follow the lead of the other realms who have closed their borders to mortals," he said.

"And what of the mortals already here?"

He breathed out a weary sigh. "That has been particularly controversial. Most believe we should at least set up a perimeter to limit their movement." He watched me carefully, though he kept his expression perfectly vacant as he talked. "Ulther made quite a few enemies when he refused to forbid romantic relations between mortals and Descended. He outlawed the offspring as a compromise, but I've no doubt the Houses will expect to see that loophole closed."

Everything in me wanted to jump out of my chair and scream. The entitlement, the inhumanity, the utter lack of compassion or decency—

"Should I take this to mean you desire to take a lighter approach?" Remis asked calmly.

A million angry words stomped on my tongue as Luther's advice played in my head: *Tell them as little as possible. About yourself, your plans, your magic.*

No good would come from revealing my intentions here. Even if some bout of temporary insanity convinced me that I could use Remis in my plans, it would be as a pawn, not an ally.

I leaned back and drummed my fingers on the table. "Keeping the realm safe is, of course, my top priority. All those who have taken innocent lives will be dealt with swiftly and harshly." I softened my expression, giving him my most appeasing smile. "Your counsel today has been most helpful. I can see you being a vital part of my reign. Perhaps in an even larger role than you were offered by your late brother."

My arrow struck true. Remis's smile danced with the promise of power.

“But only if you convince me you can control the Twenty Houses,” I warned. “You spoke once of the relationships House Corbois wields—so use them. Show me you can be trusted to protect my interests as well as your own.”

Remis gave me an appraising stare, and I watched as the gears spun in his mind. He didn’t like me, but short of inheriting the Crown himself, I was his best shot at maintaining power. And he knew it.

“May I offer some very blunt advice, Your Majesty?”

“By all means, please do.”

“Defer to me in the House Receptions. Let them believe you’re an empty-headed girl willingly controlled by me.”

I snorted my rejection, and Remis raised a palm, cutting me short.

“Only until after the Challenging,” he amended. “The other Houses know I will aim to keep power within House Corbois. That will focus their negotiations on more selfish concerns for them or their Houses...”

“...instead of issues that concern the entire realm, such as the mortals,” I finished, slowly understanding.

Remis nodded with a vulpine smile. “Go to the ball and play the part. Be the vapid girl they expect. If they ask you a question of any importance, tell them only to take it up with me. It will infuriate them—but in a way that is predictable and easy to control.”

It wasn’t a bad idea. If I could keep attention off me and keep the Houses focused on Remis, I might stand a chance. I raised my goblet of wine to him in salute. “Clever, Regent. *Very* clever.”

Remis gave me a gracious nod, his lips quivering with the self-satisfied grin he was failing badly at hiding. “It would also be wise to take a young Corbois man as your attendant to control speculation about your marriage prospects.”

I started to announce Aemonn as my escort, then thought better of it as a plan began to form. “Which of my handsome new cousins would you recommend for the job?”

“It seems you and my son have become well acquainted. Word has already spread that he remains a fixture at your side.”

I kept my face completely still, offering no reaction.

“Though Aemonn might be a wiser choice,” Remis went on. “He is well-known to be loyal to House Corbois. And, if my brother Garath

believed you to be susceptible to his son's charms, he might be persuaded to assist you, as well."

"Brilliant idea," I said with a clap of my hands. "I'll take your advice and ask Aemonn to be my escort."

More like he already blackmailed me into it, but better to keep that to myself.

"I'm pleased we're on the same page, Your Majesty. I desire only to serve you."

I almost laughed out loud.

I was beginning to understand Remis and his motives. If he had any real convictions about mortals or half-mortals, or even the rebels, he would have pushed harder on the subject. Instead, he'd changed course at the first offer of a prestigious title.

I had a strong suspicion the only thing Remis Corbois truly cared about protecting was Remis Corbois. If I could use him as a shield against the other Houses by dangling power as a lure—that was a tool I could work with.

"I've asked Eleanor to be my advisor," I added. "She will be joining us at the House Receptions."

Remis balked. "Eleanor Corbois?"

"The one and only."

He considered it for a moment, then slowly dipped his chin. "I suppose it does play into the image we are creating of a vapid Queen who cares nothing of important matters."

The comment irked me on Eleanor's behalf, but I held my tongue. Let him underestimate her—and me. After the Challenging, he would learn what we both were capable of.

I rose to my feet, suddenly anxious to leave. "This has been most enlightening."

He mirrored the movement slowly. "There's just one last thing, Your Majesty. Given the loyalty House Corbois is offering in support of your reign, it seems appropriate that we should formalize our arrangement."

"And how do you propose we do that?"

The shrewd gleam in his eye had my blood chilling in warning. "A bonded bargain, of course." He flashed a broad smile. "We can keep the terms simple enough. You agree to claim House Corbois for the length of

your reign, and in exchange, House Corbois will not raise a Challenge against you.”

My brows pinched into a deep crease. “And you won’t support or encourage any other House to raise a Challenge against me, either?”

He nodded and spread his hands wide. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

I twisted and stretched the words to their limits, searching for trapdoors in the language. If I agreed to this, I would be bound to House Corbois for life—but nothing in the bargain stopped me from taking down the House from within. And if I refused, I might not live long enough to get the chance.

“Agreed,” I said finally.

“Splendid,” he announced, his smile spreading wider. He unfastened the clasps at his cuffs, then folded the fabric up to reveal his forearm. “The bargain requires two exchanges. First, an offering of blood to seal our oath.”

His fingers twitched, and a blade of pale blue light shimmered to life and sliced a shallow cut into his wrist. His eyes rose expectantly to me.

I flashed him a menacing smile and reached into my cleavage, where I’d stashed a small, thin knife. I might have been dressed like a songbird, but inside I was still a hawk.

“I prefer shedding blood the old fashioned way,” I muttered, wedging the sharp tip into my flesh.

“Then let us hope your enemies do, too. Magic can strike a killing blow so much faster than a blade.”

My eyes narrowed at the implicit threat. “What’s the second offering?”

“A symbol of what’s at stake.” He held out his arm with a haughty smile. “A drop of your magic for a drop of mine.”

I froze. I had never summoned a *drop* of my magic before—it had only ever come in a tidal wave of lethal destruction or nothing at all. I wasn’t entirely opposed to wiping Remis off the map, but doing so accidentally, and before the Challenging, wasn’t quite ideal.

“Is there a problem?” Remis asked, stretching his arm out further.

I gave a stiff shake of my head and clasped his forearm so our wounds aligned, the trickles of blood pressing to an angry smear. The godhood inside me stirred, agitated at Remis’s touch.

“I, Remis Corbois, bond my magic to this bargain of my own free will.” His eyes raised to me.

I pulled the words forward with effort, my throat thick with nerves. “I, Diem Bellator, bond my magic to this bargain of my own free will.”

A burst of warmth flared against my wrist, and my magic responded unbidden. An answering pulse of energy shot down my arm and flowed through the wound, drawn from my blood like a magnet. A cold tingling sensation circled my wrist and pulled tight.

Remis abruptly released me and flexed his fingers, but the feeling of his grip on my arm remained, an invisible shackle locked in place.

“It’s very important that we keep this bargain between us. Some in House Corbois would be willing to Challenge you just to cost me my magic.” His gaze darkened. “Especially those powerful enough to believe they can defeat you.”

I frowned, but I nodded in agreement. I didn’t need his pointed look to know there was only one Corbois who fit that description.

Remis beamed like he had won some critical advantage, leaving me with a nagging unease. “Let me be the first to formally welcome you to House Corbois.”

I rubbed my still-throbbing wrist. “Has my mysterious Corbois father been chosen?”

“Indeed.” He retrieved a book from a nearby shelf, then cracked it open and laid the pages before me, his finger tracing the ink of a handwritten family tree. “Harold Corbois. He was the last of his line.”

I skimmed the information below Harold’s name. He had no spouse or siblings, born just before the death of his parents, and deceased a month before my own birth.

Curiously convenient.

“Is there anything I should know about my dear departed sire?” I asked.

“I believe the less you know about him, Your Majesty, the better.”

I looked once more at the family records. The ink on Harold’s listing was thicker and bolder than the other faded entries on the page.

I wondered if dear Harold ever even existed at all.

“Well, then.” I gently tapped my finger over his scrawled name. “Rest in peace, Father.”

Chapter Sixteen

The day of the funeral, a group of servants arrived to move me to the royal chambers despite all my protests to the contrary.

Though the Crown's multi-room suite was filled with every luxury, I had no desire to return to the site of my bizarre encounter with the late King, and my current room's close proximity to Luther gave me a sense of comfort I was trying not to think too much about. I was begrudgingly convinced to move when Luther promised me the King's deathbed had been replaced—and when he mentioned the suite connected to the gryvern habitat.

Sorae was ecstatic to have me within reach. A row of wide archways in the spacious main parlor and the Crown's bedchambers opened up to her perch, and she had wedged herself as far through them as her enormous body could fit. She purred contentedly, her scaled head resting on a bed of cushions I'd piled together as her ochre gaze watched me pace around the sprawling firelit room.

I had no idea what to expect of a Descended funeral, and I had been too wrapped up in thoughts of the Challenging to bother finding out.

To make matters worse, there was no one around to ask. House Corbois had departed hours earlier to rub elbows with the other Houses before the event began. Remis had insisted that I fly in later on Sorae—alone.

"If only you could talk, Sorae," I groaned, flipping through a stack of dresses I'd pulled from the wardrobe. "I bet you would be a fantastic advisor."

She gave a breathy snort and snapped her teeth, as if to say *You're damn right I would*.

Eleanor had stocked my closets with clothing in every style and color, but she had thought too highly of my intellect—wrongly, it seemed—to label them by appropriate occasion. I pulled out a modest, unadorned black

gown that revealed little other than a low back and held it up to Sorae. “What do you think—royal funeral appropriate?”

The dark slits of her reptilian eyes swelled and thinned. She gave me a guttural rumble, a tendril of smoke wafting from her nostrils.

“Too plain?” I wrinkled my nose and stared at my options. “If you were pretending to be a naive, airheaded fool, what would you wear?”

A scrap of glittering scarlet caught my eye. “Probably something like this,” I joked, tugging out a slinky dress with thin crisscrossing straps down the back and thighs. Sorae let out a soprano trill that I swore sounded like an agreement.

I held the gaudy dress against my body. Flecks of light sparkled as I swayed from side to side. “If I wore this to a funeral in the mortal world, *my* funeral would come next.”

Sorae’s fur-tipped tail smacked the floor. She lifted her head from the pillows and nudged my ankle insistently.

“It’s too much. There will be time soon enough to make a big statement. Today, I need to blend in and not be noticed.”

Her golden eyes shot to the dazzling Crown above my head, as if saying *Good luck with that*.

I sighed and peeled off my clothing, then shimmied into the plain black dress. The open back was more dramatic than I’d expected, dipping so low it was nearly obscene. I fought the instinct to cover it up.

Though I was slowly becoming more comfortable in the luxurious gowns common among women of the palace, the sensuality with which the Descended put their skin on display was still deeply intimidating. I wasn’t ashamed of my body, but nor was I proud. It was simply utilitarian, a tool to meet my needs, whether that be working, fighting, or sex. I had never imagined my flesh as something to be *admired*.

Even with Henri, I’d always struggled to see myself as an object of desire. We spent our childhoods swimming naked and stripping to our undergarments to avoid the summer heat. Revealing my body to him had never felt like an intimate act, even after our activities had gone well beyond platonic.

I left my hair unbound, the snowy tresses curtaining the expanse of skin at my back. Unlike in the mortal world, my strange hair fit right in among the Descended, who delighted in dying their hair shocking hues.

Eleanor had warned me that court regulars would soon be sporting newly whitened hair in a cheap attempt to flatter me.

“What do you think?” I called out to Sorae, spreading my skirt and spinning in a circle. “Do I look forgettable and inoffensive?”

She let out a soft huff, then rose to her feet, disappearing through the archway to her perch.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I muttered. I hiked up my skirts and strapped two blades to my thighs, then followed her to the stone balcony. The day was sunny and brisk, but not windy, the perfect day for a ride in the skies.

I ran my hand along her haunches and marveled at the powerful muscles that twitched beneath her sandy brown fur. I studied the spot along her feline body just behind her wings, then gave her a wary stare. “Am I supposed to put a saddle on you, or...”

She stretched her neck to the sky and erupted in a sudden roar. Her tail whipped angrily toward me, nearly smacking my shin.

“Alright, alright!” I yelped, throwing my hands up in surrender and dodging another flick of her tail. “No saddle. Understood.”

She dropped low to the ground and curved her wing around me in silent encouragement to climb on. Like a fool, I glanced over the balcony’s edge instead. My stomach clenched at the steep drop.

“You’re not allowed to let me fall, right? You’re oath bound to make sure I don’t die?”

I felt a tug and looked down to see the train of my dress bunched up in Sorae’s toothy jaws. She reared back, yanking me away from the edge. I let out a laugh as she dropped the fabric, gave my hip a swift bump with her snout, and huffed impatiently.

“I trust you,” I conceded with a grin. I gathered my skirts and threw my leg across her back. She patiently waited while I found a handhold along her shoulder blades, then gave a sweet, inquisitive trill.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

“Alright, girl. Show me what you’ve got.”

With a jubilant howl, Sorae launched from her powerful hind legs. A few downbeats of her mighty wings, and we were soaring into the sky.

Euphoric laughter bubbled up from my chest. A burst of Sorae’s pride shot across the bond at the sound of my delight. Though my stomach still felt wobbly and a bit weightless every time I peeked at the ground below, any unease was drowned out by my swelling joy.

There was something liberating about cutting through the clouds on Sorae's back. I was no longer leashed by the stress of the Challenging, court politics, or the expectations of a divided realm on the brink of war. Up here, I was blissfully unburdened. My problems weren't gone, but they were anchored to the ground, and I was in the skies.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this happy, this free. Maybe I never had.

"This is incredible!" I shouted, gently squeezing the tendons that connected Sorae's wing to her back. "What do you say we fly away and never return?"

She let loose a long, booming yowl and tilted her wings at an angle, sending us shooting toward the earth before banking into a sharp turn that had my heart in my throat. A string of happy warbles rumbled out of her as she continued to climb and plummet, circle and roll.

Although the sheer terror of it was shaving years off my life, I now had a lot more of those to burn, and I couldn't bear to make her stop. Her childlike giddiness was the sweetest music. She was *playing*, showing me her world for one precious moment where her gilded chains felt as temporarily invisible as my own.

The forests of Lumnos passed in a blur beneath us, and far too quickly, our exultant moment ended as a massive, oval-shaped structure came into view. On one end, the royal family's seating area was outfitted with upholstered chairs and cushioned banquettes, in contrast to the rows of stone benches that ran along the perimeter.

Luther had come by this morning with another tray of breakfast and an overview of the agenda, a move I had to admit was endearing him to me—the daily food deliveries, not the advising. I knew from his guidance that Sorae would take me to the center, where I would lay a ceremonial final log on the King's pyre to start the service. I was so busy reciting his instructions in my head that we had nearly landed before I noticed the audience was filled with a vibrant shade of cherry red.

Other than a small clump of black in a section near the top edge, every last attendee wore garments of vivid scarlet, many of them adorned with jewels or flashy sequins. Even House Corbois was outfitted in head-to-toe crimson with some flourish designed to sparkle in the light.

From a distance, the effect was breathtaking—the arena resembled a flawless ruby whose facets glittered under the midday sun.

As we got closer, it began to look a lot more like a glossy pool of freshly spilled blood.

Sorae's claw-tipped feet landed on the sandy central floor to a skittering wave of gasps and a sea of horrified stares. Whatever fashion error I had committed, it was a bad one.

I turned my attention up to the royal box. Remis and Luther wore matching masks of calm indifference, though their eyes told two very different stories. Remis's gaze was calculating, likely scheming how to both explain away my misstep and twist it for his benefit. Luther's burned with a visceral rage that sent a shudder down my spine, even at this great distance.

Garath looked disgusted. Lily looked mortified on my behalf. Taran was grinning. Eleanor was near tears.

I slid off Sorae's back and stroked my hand along her downy wing. She gave me an intense look that at first seemed to be a show of support, until I caught the gleam of laughter in her eyes and remembered how she had urged me toward the glittery red number I'd so quickly discarded.

"Point proven," I grumbled. "Next time, I'll take your advice."

She gave me a light tap with her nose before retreating several steps. Her head rose to the sky, and a ferocious snarl tore from her throat and resounded across the arena. She whipped from side to side to repeat the menacing sound to each section of the crowd. She bared her fangs in a rumbling growl, then turned her focus to me. Her wings draped flat at her sides, and she lowered her head to the ground in a reverent bow.

My heart squeezed—Sorae was *kneeling*. This incredible creature was claiming me as her Queen, offering a fierce vote of confidence when I needed it most—as well as a deadly warning to anyone who might plan to do me harm.

Movement caught my eye. I looked up to see Luther mimicking her bow, his fist beating across his chest as he sank to one knee and lowered his gaze to the floor. Lily followed immediately, then Taran and Alixe, then the rest of House Corbois, until it surged across the arena like a rolling storm.

I should have enjoyed it. I *wanted* to enjoy it. Mortals had squirmed beneath their immortal thumbs for so long, forced into a violent, brutal submission, and now the tables had finally turned. Now these monstrous people were submitting to *me*.

But it wasn't to me—not really. All their bows and genuflects were for the Crown above my head. They did not know me, they did not fear me, and

they certainly did not respect me.

And they didn't try to hide it. More than a few attendees shot me dirty looks as they kneeled, Aemonn's father Garath among them, though none were bold enough to remain standing and risk drawing my focus—or Sorae's.

"Thank you," I whispered, quiet enough to be heard only by a gryvern's hypersensitive ears. I knew from the responding pulse of emotion across our bond that she was ready to stand by my side, tacky outfit or not.

She leapt back into the sky, circling the arena then landing on the awning above the royal box. At last I was alone, fully exposed to the crowd and all its judgment.

I kept my chin high as I turned to the wooden tower that encased the King's corpse, swaddled in crimson silk. On a golden pedestal at my side sat a single log, tied with a white ribbon, on a bed of garnet-colored velvet.

I'd spent my entire life blaming King Ulther for the mistreatment of mortals in Lumnos. After my discussion with Remis, I was beginning to wonder if Ulther might be the sole reason the situation wasn't dramatically worse.

I might never learn his true intentions or what conversations had gone on behind the closed doors of the palace, but as I gathered the final log into my hands and set it on the pyre, I closed my eyes and offered up a prayer for Ulther's soul. Whatever kind of Queen I turned out to be, I hoped that someday, someone would do the same for me.

I strolled toward the steep staircase that ran from the floor of the arena to the royal box. At the top, Luther made a move toward the stairs, presumably to come down and escort me up. At the last second, Remis grabbed his son by the arm, and they exchanged what looked to be heated words.

Luther's focus shifted to me, his expression hard. Remis leaned in and said something further that had Luther's gaze skirting the crowd—who were increasingly noticing the drama between father and son.

I gave him a faint shake of my head in a wordless order to stand down. His shoulders sagged. He took a step back into place, hands fisted at his sides.

As I made the long walk across the arena floor and up the narrow steps, snippets of hushed conversations floated to my ears.

...completely disrespectful...

...looks like a mortal...
...only days after the attack...
...not even a real Corbois...

I told myself I didn't care what these horrible people thought of me. I tried even harder to believe it.

My eyes stayed fixed on Luther, the strength in his gaze calming my pounding heart. It felt as if something in him had hooked itself on something in me. While my indignation and my insecurity battled for control, Luther held me firm, steadily reeling me toward him like a fish on a line. Certain death might await me on the other side, but for the moment, he was a shiny lure I couldn't seem to resist.

When I reached the landing, Remis stepped forward and gave me a low nod. "Your Majesty."

"Regent," I answered. "I take it black was a bad choice."

Garath scoffed. "Atrocious is what it is."

"Garath," I chirped with a smile that was equal parts sugar and venom. "Always a pleasure."

He huffed and looked away. At his back, Aemonn shot me a flirtatious smile. Taran grinned and flashed a thumb's up.

Remis cleared his throat. "We've prepared a seat of honor for you at the front of the dais." He gestured to one of two wooden thrones on an extended balcony that surveyed the arena floor.

The ornate, oversized chairs were set just outside the awning's shade, placing their occupants in a sunny spotlight so each and every attendee could see them with brutal clarity. After my disastrous entrance, my throat constricted at the idea of being so exposed.

"Perhaps Her Majesty would prefer to sit with the family," Luther said, stepping to my side and lightly grasping my elbow. "Uncle Garath could take her place."

Remis eyed my dress. "Yes. That might be best—if Her Majesty agrees."

Breath whooshed out of me. "Her Majesty definitely agrees," I blurted out. "It's all yours, Uncle Garath."

The elder Corbois shot me a terse look but couldn't hide his pleasure at being offered an elevated role in front of all of Lumnos—or at least the only half of Lumnos he gave a damn about. He brushed past me without a word and sank into one of the thrones, followed shortly by Remis.

“Thank you,” I mouthed to Luther.

He flashed me a barely there smile that had me momentarily transfixed. I was still so unaccustomed to this charming, unguarded side of him. Each glimpse behind the curtain left me more confused than ever.

His ironclad wall reappeared a beat later, and his features wiped away to his trademark blank slate. As he guided me to the family’s general seating, his hand moved to my back, causing his palm to slide under my hair and skim my exposed skin.

The intimate contact took us both by surprise, at least if his sharp inhale was any indication. I nearly tripped on the long hem of my gown, and his other hand shot out and gripped my hand. Warmth flooded my body as he leaned me against his side to hold me steady.

“I’m off to a brilliant start,” I joked, my voice a little hoarse.

“You’re doing great,” he murmured, giving my hand a gentle squeeze. With a tender press at my back, he led me to a row of tufted settees where Taran sat with an empty space beside him. Luther glanced at him and made a jerking motion with his chin.

Taran groaned. “Listen, Your Majesty, I like you and all, but...” He inclined his head to the side, where the only other open seat was beside his brother Aemonn. “Please don’t make me do it.”

“Not in the mood for family bonding?” I teased.

He smiled wickedly. “I’d rather bond with you. In private.”

“Taran,” Luther warned.

I halted him with a laugh. “I wouldn’t dream of causing any family drama,” I purred, which Taran answered with a snort. “I’ll sit with Aemonn.”

I started to leave. Luther’s hand snaked around my hip, holding me in place.

“We’ll make room,” he said quickly. “You’re small, and I’ll be at the podium for half the ceremony as it is.”

I’d never been called *small* in my life—in the mortal world I was always too tall, too covered in muscles and curves—but as I nestled between the two hulking male demigods that were Luther and Taran, I felt almost petite.

The funeral ceremony began as Remis and Garath took turns droning on at a raised podium at the edge of the dais about the King’s legacy. A device provided by the technologically advanced realm of Sophos amplified

their voices through the arena, though the crowd paid them little attention. Conversation hummed at a dull roar, and even in the royal box, the Corbois continued to laugh and mingle freely.

I tried to focus, though as time wore on, I began to squirm—as much as I could between the trunk-like thighs and brawny arms of the two men shoved against me.

Taran leaned back and sprawled his arm across the top of the settee to give me some breathing room. “So Your Majesty, how does it feel to be sandwiched between two handsome, single Corbois Princes?”

“Taran,” Luther warned, shooting him a look.

Taran ignored him. “A lot of women would pay good money for that, you know. Though there would be far less clothing involved. And less of a crowd.” He leaned in close to me. “Unless having an audience is your thing.”

“Show some respect,” Luther barked. “She’s your Queen.”

Taran gave an exaggerated eyeroll. “We get someone young and interesting as the Crown, and you’re not going to let me tease her even a little bit? Besides, she likes it.” Taran nudged my leg with his knee. “You like it, right?”

Luther sighed. “Just say the word and I’ll hang him upside down from the rafters.”

“Not *again*,” Taran moaned.

I laughed and settled back into the cushions. “If Taran wants to boast that he can’t get a woman in bed unless there’s money involved, far be it for me to stop him.”

A half-smile broke through Luther’s facade, and Taran roared with laughter. His arm moved to my shoulders. “Sorry Lu, you’re out as my favorite cousin. I think I’m in love with this one.”

“Sorry *Lu*,” I echoed sweetly.

“This was a bad idea,” Luther muttered. “You two becoming friends is my worst nightmare.”

“That’s incentive enough for me.” I cuddled into Taran’s side and pat my hand playfully on his upper thigh. “Taran, you can call me Diem.”

Luther’s eyes darted to the gesture. The levity on his face faded. “May I remind you both we are in front of a very large crowd, and every one of them is watching this exchange.”

Crimson rushed to my cheeks. I pulled my hands into my lap and sat stiffly upright.

“No need to ruin our fun just because you’re jealous, cousin,” Taran said.

“I’m not *jealous*,” Luther ground out, the words sounding so insincere that I looked at him in surprise. “And you shouldn’t lie to your Queen. Everyone knows your real favorite cousin is Eleanor.”

I suddenly remembered Eleanor’s anguished expression when I first arrived. I whipped around to search for her in the gallery, only to find her seated behind me, her eyes red and puffy, her lips tightly pursed.

I reached for her hand. “Eleanor, what’s wrong?”

Her fingers trembled in mine. “The dress... I should have warned you.” She looked down, her voice falling to a whisper. “Someone finally gave me a chance, and I let them down.”

I squeezed her hand. “It’s fine. It’s just a dress.”

“It’s not,” she said, wincing. “We wear red to honor our Kindred blood, and we wear something that reflects light to represent the glow of the afterlife where souls rest if they are found worthy. Wearing black, it... it...”

“It will be seen as disrespectful to the Kindred and a suggestion that you believe the King’s soul will be found unworthy,” Luther finished for her. His tone had gone cold, and he glowered at Eleanor with reproach.

I snorted. “Had I known that, I *definitely* would have worn this dr—”

Luther’s glare shot to me, and my mouth snapped shut.

“It can’t be that bad,” I argued. “I saw others wearing black.”

“Those were the mortal guests,” he said. “They aren’t held to the same standards. But if people believe you’re wearing black as a show of loyalty to them...”

I recalled Remis’s warning that fear over my connection to the mortals was my greatest risk of provoking a Challenge.

“Alright, it’s pretty bad,” I admitted.

Eleanor’s head sank. “I’m so sorry, Your Majesty. I’ll tell everyone it was me who chose the dress, not you, and I’ll step down as your advisor.”

“You made her your advisor?” Aemonn spoke up from the adjoining settee.

“I *knew* he was eavesdropping,” Taran grumbled.

“Eleanor is my advisor on matters of court and culture,” I answered to Aemonn.

His eyes narrowed on his distraught cousin, looking as if he was assessing her as a new threat.

“Court and culture?” Taran repeated in a mocking voice.

My brows rose. “Do you have some thoughts, cousin Taran?”

“None that I’m going to say out loud.”

I patted him lightly on the cheek. “You’re smarter than you look.”

Taran clasped my hand between his and smiled even wider. “Oh, I’m *definitely* in love.”

I laughed and turned back to face Eleanor. “First of all, I told you to call me Diem. We’re friends, remember?” I offered an encouraging smile. “And you absolutely will not take the blame.”

“She should,” Luther muttered. “This is precisely the kind of matter she should have advised you on.”

“Stay out of it,” I clipped, and he frowned.

“He’s right,” Eleanor said. “I let you down. I’m not worthy to—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” I said. “There is only one person in this realm who has proven themselves worthy to be my advisor, Eleanor, and that’s you.”

Luther bristled.

“What about me?” Taran said, pouting. “I could advise on... I don’t know, *something*.”

“Drinking,” Aemonn drawled. “Sleeping around. Being useless.”

Taran grinned. “Exactly.”

I ignored the brotherly bickering. “Did you do it on purpose?” I asked Eleanor.

“Of course not,” she breathed.

“And you would handle it differently now?”

“Oh yes, I swear it.”

“So one might say it has made you an even better advisor, because now you’ll be more likely to consider what might have gone overlooked?”

Eleanor’s expression shifted as she realized what I was implying. She nodded, a faint smile breaking through her shame.

“Then it’s over and forgotten. I don’t want to hear another word about it.” I turned to Luther with a pointed glare. “I don’t know how you all do things, but where I come from, we don’t give up on someone after an honest mistake.”

“No, you don’t know how we do things, and that’s the problem,” Luther growled. “You’re an Unchallenged Queen. ‘*Honest mistakes*’ can get you killed.”

“Then at least I’ll go out looking fucking fabulous in this dress.” I flipped my hair over my shoulder and hauled up the hem of my gown to flash my legs as I crossed them in a huff.

A vein popped under the scar that ran along his throat. He stood and gave a sharp tug on the edge of his jacket. “It’s time to give my eulogy,” he said icily, then stalked to the podium.

I scowled, folding my arms irritably over my chest.

Taran chuckled. “Long live the Queen.”

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Chapter Seventeen

I was starting to wonder if Descended time operated like dog years, because the funeral that Luther had assured me would last “an hour, at most” had been going on for what felt like three decades.

An endless flow of speakers shared words of reverence about the late King, and not a single one had seemed genuine. Even Luther’s eulogy had been stiff and impersonal, lacking the nuanced emotion I’d seen in him when he had described their complicated relationship to me in private.

Remis and Garath spoke of the King’s commitment to his family, leaders from the Twenty Houses spoke of key trade deals he brokered, and visiting Descended from the other nine realms offered the condolences of their Crowns and urged the importance of our longstanding alliances.

The latter group had struck my interest the most. I longed to rush into the cordoned-off area where the foreign representatives were segregated behind a heavy contingent of guards led by Alixe and bombard them with questions about their realms. From the way they watched me with intense focus, they were itching to do the same.

The rotation of speakers was punctuated by musicians from around the realm offering songs in the late King’s honor. At the moment, a small orchestra was playing a truly gods-awful piece that the conductor swore was one of Ulther’s favorites.

It wasn’t immediately evident whether the musicians were all playing the same song, so it wasn’t off to a great start.

“If I die in the Challenging, will my funeral get all of this pageantry, or will you just toss me in an unmarked grave and move on to the next?” I asked.

Taran gave a thoughtful hum. “Well, you’ll already be down there, and all of us will already be up here... we could throw some logs on you and make it a two-for-one event.”

Several nearby Corbois gasped and shot us horrified stares. Taran and I shared a mischievous grin.

Over the course of the funeral, he and I had become fast friends. There was something I instantly liked about him. Like all Descended, he was drop-dead gorgeous and fearsome to behold, but unlike his kinsmen, Taran was quick to hand out a smile or a laugh. He returned my sass with quickfire barbs of his own, and he'd treated me not like a mortal or a Queen, but an equal.

For the first hour, he had burst out laughing every time he glanced at my black dress. After vowing to call me "*Her Depressing Majesty, Queen Die-em the Royal Undertaker*" for the rest of my life, he'd finally thrown an arm around my neck and turned his teasing on other members of the family.

I had a sneaking suspicion his bold friendliness was an act of mercy to shield me from his family's cruelty. It didn't work—I was still acutely aware of every nasty look, every scandalized whisper—but it was a kindness I wouldn't soon forget.

"So the Challenging is held in this arena?" I asked, and Taran nodded.

I looked around at the blood-red smear of the crowd. I tried to imagine them cheering me on in victory, but I could only picture their faces of disgust when I'd arrived.

"Will they all wear red then, too?"

"Only if they think you're going to die."

"So that's a yes."

"You're not going to die at the Challenging," Luther interrupted.

"You don't know that," I protested.

"Maybe he's planning to kill you *before* the Challenging," Taran suggested.

I frowned. "Good point. I'll have a chat about that with Sorae."

A muffled growl rumbled from the landing above our heads.

"You're not going to die because I won't let it happen." Luther's attention stayed fixed on the arena floor, his shoulders drawn tight. "We have a number of tools at our disposal to ensure you are coronated. I'll use as many of them as I have to. You belong on that throne."

I pressed my lips together to hold back a smile. While I was still miffed at his scolding of Eleanor, I had to admit the gruff, overprotective champion act was a little sweet.

My knee brushed his, luring his eyes to mine. The hard set of his expression was almost painful to look at now that I knew it had been forged from years of being isolated by his power, his family, and his destiny. This was the public-facing Luther, as heartless as he was matchless. *The Prince*.

But I knew better.

“You’re not going to die,” he repeated, his eyes blazing.

My gaze drifted to the King’s body. For a moment, all I could see was my own funeral pyre—my corpse broken and bleeding from defeat, my father and brother weeping at my side.

My throat burned. “You promise?” I whispered, remembering his words.

I keep my promises, my Queen. Whatever the cost.

He nodded. “I promise.”

“Luther,” Remis called out sharply. “The poem.”

Luther retrieved a folded paper from an inside pocket and returned to the podium. His voice boomed across the crowd as he began to speak.

“As most of you know, King Ulther’s mate, Rapheol, passed away many years ago. Rapheol was a talented poet, and when his mate ascended to the throne, he wrote a poem to commemorate his beloved’s reign. I would like to read you an excerpt from that poem.”

I sank back against the cushions and closed my eyes, listening to Luther’s deep voice recite the beautiful, lilting verses. Rapheol’s devotion to his husband was clear in every line, and we all laughed and blushed at his catalogue of the King’s best features at court, on the battlefield, and in the bedroom.

“I didn’t even know the King was married,” I admitted. “When did Rapheol die?”

Eleanor leaned forward until her face was close to mine. “Less than a month after Ulther’s coronation. He was poisoned by a rival House. It’s a heartbreaking story.”

“Someone *poisoned* the King’s husband?”

She nodded. “Just as he received the Crown, Ulther was cheated in a trade agreement. He wanted to prove his strength before his Challenging, so he had their entire House shut down. He seized their property and ordered that they all leave Lumnos, join another House, or become one of the Unhoused Descended that live on the outskirts of the realm.”

“All that over a bad business deal?”

“It gets worse.” She sighed sadly. “An elder from that House decided she had nothing left to lose, so she infected Rapheol with a rare poison and demanded Ulther reinstate her House in exchange for an antidote. She even insisted on a bonded bargain that he wouldn’t punish her or her House for it later.”

“And Ulther wouldn’t do it?”

“Oh, he did—but she gave him *an* antidote, not *the* antidote. She worded the bargain cleverly, and there was nothing he could do. Rapheol died, and Ulther couldn’t seek revenge without losing his magic.”

“That’s terrible,” I gasped. “I can’t believe she got away with it.”

“She didn’t. That’s where it gets worse. Her bargain was clever, but not clever enough, because it only bound Ulther and not the rest of House Corbois. The King couldn’t take revenge—but his brothers could.”

My eyebrows flew up. “What did they do?”

She chewed on her lip and glanced nervously at her uncles. “They took out the entire House.”

I spun around to face her. “Took out? As in...?”

“As in dead. Every last one. The whole family was wiped out overnight.”

“Even... even the children? The innocents?”

Her only answer was a sad, pained grimace.

I sank back into my seat, staring at Remis and Garath as my pulse pounded in my ears.

“Ulther never got over it,” she went on. “He only appointed his brothers and their children as his advisors, and he banned anyone who wasn’t a Corbois from living or working in the palace. He refused to trust anyone from the other Houses ever again.”

My heart twisted and tore. “Was Luther part of it—the killing?” I swallowed, not really wanting to know the answer, but needing to.

“Oh no,” she said quickly. “Luther wasn’t even born.”

My shoulders sagged with relief.

Taran frowned at me. “You really believe Luther would take part in something like that?” His expression looked hurt, almost betrayed, as if I had accused *him*.

“I barely know him,” I mumbled, feeling my cheeks flush. “I don’t know what he’s capable of.”

Taran shook his head and looked away.

Guilt started to gnaw away at me. “The King never remarried?” I asked.

“He was mated,” Eleanor said matter-of-factly.

“But he never fell in love with anyone else?”

“He was *mated*,” she said again, giving me a strange look.

“Mortals don’t have mates,” Taran said to Eleanor. “She doesn’t know what that means.”

Her eyes widened, her expression bemused. “You really don’t know our culture, do you?”

I shrugged. “Only what I learned in the mortal schools.”

“Which was what?” Taran asked. “That Descended are all evil monsters who are out to get them?”

“Quite the opposite,” I sniped. “We’re taught you’re all perfect, and death to anyone who says otherwise.” I could handle Taran’s ribbing, but the haughty way the Descended spoke about mortals never failed to set my temper alight. “The Crown decides what information mortals are *allowed* to know. And if we try to learn more than we’re supposed to, we wind up on the end of a Descended blade.” I gestured to Remis and Garath. “So you can take up your thoughts on my inadequate education with those two and their Keeper of the Laws.”

All traces of Taran’s judgment disappeared. “Sorry,” he said quietly. “I didn’t realize.”

I flexed my jaw and looked back at Eleanor. “Mates—could you explain it to me?”

She nodded. “For us, marriage is just a ceremony to exchange rings and vows. You can get married for any reason—politics, alliances, money—and you can remarry as often as you like. But a mate...” Her eyes shone with reverence. “A mate is so much more. A mating bond can only be made by love—*true* love.”

I gave her a skeptical look. “True love?”

She smiled dreamily, oblivious to my cynicism. “Any two Descended can attempt the mating ritual, but the bonding magic will only work if your love is genuine and unconditional, and if you freely commit to stand by your mate forever, in life and in death. Once you’re mated, your heart is bound to your mate for eternity. You can never love anyone else.”

“Never? Even if they die?”

“Never. It’s a legacy of the Kindred’s choice to give up their immortality for their mortal lovers.”

“Being mated isn’t just a relationship,” Taran said, his expression equally aglow. “It changes you physically. Your bodies become two halves of a whole. If you’re away from your mate for too long, you get ill and your magic weakens. They say you can even die from it.”

“I heard they can sense each other’s emotions,” Eleanor added. “And it doesn’t end at death. Whichever mate dies first, they stay in limbo until the other joins them. Their worthiness is judged together, like a single soul.”

Taran sighed happily. “It’s just so *romantic*.”

“You two aren’t really selling me on this mating thing,” I joked. They both looked at me like I had sprouted a second head. “It sounds like giving up a lot of yourself. And it’s very... permanent. Why would anyone choose that over marriage?”

“Because they’re your *mate*,” Eleanor said, drawing the word out as if that should say it all. “To be connected so deeply to the one you love, even beyond death... it’s the greatest joy anyone can experience.”

Taran leaned over with a savage grin. “And they say sex with your mate is *mind-blowing*.”

Eleanor swatted at him and laughed, though she threw me a tawdry grin that said she agreed.

“The mating bond is sacred,” he added. “It’s respected by all Descended, no matter the realm. Even if one mate is imprisoned, the other is permitted access to them at all times. To separate mates is an insult to the Kindred themselves.”

I sat back and frowned, trying to imagine being bound in such an intimate and irreversible way—to give away half of my very soul to another and trust them to protect it and remain loyal to it always. My mind lingered on Henri and the marriage proposal I had nearly rejected, and a horrible pit settled in my stomach.

“How do you know if your love for someone is true enough to be mated?” I asked.

“Oh, the rite is very simple,” Eleanor chirped. “You shed a little blood, commit to them forever... if the love is worthy, the magic does the rest.”

It wasn’t the *mechanics* of the rite that were haunting me, but her words caught my attention.

“If it doesn’t work, haven’t you just admitted that you don’t truly love each other?”

“Happens all the time,” Taran answered.

“It’s the worst,” Eleanor groaned. “So painful to watch. Some couples test the rite first to avoid embarrassment. Technically, the bond can be one-sided, so—”

“*What?*” I cried out, drawing stares from nearby Corbois.

Taran grinned at my outburst. “It’s not uncommon to start the rite in private to be certain it will work. If one mate completes the bond, the other usually will, too.”

“But not always?”

“It’s very rare, but it’s possible,” Eleanor agreed. “They’re called stranded mates. It’s all the worst parts of the bond—having to be near them, feeling their pain, never being able to love anyone else—without any of the benefits.” She winced as if just thinking on it caused her actual pain. “It’s the worst fate I could imagine.”

I studied the couples seated around us. “Who is mated in House Corbois?”

Eleanor and Taran exchanged a loaded glance. A shared pain seemed to pass across their faces.

“Royals marry for strategic alliances, not for love.” Eleanor’s posture drooped. “Uncle Garath told me if I tried to mate without his consent, I’d be exiled from the realm.”

Taran grunted quietly, his glum expression implying he’d received the same order.

My eyes narrowed on the throne where his father now sat. The more I learned about Garath, the more I reviled him. I wasn’t sold on the concept of taking a mate—even a simple marriage to Henri was keeping me awake at night—but I very much believed in love.

I had seen it countless times in my years as a healer. Desperate, gut-wrenching pleas for help when a spouse was gravely ill, and quaking sobs of relief when they recovered. Elderly couples saying their final goodbyes, their devotion steadfast over decades of ups and downs. Healthy spouses who mysteriously passed within days of their partner, their hearts unwilling to keep beating in a world where their beloved’s heart didn’t.

I knew what it looked like to watch love be cut short too early. If I could spare my new friends—*by the Flames, do I really have Descended*

friends?—from that tragedy, that was a battle worth fighting.

I shot them a defiant scowl. “You tell the family they can mate with whoever they damn well please. Garath’s order ends with me. If he doesn’t like it, he can take it up with his Queen.”

Taran studied me, his face hopeful. “You truly mean that?”

I scoffed. “You think I would let anyone dare to stand in the way of my beloved cousins and *mind-blowing* sex?”

Taran and Eleanor looked at each other and grinned.

“Sorry Ellie, she’s definitely my favorite Corbois now,” he crowed.

“Mine, too,” she laughed.

“I step away for a few minutes and the conversation has already turned to sex?”

The three of us looked up to see Luther towering over us with eyebrows raised.

“Diem is lifting Garath’s ban on royals mating without permission.” Eleanor smirked. “And all in the name of good sex.”

Taran pulled me into his side as he beamed up at his cousin. “We love a woman with her priorities in order, don’t we Lu?”

Luther’s piercing stare pinned me in place. “We do,” he said, his voice heart-stoppingly soft.

I squirmed under his rapt attention. “Tell Iléana I said ‘*you’re welcome.*’ Be sure to send me an invitation to your mating ceremony.” I tried to make my tone light, but the words came out bitter.

Taran cackled so loudly it reverberated around the royal box, and again, a sea of faces turned our direction.

Luther wedged back into the narrow space beside me, his body pressing distractingly hard against mine. He kept his posture stiff, as aware as I was of the crowd scrutinizing our interaction.

“Iléana would never be my mate,” he said tersely. “Our relationship had nothing to do with love.”

“You cared enough to stay with her for years,” I argued.

“No, she and her family *chased* me for years. She wanted to be my Queen Consort, and my father wanted an alliance with House Hanoverre. What I want...” His jaw ticked as he stopped himself short.

“What do you want, Luther?”

His eyes dragged slowly to me. He held me there like a butterfly cupped between his hands, fluttering against his touch and wondering if he

would be my doom.

Every hair on my neck stood on end as he turned his lips to my ear, his voice low and rough. “Something I cannot have.”

A quiet, breathy sound rushed out of me. The poem in Luther’s hand crinkled loudly as his fingers curled around it into a tight fist.

Behind us, Eleanor laughed loudly at something Taran said, and Garath suddenly shot up from his chair. He stormed toward us. “By the Blessed Mother, will you four keep your childish giggling down? This is a funeral, you know.” His glare sharpened on me. “Haven’t you shown enough disrespect today?”

My face went hot. I jerked away from Luther, dropping my eyes to my lap, though the guilt running through me had little to do with Garath’s scolding and more to do with the way my skin was alight with crackling fire.

“Uncle Garath,” Eleanor said from behind me, “it was my fault, not hers. I—”

“You’re wrong, Uncle,” Luther interrupted loudly. “Targeting innocent victims, as usual.”

Everyone in the gallery stilled, as if Luther had crossed some boundary I could not yet see. I glanced at Aemonn, who was glowering at him in disgust, then at Taran, who looked wide-eyed and wary.

Luther’s jaw lifted in challenge. “Descended funerals are a time for celebration. I’m certain the late King would be honored by our laughter.”

“Yes, how very close you were to my brother.” Garath sneered as he moved closer. “What *intimate* access you had when he came to such an untimely death.”

Now even I held my breath.

“How interesting that you have positioned yourself just as closely to our young new Queen,” he added. “I wonder if your ambition will cause her to meet a similar fate.”

Luther looked almost bored, seemingly unruffled by Garath’s words, but I saw through his ruse—or rather, *felt* through it. His powerful aura throbbed against my skin, the blistering fury radiating from him nearly hot enough to burn.

I opened my mouth to interrupt. Luther dropped the poem and clamped his hand high on my leg, shocking me to silence.

“You are certainly the expert on striking blows against your own family, Uncle,” he said flatly. “Though you prefer it when they’re smaller and weaker.”

“Luther,” Taran rumbled in warning. His usual grin had vanished, and for the first time, I saw a glimpse of the terrifying warrior that lay beneath his easy disposition.

Luther shot him a quick look, and Taran’s azure eyes conveyed something that looked a lot like betrayal.

Somehow I had stumbled into a dark, perilous cave of family secrets. I would have killed to see Eleanor’s reaction, but I didn’t dare move. I caught sight of Aemonn from the corner of my eye. His focus was fixed on my upper thigh, where Luther’s fingers still dug into my flesh.

Garath laughed harshly. “Why should you raise a fist, dear nephew, when you seem content to let the Challenging do the work for you? Bringing her here in a black dress, letting her laugh and smile while the realm mourns—your counsel will have her facing a line of Challengers stretching all the way to Fortos. I underestimated your ambition.”

Luther’s fingers tightened around my thigh. I had a feeling I was about to watch a very different type of challenging go down right here in the royal box.

I clawed myself together and stood, pulling out of Luther’s grasp. “The only person who dressed me and *let* me laugh and smile is me,” I said coolly. “Though I will be certain to keep your fascinating observations in mind when I select my new Wardens.”

“If that day in fact arrives,” he muttered.

“Oh, it will.” I smiled brightly and took a few steps closer, lowering my voice so only he could hear. “And when it does, you can beg for whatever scraps I give you, just like you did with Ulther.”

Garath’s answering rage could have razed a mountain. “You loud-mouthed, uppity little—”

“*Careful*, Uncle,” Luther rumbled. “She is Queen, and I am still Keeper of the Laws. Executions are my specialty.”

Garath’s fingers twitched at his sides. He kept scowling, and I kept smiling, both expressions dripping with equal hatred. His eyes narrowed, then he abruptly spun on his heel and stalked back to his chair.

I slammed back into my seat and bit down hard to hold back the deluge of words that threatened to come flooding out. No one in the gallery

spoke, everyone too spellbound by the spectacle that had just occurred.

“Sit back,” Luther said, quietly but firmly.

Against my stubborn nature, I obeyed.

“Stop glaring. Don’t let them know he got to you.”

“He didn’t,” I snapped—but again, I obeyed.

He stretched out his legs, looking utterly at ease, and propped his arm on the seat back behind me. As he did, he brushed the hair away from my shoulder and stroked a thumb along my neck, the gesture so brief it might have been accidental.

Though his stony stare remained locked dead ahead, his head inclined slightly to me. “Garath is dangerous,” he whispered. “It’s one thing for me to provoke him. He won’t strike at me without my father’s blessing. But for you...”

“I’m not afraid of Garath,” I gritted out. “He might be dangerous, but I’m gods-damned *fatal*.”

For all my boasting, I wasn’t sure even I believed those words. I balled my hands in my lap and tried to ignore the sinking feeling that I’d just made a very grave mistake.

Chapter

Eighteen

“**W**hat was *that* about?” Eleanor hissed in my ear the second Luther stepped away for yet another part of the ceremony, which I was confident was now entering its second century.

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” I said as I whipped around to face her.

She shook her head, looking amused. “I thought we were about to get two funerals in one.”

“What Luther said about Garath—what did he mean?”

Eleanor shot a nervous glance at Taran, her voice hushing. “When his sons were young, they would often show up at school with lashes or burns. *Very* often. Rumor is the King spoke with Garath and made it stop, although...” She chewed on her lip. “That was when their healing abilities began, so no one knew for sure.”

I eyed Aemonn and Taran. Both were staring anywhere but their father, looking miserable and exposed.

My heart cracked open for them. I had seen in my patients how the wounds of abuse could linger on a soul long after the violence itself had ended.

My attention drifted to their mother, Freah. When I first met her, I thought her to be Garath’s equally cold, equally cruel accomplice. Now, as she gazed blankly ahead, her face gaunt and hard as stone, she seemed more like his shadow.

“What about Freah?” I whispered to Eleanor.

“She would never say a word against Garath. She’s either completely loyal to him or completely afraid of him.”

Or both, I thought.

“Enough about Garath,” Eleanor said. “What’s going on between you and Luther?”

“Nothing,” I blurted out, my voice going shrill. “Why would you even think that?”

“*Diem.*” She nudged me with her arm. “There isn’t a man with more self-control in the nine realms, but he can’t keep his hands off you. He was about to take Garath’s head off for insulting you. And *you* were getting jealous over Iléana—”

“I was not jealous!”

“—and he keeps smiling at you. He doesn’t smile at anyone except Taran and Lily.” She shot me a mischievous look. “And those are *not* the smiles he gives Taran and Lily.”

I felt too hot and laid bare and excruciatingly confused. I’d assumed these moments he and I had been trading were nothing more than glimpses of the real Luther beneath his brusque exterior. I’d thought I was finally seeing a side of him his friends and family had already seen.

It hadn’t occurred to me it might be a side of him *no one* had seen.

“He’s just trying to flatter me to get an advisor role,” I deflected. “He realized I like nice people, so now he’s pretending to be one.”

“Uh huh.” The knowing gleam in her eyes said she wasn’t buying it.

“Besides...” I paused, yanking her closer and lowering my voice. “I’m already spoken for.”

Her brows shot skyward, a hand flying to her mouth. “What? Who?” She peered down the row. “Aemonn? Blessed Kindred, he moves fast.”

“Eleanor, I’ve been here a week. I’m not engaged to one of your cousins.”

“*Engaged?*” she squeaked. “We’re going to have a King Consort?” Her head cocked. “Wait, if it’s not someone from here, then they must be—oh... *Oh.*”

“I know it’s unusual,” I rushed out, seeing her wide-eyed look of alarm. “Please don’t say anything. I’m still figuring it all out.”

“Oh, of course. I, um, yes, that’s...” She shifted in her chair. “Well, I’m here if you want to, uh, talk it through.”

She was making every effort to be supportive, but the horror on her face said it all. Eleanor might be my only true ally outside of Mortal City, and if this was how she reacted...

Luther was right. The Descended were never going to willingly accept a mortal as King Consort.

I reminded myself that I didn't care. I would not let these people and their prejudices dictate who was worthy to stand by my side. Mortal or Descended, Queen or not, my heart was mine alone to give.

But... *but*.

"Diem, they're waiting for you."

I snapped out of my wandering thoughts. My heart skipped a beat—everyone in the royal box was watching me.

Taran gently nudged my side. "Go," he urged.

I shot him a panicked look. "Go *where*?"

"They announced that you would light the funeral pyre." His head inclined to the front of the dais, where Remis was looking at me, hand extended.

I rose unsteadily with a thick swallow. Luther hadn't mentioned this part in his preview. I searched for him, finding him standing near the podium wearing a troubled expression that did nothing to ease my nerves.

"Your Majesty?" Remis called out, stretching his hand further.

Slowly, I walked toward him and set my palm in his. My wrist throbbed at the reminder of our bonded bargain, its significance feeling far heavier after hearing the story of Ulther's mate.

"What is this?" I asked. "I thought my part was complete."

Garath stepped up to my other side. "Lighting the King's pyre is the highest honor. As Ulther's older brother, the task was mine to take, but..." He gave me a serpentine smile. "Consider it a gift, from me to my new Queen."

Alarm bells blared in my head. The task sounded easy enough, but something in the smugness of his voice sent a chill skittering down my neck.

Perhaps he only wanted to put my black dress on display again to make a spectacle of my ignorance. If that was the case, I was determined to show him that it would take a lot more than that to break my spirit.

I pulled my shoulders back and beamed at him. "How very thoughtful, *Uncle*," I crooned, taking a little too much pleasure in how his teeth clenched at the word. "I assure you, I'll find a way to repay the favor."

Remis led me down the steps to the arena floor, Garath and Luther following at our backs. We circled the pyre halfway until we were facing the royal box. I glanced around for a torch or some other bit of fire to cast

the initial flame but found nothing. I frowned at Remis. “What am I to use to light the pyre?”

“Your magic, Your Majesty.”

I stiffened. “My magic?”

“There’s dry kindling all around the pyre. A spark of light should set it alight easily enough.”

My breathing sped up. “I don’t—I mean, I... can’t I use a normal flame?” I stammered.

“My son led me to believe you have both light and shadow magic,” Remis said, frowning.

“She does,” Luther cut in. His eyes flared wide with some attempt to convey a silent message, but my mind was too panicked to decipher it.

“Yes, my nephew simply *raved* about your magnificent power,” Garath purred, delighted at my distress. “He gave us quite a detailed description, but we’re all eager to witness such an impressive display for ourselves.”

I shot Luther a look of betrayal and watched as surprise, then doubt, flickered over his face. The strength of my magic was hardly a secret—I wouldn’t have inherited the Crown without it—but that moment in the dungeon had felt like something intimate, something that belonged only to us. I hadn’t even told Teller the details.

“Perhaps this is a mistake,” Luther said slowly. “If the crowd only sees her magic used for a small gesture, they may misunderstand and believe her weak.”

Garath shrugged. “Then she’ll just have to put on a show for them, won’t she?”

Luther started to protest, and Remis cut in. “Garath has a point. A significant display of power here would go a long way in preventing a Challenge, especially after—” He grimaced at my dress. “—*this*. If we can’t convince them to trust you, we can at least make them fear you.”

His ominous words called to mind the bloody lengths he and Garath had gone to defeat their brother’s enemies and show his strength before Ulther’s Challenging. I very much doubted they would be willing to do the same for me—but I wasn’t certain, and that alone was enough to unsettle me.

“Go on, Your Majesty,” Garath drawled. “Show us what you’re capable of.”

“I’m not as well-trained as the three of you,” I argued. “What if I hurt someone?”

“The arena has a magical barrier protecting the crowd,” Remis said. He gave me a wary once-over. “Perhaps the three of us should retire behind the shield. Just in case.”

He bowed and turned to the stairs, and Garath followed him with a final poisonous smile in my direction.

Luther reached to take my hand. I retreated a step, my heart still stinging from his disclosure.

His brow furrowed. “You can do this. Just do the same thing you did in the dungeon.”

“I don’t even know how I did it then.”

“You struggled to use your magic that night because you didn’t *want* to use it. You didn’t want to accept what you are. Once you embrace it instead of fighting it, the godhood will answer your call. There won’t be a single soul in Lumnos who would dare Challenge you then.”

His eyes burned into mine with such ferocity that my breath stilled in anticipation. He cautiously stepped closer, and this time, I didn’t pull away.

“Blessed Mother Lumnos chose you for a reason. She saw who you are and what you can be. Prove to all of them what she and I already know—you are capable of this, and *so much* more.”

Though his voice was a whisper, the strength in it bonded to my bones like living armor.

“Unleash, my Queen. Show this world what it means to Challenge Diem Bellator.”

His use of my name—my *real* name—was its own kind of spark on a pyre of dry kindling. A fiery rush of emotion blazed through my body. Pride mixed with fear, hope wound with determination.

Luther’s face illuminated in a soft glow. It took me a moment to realize the effect had come from me—from my own skin, which had taken on a shimmering, pearlescent luminance. I looked down at the black fabric of my dress, realizing that it had transformed into a moving shadow of smoky black tendrils. Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

Luther thumped his fist to his chest in salute.

“*Unleash*,” he hissed.

He held my stare as he backed away, until finally he bowed low, then departed for the stairs where Remis and Garath now waited.

I swallowed and turned to face the pyre. I listened for the *voice* I had surrendered to each time my magic had exploded from within me. I couldn't hear it, but I could *feel* it, stirring low in my chest.

I extended my hands in front of me, willing the power to manifest in my palms in the same way I had seen Luther wield it. The eager, watchful eyes of the crowd hovered around me like a fog. I wasn't sure which they wanted more—a scandalous failure or a spectacular success.

A tingling sparked in the hollow of my ribcage. It swelled and spread until it filled my chest, then my stomach, then bled out into my limbs and trickled through to my hands and feet. The familiar sensation of icy heat began to grow at the heart of my palms.

Luther's words rang in my ear.

Unleash, my Queen.

My skin glowed brighter with silvery light, forming a halo along the sandy ground where I stood. That night in the dungeon, I had been so terrified to face the reality of being Descended that I hadn't let myself admit just how good it had felt to let go. How *right* it seemed that I should wield this power that was my birthright.

The shadows at my dress spilled into a living pool at my feet writhing with furious energy. The tingling was growing stronger. It pulsed over and over as the sensation in my palms intensified.

My eyes lifted to Luther. Despite our very public surroundings, he had dropped his mask, revealing that same genuine, wholly unguarded smile he had given me after I released my magic for the first time. My heart sang at its sight.

Unleash, my Queen.

Sparks swirled around my hand, my excitement rising as I dragged my gaze back toward the pyre.

I could do this. I could show them how strong I was—how dangerous I could be, if pushed. I could be the fearsome Queen that Luther saw in me.

I could deliver a blow the Descended would never forget.

Then my eyes caught on something in the crowd.

A splash of black in the highest rows, tucked behind the royal box. The mortal guests, shoved into a corner to keep them out of sight—and right in Sorae's direct line of fire, if they dared to make a scene.

My good sense warned me not to look closer. I knew I would see faces I recognized, wearing the same disgust I'd seen on Henri when he'd first

found me in the palace.

But restraint was never my strong suit.

Almost instantly, my eyes landed on Maura, seated front and center.

Of course. She was the official palace healer. She had tended to the King for months. If any mortal would be invited to his funeral, it would be her.

Her eyes bulged, her face drained of all color. Her hands wrung fretfully in her lap. She stared at me as if she didn't know me at all—as if I were some beast about to devour her whole.

My power flickered and dimmed as I grappled to maintain control. *Focus, I thought. I'll find her later and explain. I'll make her see I'm the same Diem she's always known.*

Again I tried to pull my attention away, but Maura turned, and I followed her line of sight.

Straight to the eyes of my father.

My magic vanished on the wind. My skin turned dull. My palms emptied. My dress faded to plain, unremarkable cloth.

Our last conversation played over and over in my ears.

You are not my father.

It was never more clear how true those words had been. And I'd never wanted so badly to be able to take them back.

He was crying. Even at this distance, I could see it—the bright sun glinting off the wetness on his cheeks.

It shattered me. Cracked me wide open.

I had never seen my father cry. *Never.* Not when Teller was born, not even after my mother had disappeared. He was steady, he was sure, an immovable force. For our family, he was the mighty shield no arrow could pierce.

But this had broken him.

I had broken him.

I crumpled to my knees, barely hearing the gasp that arose from the crowd. All the grief I had felt at realizing I was Descended came roaring back into me. My hands fell to my side, and a violent tremble took over my body. I felt no glimmer of my magic, no whisper of the godhood's *voice*.

Nothing but despair.

Chaos erupted. Mortals whispered and pointed, Descended shouted, royals rushed to the edge of the dais to get a better look. In the corner of my

vision, I saw Luther fighting to get to me, Remis and Garath holding him back.

I hung my head, unable to bear the sight of any of it. The world closed in around me, squeezing at my neck until I choked for breath.

A ferocious snarl brought the crowd to instant silence. I heard the flapping of wings, then felt a breeze flutter my hair, followed by a tremor that rattled the dusty arena floor, and a soft, breathy whimper.

I looked up and met Sorae's golden eyes. With a growl that could crack bones, Sorae reared back and unlocked her jaws. She whipped her head to the side, and a stream of pale blue dragonfyre shot from between her razor-sharp fangs, curling around the pyre.

Within seconds, the King's body disappeared in an inferno of glittering sapphire flames. The sweltering heat scalded my skin and dragged me unwilling into haunting memories of the armory attack.

I'd almost given in that night. I'd convinced myself my family and friends would be better off without me and the trouble I always seemed to bring, then I'd laid down beside the murdered guard and invited death to fold me into its embrace.

But the *voice* had refused to give up on me. My godhood had saved my life by forcing me back to my feet and reminding me of the strength that lived inside.

Then I remembered the end—the moment the armory began to collapse. Those last moments, where I'd looked into Luther's eyes and saw a vision of... what, exactly, I didn't know. A future that might come to pass, if I had the courage to pursue it.

A destiny.

Suddenly, a solid hand was on my back.

"You need to leave." Luther's voice was strained, edged with alarm. "Sorae will take you back to the palace. I'll follow as soon as I can."

"My father," I croaked. "He's here. He saw me."

His head snapped to the mortal section of the crowd, and his eyes narrowed. He swore softly.

"I have to see him," I whispered. "I have to explain, I..." My voice cracked.

"I'll bring him to the palace. You need to go. *Now.*"

He crouched and offered out his hand, his muscles bunching forward as if he was one second away from scooping me up in his arms and carrying

me out. For once, I gave into my weaker urges and leaned against him as we walked side by side to Sorae, needing the strength that poured through his protective aura. He kept his hands firmly locked on my waist as I mounted the gryvern. When I promised him I was secure, he moved to Sorae's face and stroked a hand down the scaly expanse of her snout.

"Take her home," he ordered. "Don't let anyone she distrusts come near her."

Sorae huffed in agreement. She didn't waste a second before launching skyward, leaving the glittering, flaming ruby of the arena in our wake.

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Chapter

Nineteen

Sorae flew back to the palace at breakneck speed. I curled into her warm fur and focused on stilling my trembling limbs and chattering teeth.

My healer's instincts wondered if calling forth so much of my power without a release had sent me into some kind of magical shock. It was a painful reminder of how much I still had to learn—about this world, this magic, and even my own body.

I tried to rest, but every time I closed my eyes, I saw my father's tear-streaked face. What would I say to him, when I finally saw him? What *could* I say?

We approached the palace, and Sorae glided seamlessly onto her perch. I nearly collapsed on wobbling knees as I dismounted, but Sorae swung her long neck under my arms to keep me upright until I made it to a couch near an archway in the parlor.

My sweet gryvern fussed over me like a mother hen. She breathed a fresh fire into the hearth and tugged a blanket over me with her toothy jaws. Only when my tremors stopped and my breathing soothed to a healthier rhythm did she finally stop pacing as if I might perish at any moment. She then took up her role as sentinel, perching stiffly near my side and glaring at the door with wings high.

"You're supposed to obey my commands, not Luther's," I said with a weak smile. "We don't like him, remember?"

She gave a series of short, angry snorts that sounded like *I'm doing my job* and *You're a terrible liar*.

I reached out and brushed my fingers along the border between her reptilian neck and her leonine body, marveling at the way the dark, iridescent scales faded into coarse fur. "Thank you for helping me. I know you don't have a choice, but... thank you anyway."

She huffed again and draped a wing over my body. Its warmth sank into my bones, and soon I was pulled into a restless slumber plagued with

dreams of fire and blue-grey eyes I couldn't escape.



I AWOKE TO A LIGHT KNOCK, then a creaking door. Apprehension shot through me, but Sorae didn't move an inch. If she wasn't attacking, that must mean...

I bolted upright, her wing tumbling off me along with my blankets. At the door, Luther stood with a man shrouded beneath a heavy brown cloak. The man tugged on the hood until it fell to his back.

"Father," I breathed.

His caramel eyes darted wildly around my face, my clothing, the room, the gryvern. He couldn't take it all in fast enough. Finally, they settled on the space above my head.

"It's true," he whispered. "You really are the new Queen."

Luther, who was once again looking every inch the emotionless Prince, gave me a long stare. "I expect you'd like to speak in private."

"We would," my father answered on my behalf.

Luther held still, awaiting my confirmation. His iron facade cracked the tiniest bit, a hint of concern leaking through.

I managed a faint smile. "Yes. Thank you, Luther."

His throat worked, hinting at words unsaid, before he gave a shallow bow and excused himself.

I stared at my father as I struggled to bottle my sea of thoughts into words and sentences.

"Did you know?" I asked. "Did you know I was a..." I hesitated, still struggling to admit this new reality out loud.

"I had suspicions," he admitted. "When your eyes changed."

"Did you ever ask Mother?"

Guilt worked its way into the creases of his weathered face. "No, I didn't."

"You suspected all these years, and you never said a thing? You just let her drug me with the flameroot to keep me hidden?"

"It was her choice to make."

"You're my father, you're supposed to *protect* me," I snapped, my voice rising. "Even from my own mother, if you have to."

“You still consider me your father, then?”

My temper broke, and my eyes dropped guiltily to the floor. “Of course I do. What I said that night—I didn’t mean...”

He walked over and grabbed my arms, pulling me in for a fierce hug. His voice turned rough. “I said things I regret, too. I lost my temper. I was so scared there would be no one left to protect you and Teller when I left for the war.”

“I know,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry, Father.”

He clutched me tighter. “I’m sorry, too. My sweet Diem, I love you so much.”

My heart consumed my entire chest, burning through the anger and shame I had been holding in since that night.

He pulled back to look at me. “Teller knows, doesn’t he?” I nodded, and he huffed a laugh. “I knew that boy was acting funny. He kept making excuses to spend time with me at home. He hasn’t done that since he discovered girls.” He angled his head. “And Henri?”

I flinched and nodded again.

He squeezed my shoulder. “He’ll understand. If he truly loves you, it won’t change how he feels.”

I didn’t know how to tell him that those words didn’t make me feel any better.

“Father, tell me the truth. Do you know who sired me?”

“No. I never lied to you about that.”

“Do you have any idea who it could be? Did Mother work with any Lumnos Descended in the army?”

“None that I know of. She had you while she was away on her final mission. I assumed it was someone she met during that time.”

“Where was it? Who went with her? Did she—”

“I don’t know any details. It was highly confidential. She wasn’t even supposed to confirm a mission happened at all. Only the King of Fortos would have the authority to tell you.”

I sank back down onto the couch, rubbing at my face. “I have too many questions, and no one can give me answers.”

My father joined me, and silence passed as we both steeped in the boil of this mystery that had consumed both of our lives. His hand swept across my shoulders and tugged me close. I looked up, and my heart squeezed at the gentle understanding I saw on his face.

“You know none of this changes how I feel about you, right?” he asked. “You’re my little girl. You always will be, whether you’re Descended or mortal or anything else.”

Burning filled my eyes. I nodded and blinked furiously to push the emotion away. “Have you heard about the Challenging?”

“Yes. Others were discussing it at the funeral.” From his bitter tone, whatever he’d heard didn’t bode well for me.

“You’ll survive it,” he growled. “It’s just another battle. I’ve taught you everything you need to know.”

“It’s a battle of magic, not weapons or fists,” I said hoarsely. “They’ve been training for years. *Centuries*.”

“A battle is a battle.” He tapped a finger on my temple. “The weapon in your head is more important than the weapon in your hands. You’ve always been my bravest soldier. As long as you keep fighting, I know you can win.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “With any luck, I won’t have to. I made a bargain with Remis Corbois to claim his House in exchange for their help.”

The Commander side of him took control again as he gazed into the distance with a glassy stare, no doubt engrossed in strategy and warfare. He gave a curt nod. “Good,” he said finally. “I don’t trust him, but I would rather he be your ally than your enemy. You’ll need advisors, and he is a powerful one.”

“I do need advisors,” I agreed. “And I want you to be one of them. I have meetings soon with the Twenty Houses. I’d like you to attend as the military advisor on my Crown Council.”

He held up a palm. “Diem, I’m not sure that’s wise.”

“You advised King Ulther.”

“In private, not on his Council. And certainly not in meetings with other Descended.” He gave me a hard look of warning. “I know how these people operate. They won’t like my being there.”

“I can’t trust anyone here,” I pushed. “I need one person in the room, just *one person*, who isn’t going to stab me the moment I turn my back.”

I sensed his turmoil as he frowned and weighed the bigger threat: abandoning me to the wolves or making himself the juicy bait that sent their mouths frothing.

“Please,” I begged. “I can’t do this alone.”

He scratched at his chin. "I suppose if I'm advising a Crown, the army might rescind my orders to deploy for the war. I could stay with Teller until he finishes school."

I beamed. "It's settled. You're my newest advisor."

He grunted a reluctant agreement. His eyes wandered over my shoulder, and I glanced back to see Sorae watching him with curiosity.

My smile spread at the wonder illuminating my father's eyes. "Do you want to meet her?"

Sorae puffed her wings in a show of welcome, though my father paled, taking it as a warning.

He hesitated. "I saw the Ignios gryvern a few times while in the army. He's a mean, nasty brute."

Sorae let out the faintest whine, and an odd pulse of emotion I didn't understand came across the bond she and I shared. I walked over and itched the underside of her chin. "Sorae's only mean and nasty to the people who deserve it."

She huffed in agreement.

My father edged forward in slow, tentative steps. His hand hovered close to her and froze. I pursed my lips to contain my smile and sent a silent push of encouragement down the bond.

She arched her neck and abruptly shoved her snout into his palm, rubbing it along the soft spots where she loved to be scratched.

A surprised laugh erupted from my father's chest. He brought his other hand up to her head, making gentle motions along the scales and spikes that lined her upper body. Sorae's eyes squeezed shut as a loud purr rumbled out of her.

I grinned. "She likes you."

He eyed the sharp fangs poking out from the edge of her mouth. "Thank the gods for that. Can you really talk to her?"

"In a way. We can sense each other's emotions, but sometimes I swear she knows exactly what I'm saying. She gives me a surprising amount of shit for a beast that can't talk."

Sorae snorted and whacked me across the back of my thighs with her tail, earning another bout of raucous laughter from my father.

The sound of my father's happiness ignited my own, and for a few blissful moments, all my problems fell away. I watched in delight as he spoiled her with a series of aggressive belly rubs and loud, affectionate

smacks to her haunches. Sorae reveled in the attention, her contentment coating our bond like the sweetest honey.

As much as I hated to do anything to stain this cherished pocket of joy we'd managed to find, there was one more topic lingering between us I couldn't put off any longer.

"Father," I started. "I need to know the truth. No more secrets. What do you really know about Mother's disappearance?"

He stilled, then sighed and slowly stepped away from Sorae. He scrubbed a hand across his face, looking suddenly weary. "She was planning a trip. She wouldn't say where or why, only that she could be gone for a long time and she wouldn't be able to contact me while she was away. But she swore she would warn me before she left. When she vanished without a word, I wasn't sure whether..." He stopped, and the darkness of grief began to creep back into his features.

"Luther knows where she is," I blurted out. His eyes grew wide. "But she made him promise not to tell me, and he's determined to keep his word."

His attention sharpened on the door, his body tensing, as if he might launch himself through it to go demand answers himself.

I stepped in front of him and gripped his hands. "He thinks she's alive. He promised that if she hasn't returned by the end of the year, he'll get her and bring her back."

"And you trust him?"

It was a question I had been asking myself over and over, reaching a different answer every time.

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I think maybe I do."

His eyes narrowed as he searched my face. I squirmed, knowing there was little that escaped my father once he fixed himself on a mission. I wasn't even sure what I wanted him to see—or *not* see.

"I watched him down there with you today. I saw how he ran to your side when things went badly." He cocked his head and gave me a pointed look. "When he came to fetch me... I've rarely seen a man look so desperate."

I looked down and shrugged. "He's helping me. As an advisor."

Not entirely a lie. Not entirely the truth, either.

He waited for more, and when it became clear that I would neither explain nor meet his gaze, he turned his attention back to the chamber door

with a thoughtful hum. “It all makes sense now. That letter. Him keeping you here after the fire.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

A loud knock rang out before he could respond. “Come in,” I called out, and the door swung open. Luther and Alixe strolled inside and bowed low in greeting.

“Alixé,” I said, “this is my father, Andrei Bellator. Father, this is Alixe Corbois.”

“Commander Bellator.” Alixe snapped to attention and crossed her forearms into a low X, the formal salute of the Emarion Army. “It’s an honor. I’m quite familiar with your impressive reputation.”

My father returned the salute with a respectful nod, looking surprised at her words.

“Alixé will take your father home when he’s ready,” Luther said.

“Or you could stay,” I said hopefully to my father, ignoring the way Luther and Alixe stiffened. “You and Teller could move in with me here at the palace.”

“No, sweetheart,” he answered with a slow shake of his head. “I’ll come as often as you need me, but my place is at home.” I started to protest, and he cut me off with a stern look. “If your mother returns, I want to be there.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I wanted the very same thing, and I couldn’t deny him that chance just because I was stuck in this cursed palace.

He dropped a kiss on my forehead and pulled me in for a crushing hug, then gave Sorae a swat to her rump, earning a satisfied rumble and a nudge of her nose against his chest.

Alixé raised her palms to my father, a soft glow forming at her hands. “You may feel a slight tingling,” she warned.

I watched in disbelief as his image wavered, then the spot he was standing in went suddenly vacant. “Where did he go?”

“I’m right here,” my father’s voice boomed.

“He’s—you’re—*invisible*?”

“I am?”

I ran toward his voice and reached into what looked like open air, my hands colliding with a solid form. I could touch him, even feel the heat he gave off, but to my eyes, there was nothing there.

“Holy shit!” I cried, my jaw hanging open.

“*Language*, Diem,” the bodyless voice scolded.

Alixé laughed, and Luther pressed his lips to fight back a smile. “Alixé can manipulate light magic to create visual illusions,” he explained.

I gaped at the space where my father stood. “That is the most impressive thing I’ve ever seen.”

Sorae clawed at the floor with a jealous snort.

“The *second* most impressive thing I’ve ever seen,” I amended.

Alixé gestured for my father to join her. Two invisible hands startled me as they cupped my face, my father’s voice whispering so only I could hear. “Be strong, soldier. Don’t let these Corbois make you forget that you’re a Bellator, understood?”

I forced my shoulders up and my back straight, then winked. “Aye, Commander.”

His laughter echoed, then the feeling of his rough touch fell away, leaving my chest feeling as empty as the space he stood in. His voice struck up a murmured conversation with Alixé about their old army days. As their footsteps faded into the corridor, a tiny fragment of my heart left with him.

Chapter Twenty

“You were right,” I admitted as the door closed. “I do like Alixe.”

“Because she has impressive magic?” Luther teased.

“Because she was kind to the most important man in my life, and I think it had nothing to do with me being the Queen.” I grinned. “*And* because she has impressive magic.”

He huffed a laugh and strode toward me, his demeanor changing entirely. Like the flip of a switch, the hard resolve of the Prince melted from his expression and his taut muscles soothed into a relaxed stance. He leaned against the wall beside me with a single shoulder, arms crossed lightly over his chest.

The mask was off. Even the air around us felt different. Something about it crackled in my blood, quickening my heart.

“You could probably do that, too, you know.”

“Huh?” I mumbled, distracted by the amusement tugging on his lips.

“Create illusions with your magic. With some training, you could do it yourself. Perhaps we both should learn.”

“You can’t do it?”

“Not nearly as well as Alixe. My father demanded my training focus on using magic as a weapon.”

My brows dipped, noting how his expression darkened at that admission.

“That’s a shame. A power like that could come in handy.” A scheming smile crept onto my lips. “I could absolutely terrorize my brother. And Taran.”

His eyes crinkled as he shook his head, trying and failing to look exasperated. “You two got along well today.”

“I like Taran. He seems to be the only Descended in Lumnos who doesn’t care about the Crown.” I gave him a thoughtful look. “I imagine that has something to do with why you two are so close.”

“It does. We both had childhoods that were not particularly pleasant. We swore our loyalty to each other when we were boys, and we’ve never looked back. There’s very little about me he doesn’t know.”

I thought of the journal full of half-mortal children and raised a brow. “Even...?”

Luther nodded, sensing my meaning. “Taran helps get them out, if needed. Alixe, too. Along with your mother, they’re the only ones on the Lumnos side who know.”

“Not even Lily?”

“*Especially* not Lily.” A hint of his lethal coldness slipped back into place. “If I get caught, she—”

“You won’t,” I said firmly. “Even if you do, I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

His gaze pierced through me, and my chest tightened. Had I really just promised safety to the very man I’d sworn to destroy?

“Or Lily,” I added quickly. “Or Taran and Alixe. As long as I’m Queen, you’re all safe with me.”

The thick presence of his aura seemed to curl around me, brushing my skin. “You’re safe with me, too.”

Though I—shockingly, inexplicably—believed his words were sincere, it felt more like a lie than anything he’d ever said. There was nothing safe about... *this*.

The silence hung heavy between us, growing louder by the second.

I looked down and busied my hands with my hair, anxiously twisting the white strands around my finger. I knew he wasn’t going to like what came next. “I asked my father to come to the House Receptions as my advisor.”

Right on cue, his posture went rigid. He pulled away from the wall and uncrossed his arms.

“He advised Ulther on the mortals,” I hurried out. “I can say he’s here to do the same for me. To keep continuity with the late King’s advisors, like you said.”

I tensed as I braced for his criticism, the quiet stretching on unbearably long.

“If that’s what you want, I’ll make the arrangements.”

I looked up in surprise. “You don’t think it’s a bad idea?”

He hesitated, seeming to weigh his words. “Brutal honesty?”

“Always.”

“It’s not a bad idea, but it is a dangerous one. After today, any connection with the mortals is a risk.”

Doubt coiled in my belly. Pushing family away or keeping them close—it was a swinging pendulum I could never time just right. I was dancing on a never-ending tightrope, forever at risk of leaning too far in one direction.

He took a step closer. “You worried me today, at the funeral.” His voice was soft, almost tender, as he lowered his chin. “Are you alright?”

I tried to find some snappy comeback to tease him or make him laugh, anything to avoid him looking too closely at the weakness I always fought so hard to conceal.

But I couldn’t do it. Whatever his reasons, Luther had begun to let me see him—the *real* him. And not just his smiles and his laughter, but his fears and his rage and his regrets. The least I could do was offer him the same in return.

I shook my head. “How bad is it?” I whispered.

He shifted forward, then paused, his muscles twitching as he held himself back. “We can fix it. We’ll come up with an explanation. We can arrange another display of your power when you’re ready, or we can—”

“*Luther*. Brutal honesty, remember?”

He let out a sharp exhale.

“How bad?” I pushed.

“Bad enough.”

I dropped my face into my hands with a muffled groan. “How did I mess this up so quickly? One appearance, and I’ve already signed my death warrant. That has to be some kind of record.”

“Look at me.” His hands wrapped around my wrists and gently pried them from my face as he tugged me closer. “You’re not going to die. I promised you, didn’t I?”

“You did,” I muttered.

“And I told you I always keep my promises.”

“You did.”

He tilted his chin down and gave me a stern look. “Do you trust me?”

For once, I didn’t let myself overthink it.

“I do.” I sighed dramatically. “Against all the odds, despite all my better judgment, *somehow*... I do.”

He smiled—a true smile, broad and exquisite, his face radiating such matchless brilliance that I pitied the sun.

He keeps smiling at you, Eleanor had said. And those are not the smiles he gives Taran and Lily.

My throat felt thick, the air too heavy. I hadn't realized how near our bodies had become. So close. Too close. Not close enough.

He can't keep his hands off you, she'd said.

My senses zeroed in on the way he held my wrists to his chest with such tenderness, so unlike his kiss—that *fucking kiss*. If I thought on it long enough—which I never allowed myself to do—I could still feel the gritty stone against my back as his body crushed me to the palace wall, the knead of his fingers into my flushed skin, the way his tongue claimed me, branded me, as if it might leave his name on my lips forever.

I felt as trapped now as I had then, frozen in these ice-blue irises that followed me into my most shameful thoughts and dreams. I felt equally as conflicted, too—too scared to confront the emotions that waited within, too weak to turn away from them for good.

His hands tightened around my wrists, just for a moment, just long enough to flood my mind with disgraceful thoughts of that dominant grip on *other* parts of my body. A gasp escaped with a soft, desperate sound, and his pupils blew wide.

I thought I'd finally found my reprieve when his hold loosened, but Luther had no intention of letting me go. His palms skated up my forearms, then to my elbows, and then the curve of my waist—slowly, torturously slowly, never losing their connection with my body—until he was holding my hips and pulling me, ever so slightly, against him.

Every blink was a battle, every breath a war.

Need burned hot in his gaze, its fire consuming all the air from the room. My mouth felt painfully dry, and when I wet my lips, his eyes snapped to the movement, looking like a wild fox caught in a hunter's snare.

He moved more hungrily now, emboldened by my body's treacherous reaction. His broad hands curved around my sides and traced the edge of my gown's open back, following its hem until his hands rested perilously, scandalously low. His fingers hooked on the fabric's edge, curving beneath it, knuckles grazing smoothly over my skin.

It was such a simple act, not much different than the way his hand always found its way to my back, its warm presence becoming a crutch for my wobbling confidence.

But this was no reassuring caress. This was Luther laying his claim on what I hadn't dared to reveal. Asking for what I hadn't yet offered.

What do you want, Luther?

Something I cannot have.

Warmth exploded through me. A sinful heat pooled at my core and set every nerve ending sparking with simmering energy. My hands curled against his chest, clutching at the dark crimson fabric of his lapels.

I tried, desperately, to remind myself I was a betrothed woman. A betrothal I was becoming less sure of with every day, but *betrothed* nonetheless.

"Luther," I whispered.

"My Queen," he breathed.

Our faces drew close, and I honestly didn't know which of us had done it. My nose brushed his, our mouths so near that his breath warmed my lips.

I needed to pull away, put distance and cold, empty air between our bodies. I needed to remind him, and myself, that we were allies, reluctant friends *at best*, but nothing more. Never anything more.

And I tried to do that. I really, truly did.

But my body wouldn't obey.

My heart wouldn't, either.

I used the last shred of self-preservation I had left. I slipped my arms around his waist, laid my cheek over his heart, and pulled him against me in a hug that was eager for all the wrong reasons.

He didn't move. I could sense his confusion, and I understood it. I was a coward, hiding from his desire in his very own arms. But within seconds, he embraced me like it was the most normal thing in the world, one arm roped low on my waist, the other stroking my hair and pressing me to his chest.

His chin settled on top of my head, and we burned together for a tiny eternity, saying nothing and too much all at once.

It felt so natural to be held by him like this. So *right* in a way that didn't make sense.

"Why are you helping me?" I asked, my voice barely there.

I felt his muscles strain as he swallowed. "I have many reasons."

“Give me one. The truest one. And don’t tell me it’s because of your family or my mother or the Crown, because I won’t believe you.”

“It’s not.”

His heartbeat thundered against my cheek, and I held my breath. I wanted badly to pull back and see his face, but I was too terrified of what I might see, and what I might do next.

“The truest reason,” he repeated with a sigh. “I wish...” His arms tightened around me. “I... I can’t—”

A loud knock thumped on the door.

We both froze in place, though neither of us pulled away.

Another knock rang out, followed by two muffled voices from the other side.

“Diem? It’s Eleanor—”

“And Taran.”

“—are you alright in there? Do you need anything? Maybe some food, or chocolate, or—”

“Or whiskey?”

“Remind me again why I brought you.”

“Because I’m fun. Hey Diem, is Luther in there? Are you two doing something naughty?”

“Blessed Kindred, Taran, *stop!*”

Suddenly, it was far easier to yank myself out of Luther’s grasp and force some space between us. I avoided his eyes—and the longing I felt at the loss of his touch—as I moved to the door and pulled it open. “Food, no. Chocolate, yes. Whiskey... maybe.”

Taran flashed me a grin that only grew wider as his eyes jumped between me and whatever Luther looked like as he joined me at the door.

“Are we interrupting something?” he asked, wiggling his brows.

“Ignore him,” Eleanor said with an exaggerated eyeroll. “Are you alright? What happened?”

“I’m fine.” I forced a smile and a nonchalant shrug. “The funeral was getting dull, so I decided to liven things up a bit.”

Taran snorted. I winced in anticipation of his ribbing, banter that I would normally welcome if I wasn’t feeling quite so raw, but he didn’t offer up any jokes. Instead, he lumbered forward and wrapped me up in a swinging bear-hug that hauled me all the way off my feet as he squeezed the air from my lungs.

“Don’t worry about it, Queenie. We’ve got your back.”

I went limp, half from shock and half from mild asphyxiation. “Thank you,” I wheezed.

“Taran, please don’t snap Her Majesty’s ribs,” Luther said calmly.

“Come on, look at her, she likes it!”

“Her gryvern doesn’t.”

“Wrong, cousin. Sorae *loves* my hugs.”

Sorae snapped her jaws, and whether it was a threat or an agreement was anyone’s guess. Taran set me back down, only for me to be yanked into Eleanor’s embrace.

“I refuse to say these two words ever again, but Taran’s right.” She pulled back and placed a palm to my cheek. “You’re one of us now, and you have our full support.”

I looked from Eleanor to Taran and finally to Luther, three sets of blue eyes shining with genuine affection. I had arrived here with a plan to *destroy*, expecting to find a world full of Remises and Garaths and even Aemonns.

I hadn’t expected to find friends.

My plan might need a bit of revising.

“Thank you.” I gave them a wobbly smile. “That means a great deal to me.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Eleanor asked.

A crease cut between my brows as I stared down at my upturned palms. “That was the first time I’ve ever tried to use my magic on purpose. I thought I had it, but then...”

“You need to start training,” Luther said sternly. “We can set aside some time each day—Alixé and I can help you.”

“And me,” Taran huffed.

I frowned. “This means you think I’m definitely going to be Challenged.”

“This isn’t about the Challenging,” Luther said.

I shot him a look, and he sighed.

“It’s not *only* about the Challenging. You’re the most powerful Descended in the realm. Magic like that can be dangerous if it’s not controlled.”

“Come on, Queenie,” Taran said with a sly grin. “Don’t you want to get all hot and sweaty training with me and Lu?”

I raised my brows at Eleanor and Luther. "Is he always like this?"

"Yes," they groaned in unison.

"Fine," I said, laughing. "I'll train with Luther and Alixe. And Taran, if I must."

I turned to Luther, looking at him closely for the first time since our intimate moment. That striking, unguarded smile of his was peeking through. A glint in his eyes hinted at a secret only we shared, putting my heart right back into a gallop.

For a beat that stretched on far too long, I couldn't tear my gaze from him, nor he from mine, and the silence turned awkward. I looked at Eleanor to find her glancing between us with a knowing, *I-told-you-so* smirk.

Taran, for possibly the first time in his near-immortal life, didn't take the bait. Instead, he clapped a hand on my back. "Some of the younger cousins are hosting a dinner tonight. You should join us."

Eleanor nodded eagerly. "Yes, you must come."

I cringed. "I don't know, I might have had enough public humiliation for one day."

"This is family," Taran said. "We may want to kill each other sometimes—"

"Frequently," Luther mumbled.

"—but we're still family. We take care of each other."

"But I'm not family. Not really."

"All the more reason you should come," Eleanor said. "The sooner everyone starts seeing you as a Corbois, the better."

I looked back to Luther. "What do you think?"

"Are you asking me to *advise* you?" he asked, mischief in his tone.

I swatted at him. "Forget I asked."

He caught my hand and held onto it, tucking it into his. "Come to the dinner. I can't promise it will be pleasant, but it would be good for them to get to know you. This group is young and social. They could be some of your best ambassadors to the other Houses."

I had a hard time focusing past the feeling of his fingers wrapped around mine. "I, um... I'll think about it."

Taran and Eleanor headed back for the door, arguing about some bet they couldn't agree who had won, while Luther lingered at my side.

"I'm sorry about today. I should have made sure your father wasn't there."

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“It’s my duty to protect you from these things.”

“Is it?” I asked softly, tilting my head.

A shadow flashed across his face, but it vanished in an instant, his lips curving up as he fought a losing battle with a smile. “You said I have yet to earn your favor. I’m giving it my best shot.”

I tried to fake a scowl but the amusement on his face was too infectious, too refreshingly *real*.

Whispering caught my attention. Near the door, Eleanor and Taran watched us with pursed lips and raised brows.

I retreated quickly, then clasped my hands behind my back and cleared my throat. “In that case, I think you owe Eleanor an apology.”

“I do?” he asked.

“He does?” she repeated.

I nodded. “I recall you being quite rude to her earlier about a certain choice of dress color, and yet here you are begging my forgiveness.”

Luther’s eyes narrowed menacingly.

“Go on then.” I jerked my head toward Eleanor and flashed him a wicked grin. “Earn my favor, Prince.”

A grumble rolled around in his throat, his smile flattening to a thin line. With a deep breath and a brief lift of his eyes to the ceiling, he crossed the room to his cousin.

“Eleanor, please accept my—”

I scoffed. “Oh no, that won’t do at all. You nearly made my dear friend cry. That calls for some serious groveling.” I dipped my head. “Down there. On your knees.”

He shot me a dark look. “With all due respect to my lovely cousin, the only person I’m getting down on my knees for is *you*, my Queen.”

Taran cackled loudly. “Queenie, you hear that? Lu wants to get on his kn—”

Luther flicked his wrist, and a burst of shadow flew from his palm and smacked against Taran’s face, sealing like a gag across his mouth. Taran yelped and tugged at the dark patch as he let loose a string of muffled curses.

I crossed my arms, tapping one foot. “Eleanor and I are waiting, Prince.”

Luther growled and sank to one knee. He cut me a sharp look before reaching up and taking Eleanor's hand. "Eleanor, cousin, I—"

"Use my title, please," she corrected haughtily. "Advisor to the Crown."

Giddiness exploded across my face. I flashed Eleanor a thumb's up.

Taran finally ripped the shadow away from his mouth and grinned. "I never, ever want to forget this moment."

"You three are enjoying this far too much," Luther muttered.

"Keep going," I prodded.

"Eleanor, cousin, *Advisor to the Crown*, I'm very sorry for my earlier rudeness. I have learned my lesson, and I am quite humbled. Forgive me?"

Eleanor tapped a finger against her chin and frowned. "Hmm. Diem, what do you think? Should I forgive him?"

I shrugged. "You could make him beg a little."

"This is the greatest day of my life," Taran breathed.

"You have five seconds before I walk out of this room," Luther warned.

"Alright, alright," I laughed. "Forgive him!"

Eleanor clasped her other hand over Luther's. "Fine then. Diem says—oh, sorry, Taran and I know her as Diem, I think *you* only know her as Her Majesty—"

"Two seconds."

"Diem says I should forgive you, and I cannot deny my Queen." She leaned down and planted a kiss on his forehead. "All is forgiven, cousin."

Luther rose to his feet. "I've changed my mind. Don't come to the dinner. You getting to know any more cousins is not going to end well for me."

"You're only convincing her more," Eleanor crooned, and my grin confirmed it.

Taran looped his arm through Eleanor's, and they turned to leave. Luther shot me a brief, loaded smile before moving to join them.

"Wait—" I rushed over and grabbed his arm to pull him back. His cousins disappeared into the hallway, leaving us alone once more.

I threw caution to the wind and leaned up on my toes to press a kiss to his cheek, just above his jawline, letting my lips linger on the rough skin of his scar for longer than I should have. I heard his sharp breath in my ear and felt his hand press again to the bare skin low on my back.

I pulled back slightly and offered him a glimpse of my happiness, free of all guile, just as he had done for me. “Thank you for bringing my father. And for being a good sport. My favor is well on its way to being earned.” I dragged my teeth over my bottom lip. “And now when you claim *I* kissed *you*, you’ll finally be telling the truth.”

He shook his head, eyes glittering, the words in them clear—*I was always telling the truth, and you know it.*

For once, he didn’t call me on my bullshit. Instead, he dragged the hand on my back slowly up my spine and curved high on my nape. His fingers twined in my hair as his mouth slid into a half smile, his face so ruggedly handsome I could barely breathe.

His hand curled into a fist, tugging at my hair—gently, but enough to pull a gasp from my lips and an arch from my back. He leaned into my ear. “If a kiss is the reward, my Queen, I’ll get on my knees for you whenever you want.”

He released me and gave me a wink before slipping into the hallway and closing the door behind him.

I waited until I heard his footsteps fade away, then turned my back to the door and slumped to the ground, a warm pulse between my legs and a single thought dominating my mind.

I’m in very big trouble.

Chapter

Twenty-One

For the next several hours, I convinced myself of all the reasons I shouldn't attend the dinner.

I would be intruding on a private family event. I would surely become the focus of the dinner, and I'd had enough of being in the spotlight today. I would almost certainly say or do something that would get me in trouble. *Again.*

And Luther would be there. I hadn't decided whether that was a mark in favor or against.

I had done such an effective job that by the time the hour struck to depart, I was curled up in my bed, three fingers of whiskey deep and surrounded by silver platters of half-eaten chocolates.

I heard the clock chime and glanced at Sorae, who was laying outside on her perch, head raised skyward with eyes closed as she relished the evening breeze along her feathers.

"Do you think I'm a fool for not going?" I called out to her.

She gave no sign that she'd heard me beyond a lazy swish of her tail.

"You do. You think I'm a coward."

More silence. More half-hearted tail flips.

"You think I should go."

She cracked one golden yellow eye and turned it my direction.

"Sorae, you know I'll find some way to embarrass myself, and then I'll come back up here and wallow in self-pity all night."

Her gaze shifted to the crystal decanter hanging from my chocolate-splotched hand.

I frowned. "Fine, maybe I'm already wallowing."

I slipped out of bed and cleaned myself off, then opened my wardrobe, eying the medley of ethereal fabrics. "Even if I did go, what would I wear? After this morning, it would have to be *perfect*."

I pulled three long dresses from the wardrobe, all in muted colors of dark grey and navy. “What about these?”

Sorae looked at the dresses, then at me, then turned her head back to the evening sky, her eyes snapping shut.

I groaned and tossed them aside. Two more caught my eye, both in brighter colors but modest silhouettes. “Better?”

She huffed disapprovingly without even bothering to look.

“Let me guess, you want me to pick something like this?” I reached for the most inappropriate item I could find, an emerald satin *thing* that was little more than a scrap of fabric held together by golden chains.

Sorae’s head swung all the way around. A flicker of pale blue flames danced out from between rows of dagger-sharp teeth.

“*This?* Really? For a family dinner?”

She blinked slowly.

I changed into the dress, blushing even in my solitude at how it put practically every inch of me on exhibition. The draped neckline barely covered my breasts, and ruching at the waist pulled one side of the short hem all the way to my hip. Even the covered parts of me felt exposed under the cling of the silken fabric. The gilded chains that secured it to my body were frighteningly delicate, looking ready to snap at the slightest tug—and if they did, the entire dress might go down with it.

“You’re certain this is wise? I might as well be naked.”

Sorae cocked her head, as if to say *That wouldn’t be a bad choice, either.*

I gulped and slipped on a pair of heeled sandals with straps that wound up my calves and over my knee. I strapped a dagger to my thigh, its sharp point peeking from beneath the hem—just enough to remind anyone who dared to look too closely that I was a threat, and I could defend myself if I had to.

I studied myself in the mirror. The fearsome woman who stared back felt like a stranger. She was sexy, she was confident in her own skin. She cared nothing of the judgments of others, and she wore the Crown as if it had always been hers to wield.

Maybe I wasn’t her, not yet—but I was good at pretending. A little too good, sometimes. I could play her for one night.

I pulled the side of my hair up with a glittering diamond clip and glanced over my shoulder for a last once-over. A swath of emerald fabric

barely covered the curve of my ass, and over my back, a web of glimmering golden chains crisscrossed my tawny skin.

My eyes lingered on my lower back where Luther's hand had caressed me. Goosebumps prickled my skin at the memory.

I painted my lips with a balm the color of dark wine, then gave Sorae a glance. "Should I bring a shawl, just in case, or an overcoat, or maybe a quilt and a heavy cloak—"

She let loose a low snarl.

"*Fine.*" I took a steadying breath. "Just this. Just... me."



CLIMBING into a pit of starving gryverns would have been less intimidating than walking into a dining room of young, beautiful Corbois cousins.

Sorae's choice for my attire had been unsurprisingly perfect. Most of the women, and a few of the men, were clad in outrageously sexy dresses that left little to the imagination. Many were studded with gemstones worth a small fortune or enhanced with magical flares of light or shadow. Several men were shirtless, their upper halves ornamented with chains, leather straps, or armored plates. One person wasn't wearing clothes at all, their naked body covered in swirls of shadow magic strategically placed over their intimate areas. I should have known House Corbois would see family gatherings primarily as a chance to compete for the spotlight.

For a moment, I worried I might not have gone far enough. In this room, my dress seemed almost *plain*. But instead of letting it feed my insecurity, I made it into my own quiet strength.

I didn't need baubles or tricks to steal attention. I was the Queen, and I wore the Crown of Lumnos on my head. There was no spotlight I couldn't steal, no room in the realm I didn't command.

The hall was loud with conversation when I entered. All the cousins looked near to me in age, though looks were misleading—Descended could appear to be in their youth for decades, even centuries. There were around fifty present in total, all seated at a long, narrow dining table, with a few laughing boisterously near a well-stocked bar. Servants scurried around with plates and drinks, and music flowed from a quartet in a far corner.

My lungs seized up. As I strongly debated sprinting back to my chambers, a few eyes turned to me and went wide, and I was stuck. I had already fled one event today. I needed to change perceptions, not confirm them.

Luther saw me and shot to his feet. He was dressed in his usual attire, finely made but understated. Like me, he never had to *try* to command attention. He simply did.

His lips parted as he looked me over. Even from across the room, the heat of him pressed against me, drawing sweat to the back of my neck. His gaze traveled the expanse of my body, nostrils flaring as it caught on my bare thigh. When his eyes cut back to mine, the hunger raging behind them had my blood humming.

The conversation fell to a hush as the room took notice of my presence.

“Diem,” a voice called out, smooth as cream.

Aemonn strutted toward me with a glass of sparkling wine in hand. The tailored jacket of his slim-fitting white suit hung open over his bare chest, which was painted with gold whorls that swirled up his throat to his sky-high cheekbones.

“You look *ravishing*.”

I gave him a restrained smile. “I hope I’m not intruding.”

“Of course not. It’s hardly a family affair without our most important member.” Aemonn turned to the room and cleared his throat. “Cousins, may I present Her Majesty, Queen Diem Corbois.”

A number of heads—though decidedly not all—dipped in response.

“Thank you for having me,” I said. “And please, call me Diem—unless you’ve been instructed otherwise.” I glanced at Luther, and we shared the hint of a smile.

Aemonn offered his hand and led me to the table. “Ellie told me she invited you. I held a seat open in the hopes you’d join us.”

I stiffened. The chair beside Aemonn’s was surrounded by unfamiliar faces. I would have no allies to save me if the conversation took a turn for the worse. Only Eleanor was close enough to speak with, though not with any level of secrecy. Taran and Alixe were further down, just in earshot but too far to comfortably converse, and further still sat Luther.

My gaze met his again. His eyes had lost none of their passion, but his features were now sharp, his expression guarded. His jaw muscles feathered

as he watched Aemonn lean into my ear.

“I’m afraid your chaperone chose other company tonight,” Aemonn murmured.

Sure enough, Iléana sat at Luther’s side. She looked predictably stunning, her golden waves swept into a graceful updo, her ample cleavage bursting from a saffron-colored corset streaked with twisting black vines. She glanced up from her conversation with Alixe to see me watching her. Her lips, full and stained blood red, curved into a satisfied smile as she took Luther’s hand and wove her fingers with his.

My gut felt as if I had been stabbed clean through. I reminded myself again and again that I was a betrothed woman with no right to care, but hard as I tried, I couldn’t stop the hurt that constricted my throat.

I gave Aemonn a blasé shrug. It was no struggle to make my tone go cold. “I thought Iléana wasn’t a Corbois.”

“She isn’t. Luther must have invited her.”

The knife gouged a little deeper.

Aemonn huffed a sigh. “Quite rude to bring an outsider to a family dinner, if you ask me, but Luther has always thought the rules don’t apply to him.”

He gestured to a servant, and a coupe of bubbly liquid was placed in my hand. The last time I indulged on Descended wine, I’d spilled my most dangerous secret, but I was jealous and annoyed and still buzzed from the whiskey, so good decision making was officially off the table. I downed it in a single gulp.

“Diem,” Eleanor called out cheerfully. She rushed over and clasped my hands in hers. “You look stunning. I thought I’d have to bribe you to get you into this dress.”

I smiled. “Hopefully this one is a little less dramatic than my last choice.”

She looked me over with a mischievous grin. “Oh, it’s certainly dramatic.”

I ran my hand along her floor-length, deep indigo gown, admiring the winding cutouts that circled her torso and legs, where sparks of light magic twinkled against her exposed skin. “You’re gorgeous, Eleanor. What a regal color.” I winked. “Perfect for a royal advisor.”

She gave my hand a soft squeeze. “I’m so glad you came. I can rearrange chairs if you’d rather sit by...” Her voice faded as she peered over

her shoulder. I tried not to follow her line of sight, but the wine was already instigating bad choices.

Luther had turned toward Iléana. Though their fingers were no longer clasped, one of her hands draped over his thigh, the other toying with his hair, and she was laughing as if he'd said the funniest thing she'd ever heard.

"I'm fine here," I rushed out.

She frowned. "I really don't think he—"

"It's none of my business. Besides, the point of me coming was to get to know the other cousins, wasn't it?"

She studied my face with evident skepticism. "I suppose so."

"Any words of advice?"

She surveyed my tablemates, her expression lighting with a confident fire I hadn't seen in her before. This dinner was a game of court, and Eleanor Corbois was finally in her element.

"This group is used to being around power, so the Crown alone won't intimidate them. They're going to test you to see how you react." Her eyes narrowed. "Don't take the bait. If you get angry, they'll think they've won."

I tensed. Reining in my temper wasn't exactly my greatest skill.

"This place is like a jungle," she said. "They all think they're the deadliest creatures in the forest, and they want to see where you fit in. You need to show them that you're not just a predator—you're the *apex* predator. And they can either join your pack or become your prey."

A smile slowly grew onto my lips. *This*, I could do. False arrogance was my weapon of choice. If the young elite of House Corbois wanted a show of strength, I would give them a night to remember.

Back at the table, conversation had resumed. Most had already grown bored of me and turned their attention to other matters. The arrival of the unusual new Queen had been barely more than a blip.

Strangely, that knowledge gave me a burst of confidence. A servant had already refilled my wine, and I downed the entire glass again, letting the effervescent warmth that spread through my chest ignite me.

I pulled out my chair and perched my right foot in the seat. My fingers skimmed along my leg, over my knee and higher still, catching the hem of my dress until my naked thigh was on full display.

Aemonn watched with brazen lust, licking his lips and lounging against his armrest as if my display was solely for him. I shot him a sinful

smile.

“Mind helping me with this?” I asked coyly, trailing a finger along the holstered dagger. “I’d hate for it to snag my pretty dress.”

“With pleasure.” His eyes glittered with the thrill of the game. I could tell he knew I was playing at something—and he was all too happy to join in. He spread his legs wide. “Come closer so I can get a better look.”

I hesitated a beat. He had given me an order, not a request. Should I shut him down—or would that look like I feared a challenge?

Perhaps he saw the debate warring in my head, because he gave me the briefest wink. “I’m terribly clumsy. I would hate to nick that exquisite skin of yours and have to explain myself to an angry gryvern.”

I smirked and moved in front of him, perching on the edge of the table and placing my foot in between his open thighs. Conversation once again fell silent, everyone around us watching in rapt silence.

He wrapped both hands around my ankle and held my gaze as his palms glided up my leg and under the hem of my skirt. He slowed his movements as he rode higher, his fingers pressing in against the sensitive flesh of my inner thigh. Despite myself, goosebumps rose on my skin. Aemonn’s expression went utterly feline.

I clicked my tongue at him and shook my head. “Naughty cousin. Just the knife.” He gave me a pout, and I shrugged. “For now.”

“A woman who makes you work for the prize. What a rarity these days.” He released my thigh and grabbed the fabric of my dress, hitching it up above the blade.

“Perhaps you’ve grown too used to women who are impressed with your fancy title.” I placed my hands on his armrests and leaned in closer. “Unfortunately for you, mine’s a little fancier.”

With an elaborate show of keeping his hands away from my skin, Aemonn pulled my blade from its sheath. He gave the knife a skillful twirl in his fingers, then offered it out to me, handle first.

I took the blade from his hand and my leg from his chair, but his thighs only spread wider. “Lucky for the both of us, my title isn’t the only thing women find impressive.”

I gave Aemonn an amused look, then glanced down to his groin and back to him. “Let’s hope House Corbois has more to offer me than *that*.”

Snickers and whispers skittered around us. With lightning speed, I whipped around and slammed the point of the dagger into the table beside

my wine.

The crack of the blade splitting wood and the rattling of dishes from the impact silenced the room. I slid smoothly into my seat and gave a casual, one-shouldered shrug. “Just in case I need it.”

The Corbois cousins assessed me with new, curious eyes.

It was an effort not to look at Luther or Eleanor to see what they thought of my antics. I forced myself to stay focused—tonight, I needed to stand on my own.

Aemonn jumped in quickly to introduce me to the cousins in talking distance. I felt a little bad about insulting his manhood after he played along so well, though it was fair play for blackmailing me into taking him as my escort to the Ascension Ball. Now we were even, and the real game could begin.

“That’s a lovely dress, Diem,” one of the cousins—a redhead Aemonn had introduced as Ethaline—said with a sneer. I immediately regretted giving them all permission to address me so informally. “Almost as lovely as your attire this morning.”

“And the night she arrived,” another cousin murmured, only mildly attempting to conceal his voice as he sipped his wine.

More giggles and whispers arose, this time at my expense.

I sighed overdramatically and leaned back against my chair. “As you all know by now, I was raised by a mortal family.” I paused, remembering Iléana’s presence. “After the untimely death of my father, Harold Corbois, that is.”

A few knowing chuckles flitted around the room.

“In the mortal world, we wear black to a funeral to show respect for the dead. I only intended to do the same for King Ulther.”

“We?” Ethaline interrupted. “So you see yourself as a mortal?”

“Of course I don’t,” I said quickly, hating the lie. Hating that I wasn’t sure if it even *was* a lie. “I’m a Descended Queen, aren’t I?”

“And what of the lighting of the pyre?” another cousin asked—Tyris, a handsome male with a mop of dark blue curls. “We were hoping to see a show.”

“I’ll be sure to let Sorae know you found her insufficient,” I said curtly. “Perhaps she’ll give you a personal demonstration to show you what she’s capable of.”

“It wasn’t *Sorae* we found insufficient,” Ethaline said, sharing a smug look with Tyris.

I shot her a sizzling glare. “Then perhaps I’ll show you what *I*’m capable of.”

She raked her eyes over me without even an ounce of intimidation, but a deep, commanding voice had her expression going cold.

“Having been on the wrong end of Her Majesty’s power myself, I can assure you, Ethaline, there’s not a soul in Emarion that would find it *insufficient*.”

I steeled my hammering heart and fought to keep from turning to the source. A servant refilled my wine, and I took it into my hands, managing to restrain myself to a sip.

“High praise, coming from you, Prince,” Ethaline said, her lashes fluttering prettily. I rolled my eyes.

“It wasn’t praise,” Luther said flatly. “It was fact. Only someone with a death wish would think of Challenging her.”

My attention started to drift toward him. Aemonn pulled it back with an exasperated groan.

“This conversation is a bore. For once, I am in agreement with cousin Luther. Diem hardly needs to prove herself to us.” Aemonn raised his glass and tilted it to me. “House Corbois supports you, Your Majesty.”

I answered his flirtation with a thankful smile. Selfish as his motives may be, he had decided to stand by me tonight, and I was grateful for it.

“Your eye color is quite unique,” Tyris cut back in. “They almost seem...”

“Grey,” I answered. “They’re colorless.”

“And the mortals you grew up with never thought that was strange?”

“Oh, they did. The children used to tease me for it. They said grey eyes meant I had no soul and ate newborn babes to stay young.”

A cousin far down the table leaned forward and called out, “Were they right?”

I smirked back at him. “Cross me, and you’ll find out.”

A loud ripple of laughter followed. I dared a glance at Eleanor, who was beaming at me proudly. Our strategy was working. My face lit up with renewed courage.

“So where do those grey eyes of yours come from?” Tyris asked.

“From Blessed Mother Lumnos,” Luther answered.

Everyone at the table turned to him. I had no choice but to do the same, but now it was Luther who refused to look at me. The blade he'd left in my heart twisted even further.

He stared into his wine glass as he rolled it in his fingers. "Lumnos had grey eyes. She gifted her offspring with blue eyes at the Forging, but hers always remained grey."

"How do you know that?" I asked softly—so soft that I wasn't sure he'd heard me, until his own slate blue gaze finally lifted to mine.

There was an answer written in his features, but it wasn't one I understood. It was an answer loaded with secrets and hard truths and pain he had yet to share. A door he had locked up tight, welded closed, and covered in chains.

A door he was daring me to open.

"Luther is our resident expert on all things Mother Lumnos," Aemonn jeered. "He's always been such a devout little disciple. I heard he even has a full-body statue of her in his bedroom. How *scandalous*."

"It's only a bust, not a statue." The words came out of my mouth before I realized what I had done—what my words had implied.

The room went quiet.

"You were in his bedroom?" Iléana demanded, her glare so sharp it could draw blood.

I spent the night in his bedroom, I wanted to say, but my liquid boldness had thankfully not yet hit that level of shit-starting.

"Curious, indeed," Aemonn murmured. I glanced to see him watching me, his expression markedly cooler than it had been earlier.

Luther's voice turned venomous as he shifted his focus to Aemonn. "Mind what you say about the Blessed Mother, cousin. Heresy is a crime punishable by death."

Aemonn smiled. "You are certainly the expert on that, *Keeper of the Laws*. So many lives have met their sad end at your hand for such infractions."

I couldn't stop it—the doubt that crept in. The suspicion. The judgment.

I knew Luther hadn't killed the half-mortal children under the progeny laws, as Aemonn had once suggested. But there were other unjust laws, more flimsy excuses to execute mortals at the King's whim. And those

victims hadn't escaped. I had seen their bloody bodies. I had attended their funerals.

Luther's expression darkened. I could *feel* him begging me not to give up on him, not to take Aemonn's bait and believe the worst.

I looked away.

The cousin sitting across from me, pin-thin and androgynous, whose name I remembered to be Velis, leaned forward on their elbows and gestured to my throat. "Is that a scar?"

I reached up and traced the small crescent of shiny skin at my collarbone. "It is. I got it when I was young, climbing some rocks with my br... with a friend," I corrected quickly, unsure how many of them had heard about Teller.

"Climbing rocks?" Ethaline snorted. "How quaint."

"It's quite useful for building finger strength," I purred, raising my hands into a neck-strangling motion that had Ethaline's face going pale.

"You can get that removed, you know," Velis said. "Normally, once our healing powers manifest, we make a trip to the healers in Fortos to remove any—" Their eyes cut to my scar, nose wrinkling. "*—imperfections* we gained in childhood."

I shrugged. "I like my scars. Perfection is boring."

"They're unseemly for a Queen," Iléana said loudly. "It's a sign of weakness."

A handful of cousins nodded at her words.

"You have a problem with scars?" I asked, glancing between her and Luther with eyebrows raised.

"I have a problem with the Crown of Lumnos having scars," she said. "How can we expect the mortals or the other realms to fear us if our Crown is walking around covered in flaws?"

Another round of nodding heads and hushed agreement, this time more widespread.

I frowned at Luther, but he was staring straight ahead, his face revealing nothing of his thoughts.

Iléana took a sip of wine and smirked like she'd won something. "Don't look so shocked, Diem. Luther feels the same way." She ran a hand possessively along his forearm and gave him an adoring smile. "He swore to me he'll have his scars removed before he becomes King."

Luther was carved in stone. Neither his face nor his body shifted even a hair. His eyes were glaciers, cold and slow-moving, empty of life. To the room, he looked entirely unbothered, perhaps too indifferent to even be listening.

It was his aura that gave him away—the one sign only I had strong enough magic to detect. Its presence grew dark, unbearably heavy, seeming to drag me with it as it shrank toward him and coiled within.

How often had he been forced to endure conversations like these? How frequently had he been made to feel defective or inferior? My heart broke for the little boy who had made the brave decision not to have his scar healed away, and for the teenager and the young man who had surely been forced to justify that choice again and again.

I glanced at Taran, who was scowling at Iléana and looked just as furious as I felt, and at Alixe, whose eyes were raised to the ceiling as if she'd been through this discussion too many times before.

Whiskey and wine swirled hot in my chest, and my pulse picked up speed as my temper rose.

“I can’t speak for the other realms, but I can attest that mortals do not see a scar as a sign of *weakness*,” I spat out. “Quite the opposite. And on that, I couldn’t agree with them more.”

Luther’s attention shifted to me, though he remained deadly still. Iléana seethed.

“A scar is a sign of survival,” I continued. “Of endurance. It’s a sign that its bearer triumphed over what might have killed a lesser person. To show off your scars is to tell the world you’re not ashamed of what you’ve overcome. Frankly, I can’t imagine any better symbol of strength. And if Luther were *my* King, then I would make him swear to me he would never remove it. I would hope he wore it with pride for the rest of his life.”

A thunderous silence settled over the room. Even the servants froze with bated breath.

Iléana looked at me with such murderous poison in her eyes that if I had her arrested for actively plotting to kill the Queen, not a soul in the room would have disagreed.

I held her glare, jaw locked, refusing to back down from her open challenge.

Aemonn carved through the tension with a flippant wave of his hand. “What a shame it is, then, that Luther could never be your King.” He gave a

light chuckle. “Or perhaps a blessing.”

Nervous laughter rippled around the room.

“But he could be her King Consort,” Velis argued, looking me over thoughtfully. “It would be a smart match. Likely the most powerful couple the realm has ever seen.”

“And we already know she’s seen the inside of his bedroom,” Tyris added, snickering.

My cheeks flushed, and I swore internally at my body for giving me away. The cousins giggled and smiled, though Aemonn’s expression had lost its mirth.

“Think of the powerful children they would produce,” Velis added. “It could keep the Crown in House Corbois for centuries. If Diem is coronated, I imagine Remis will start planning the wedding in a matter of weeks.”

“When,” Luther snapped. “Not *if* she is coronated. *When*.”

“That remains to be seen,” Iléana huffed.

“Do you agree with Velis then, Prince?” Tyris asked. “That a match between you and Diem would be in the best interest of House Corbois?”

I couldn’t bear to look at Luther to see his reaction. I didn’t want to know his answer.

For so, so many reasons.

“It’s not for me to decide, nor my father. Her Majesty is entitled to choose whatever Consort she sees fit.”

I sagged with relief. It was a smart answer. A safe answer. And a kind one—a private show of support, given the secrets he knew.

If only he had stopped there.

“As for me, my interest lies in serving my Queen, not in marrying her.”

I had no right to feel hurt.

No right to flinch, especially as Iléana’s victorious giggle rang in my ears. No right to feel my heart clutch and my throat burn. I had no right at all to want any other answer from him.

But *gods*, I had.

“Unlike my short-sighted cousin, I am quite interested in serving Diem in every *possible* way,” Aemonn crooned to a bevy of laughter. He turned his chair toward me and took my hands. They were shaky, and I knew from the firm squeeze he gave me that he felt it, but his only reaction was to flash me his dazzling smile.

His eyes flicked briefly to Luther, disdain gnarling his perfect face. “Iléana may be more to Luther’s tastes, but I have never in my life seen a creature more stunning than our fair Queen.” He raised my hand to his mouth, holding my eyes as he kissed the back of my palm, then the other, followed by a slow smirk that hinted at our shared game.

“Thank you,” I whispered to him. “You’ve been a good friend to me tonight.”

He brushed away a strand of hair that had fallen in my eyes. “I am your most humble servant.”

I shot him a look. “Most humble?”

He grinned and leaned in close. “Fair point. Most sexy? Most devastatingly handsome?” His eyes turned wicked. “Most talented in bed?”

I laughed despite myself, and Aemonn lit up at the response. He crooked a finger under my chin, tilting my face up to his. “Iléana is a bore. We’ve all had to put up with her for far too long because of Luther’s affection for her. It’s a relief to have someone willing to challenge him and put her in her place.”

I tried to smile, but the thought of her, and of him, had my spirits tumbling. “You never seem to shy away from challenging him.”

He beamed as if that was the greatest compliment he could have received. “My dear cousin does a very good job of playing the faithful servant to the Crown, but he forgets that some of us know the truth about him.”

I swallowed. “And what’s that?”

“That Luther Corbois is a man with many secrets. And many plans.”

Finally, I mustered up the courage to peer down the table toward Luther’s chair.

But he was gone.

And so was Iléana.

Chapter

Twenty-Two

“**Y**ou were amazing. Incredible. Perfect. Sheer brilliance!”

I hooked my arm through Eleanor’s as we walked from dinner back to my suite—both out of fondness and the effects of the Descended wine that had the hallways careening around me. “You think it went that well?”

“It was exactly what you needed after the funeral,” she gushed. “If there was any doubt whether you can hold your own among us, it’s certainly gone now.”

I chewed on my lip and frowned. “There were some awkward moments.”

“And you handled them perfectly.” She tugged me in closer. “*Accidentally* spilling wine in Ethaline’s lap after she offered to take bets on the Challenging was an especially nice touch.”

“So clumsy of me,” I said innocently, drawing a cackle from Eleanor.

“They may not like you, but they certainly think you’re a vicious little beast.”

“I can work with that.”

We walked and giggled, recounting the highlights of the night. After Luther’s disappearance, the cousins had pounced with interrogations on my mortal upbringing. I managed to placate them with harmless stories without revealing anything too personal, thanks in large part to some well-timed interruptions from Eleanor and Aemonn. The two of them had been a good pair, giving me space to stand on my own without letting me drown in the process.

“Thank you for tonight, Eleanor,” I said. “Having you as my advisor has been a gift from the gods.”

“A Blessing from the Kindred,” she corrected gently. “That’s what a Descended would say.”

I frowned. “The Kindred are gods, are they not?”

“Well, yes, but...” She hesitated, appearing to brace herself for my reaction. “I heard you say ‘*by the Flames*’ during dinner.”

That was bad—and worse that I hadn’t even noticed. References to the ancient mortal religions, including any mentions of the Everflame, were forbidden as heresy. Even though I was exempt from the laws as the Crown, it would do me no favors in preventing a Challenge.

“If it had happened at the ball, in front of the other Houses...”

“I understand,” I said quickly. “Did anyone notice?”

“If so, it was quickly forgotten. Aemonn jumped in and said something outrageous.”

I gave a deep sigh. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but Aemonn was a blessing tonight, as well. Do you still think I can’t trust him?”

She hummed in thought. “He did brand himself as your ally to the whole House tonight, even though his father hasn’t. That’s no small thing—especially for Aemonn. But he also made it clear that he’s aiming for your hand in marriage. If he finds out about your betrothal, he could turn on you.”

“He already knows.”

She gaped at me. “He does?”

“I accidentally revealed it that first day in the garden. I’m taking him as my escort to the ball in exchange for his silence.”

“Interesting.” Her expression went pensive. “Perhaps he thinks he can talk you out of it. Or perhaps he’s planning to wait out the mortal’s death and marry you after.”

“He would do that?”

She gave me a sympathetic look and squeezed my arm. “Mortal lifetimes are so short compared to ours. It’s why we don’t often get close to them—they’re gone so quickly.”

I doubted there was anything more excruciating she could have said to me.

The despair I had been diligently trying to bury was beginning to claw its bony fingers back up through the soil when Eleanor paused beside me. I looked up to see Luther leaning against the wall across from my chamber door and glaring at the ground.

“I should get to bed,” she rushed out. “Big day tomorrow.”

My protests died with one glance at Luther’s harsh expression. I gave her a quick embrace and she scurried away.

I walked—fine, *carefully wobbled*—down the hall without sparing Luther a glance as my guards rushed to open the heavy iron doors.

“I wish to speak with you in private.”

Even without seeing him, I felt the dark rumble of his mood roll through the air.

A storm was brewing.

“In my room?” I asked lightly. “I wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong impression about your *interests*.”

“Fuck their impressions,” he snarled.

His tone shocked even the guards, who eyed us both with unease. One of them stepped into place at my side, hand resting on his weapon.

“You will address Her Majesty with respect,” he barked.

The hallway fell silent. I had never seen a guard so much as glance at Luther the wrong way, let alone openly challenge him.

I turned to intervene before Luther’s temper left me with a vacancy to fill and a pool of blood to mop up when my eyes stopped on a familiar face.

“Perthe?” I gasped.

The guard’s demeanor relaxed. “Your Majesty remembers me?”

I laughed and threw my arms around his neck. I hadn’t seen Perthe since the night I’d dragged him out of the burning armory after his legs were shattered by a falling beam. We were strangers to each other then, but something about nearly dying at his side made him feel like an old, dear friend.

“You’re healed,” I cried, marveling at his sturdy body.

“They took me to the healers in Fortos to speed my recovery.” His eyes cut upward to the Crown. “It seems we’re both much improved since we last spoke.”

I wasn’t sure I agreed that the Crown was an *improvement* to my life, but seeing Perthe healed and smiling was enough to have me grinning back. Guilt had been haunting me for the role I played in the Guardians’ attack, and to know that Perthe had not only survived, but recovered in full, was a salve I’d deeply needed.

“I didn’t know you were a palace guard,” I said. “Does this mean you’re a Corbois?”

“He is neither,” Luther answered from behind me. “Perthe hails from House Benette, but he is on special duty as a member of your personal sentry.”

Perthe nodded. "When I returned to Lumnos and discovered that the woman who saved my life was the new Queen, I asked Prince Luther if I could serve in your guard. Others who were friends, even family, left me behind to die that night, but you risked your life to rescue me." He clamped a fist to his chest and bowed low. "It would be my greatest honor to repay that debt."

"To see you healthy is repayment enough." I took his hand and squeezed it, ignoring Luther's grunt of displeasure. "But if you wish to serve me, I gratefully accept. I can think of no man in the *entire* realm who is more worthy to fight in my defense."

A bit over the top, perhaps, but worth it for the near-snarl that ripped out of Luther's mouth.

"If the happy reunion is over, Perthe has a job to return to," he snapped.

I offered Perthe a gracious smile, then walked past him into the parlor. Behind me, I heard Luther's footsteps follow, then a scuffle and a low exchange of words.

I turned to see two guards with their weapons crossed over Luther's chest to block his entry.

"Get out of my way," he gritted out.

"No one enters without Her Majesty's consent."

I couldn't restrain my grin. It seemed they had learned their lesson from the last time he disciplined them.

Luther glared at them before turning his icy gaze on me. There was a tension in him that seemed coiled too tight, a bowstring stretched too thin. Even without magic or weapons at his hands, he looked more deadly than ever.

"Let him through," I relented.

No sooner had the guards withdrawn their weapons than Luther had his hands on the back of their necks, shoving them out into the corridor and slamming the doors behind them.

"They're following *your* orders. You could be a little less of an ass."

He practically growled.

Sorae poked her head in to greet me, then took one look at Luther fuming and disappeared back to her perch.

"Traitor," I shouted her direction. A pulse of amusement answered back over the bond.

I rolled my eyes and stalked across the parlor. I was almost to my bedroom when the heel of my shoe caught on the edge of a rug, and I went ungracefully flailing toward the ground.

Instantly, Luther's arms were around me. He scooped me out of midair, and my brain swam with the intoxicating effects of sweet wine and hard muscles and large hands. The room spun around me as I somehow continued to move. I had only just processed that he was carrying me when I went flying again and my back hit the springy mattress of my bed. A few of the dainty chains on my dress snapped at the rough motion.

Luther stood between my legs where they hung off the edge and glared down at me.

"Foot," he barked, holding out a hand.

My jaw hung open. "What the hell was *that* for?"

"It's my duty to protect you. And that includes keeping you from breaking your neck stumbling around drunk on ridiculous shoes."

"I'm not drunk," I slurred back.

His eyes narrowed. "Foot," he said again, the roughness of his tone stirring something low in my belly.

Jealousy and anger mixed with indignation, layered with a stubborn determination to win this strange battle we were fighting, shaken by alcohol-decimated inhibitions, and poured over a lust I still wasn't ready to acknowledge.

It was a dangerous cocktail, and I was still in the mood to drink.

My foot slowly began to rise, dragging roughly up his leg. I smiled viciously as his posture drew tight and his fingers twitched. My toes skimmed along his thighs and paused at his waist, hovering just long enough to lure him to reach for me before jerking higher and continuing up his body. When I reached his chest, I flexed my foot, digging the sharp heel of my shoe into the space just over his heart.

Luther didn't flinch. His hand closed around my ankle and yanked it even higher, holding my stare as he hooked it over his shoulder. He grabbed my waist and dragged my body towards him until the back of my thigh slapped against his hips. My lips popped open, and his eyes gleamed with challenge, daring me to object.

My mouth snapped closed. I was still riding a victorious high from my success at the dinner, and I'd be damned if I lost now. Especially to *him*.

He held my stare as his hands circled my thighs and deftly began to unwrap the straps that wound from my shoes up my leg. He could have snapped them off with one strong tug—instead, he took his time lazily sliding them away, then massaging my skin to soothe the marks they'd left behind.

My eyes fluttered as he put his Descended strength to good use on my tendons. The warm, firm pressure of his rolling fingers was *divine* on my aching calves. I had to grit my teeth to keep from moaning.

"I hope you and Iléana had a nice night," I said frostily.

Luther watched me but didn't respond.

I huffed. "You two certainly seemed in a rush to be alone. You didn't even say goodbye."

He kept his silent vigil, eyes pinning me in place as he worked his way over my ankle. He slid the shoe off my foot, letting it clatter to the ground, and pulled my foot to his chest.

"I think I see now why you two work so well together. She's miserable to be around, and you love to be miserable. It's a perfect match."

His mouth thinned ever so slightly, and my grin spread wide with triumph. *Diem one, Luther zero.*

I cockily raised my chin. "She'll make a lovely Queen Consort for you once I'm dea—*ah!*" A husky, mortifying sound slid from my lips as Luther's thumb found *just* the right spot on my foot, sending a lightning bolt of pleasure up my spine. He circled it again, and my back arched against my will, hands fisting into the sheets.

Luther smiled darkly. *Tie game.*

He left my leg propped against him and held out his hand. "The other one."

There was a dominance to his tone, something less than possessive but far more than protective. It thrummed with an unspoken dare—a goading for me to say no, to wave the white flag and pull away—but it also sang with the hint of forbidden promise. A glimpse of what he might offer, if I let myself submit.

I should have hated it. I was a Queen, after all.

But I didn't.

I really, *really* didn't.

"Don't make me ask again," he said in that same rumbling, commanding tone.

Though I threw him a scowl, I lifted my other leg and gingerly placed my heel in his hand. His eyes lit up—not with victory, but with excitement, like I’d just given him a gift.

His thumb stroked my ankle, tender and feather light. “Good girl,” he murmured.

My thighs clenched.

Diem one, Luther ten.

With both legs propped against him, there was no keeping the hem of my dress from sliding profanely high. I squirmed in an effort to push it down—even I wasn’t brave enough to be *that* on display—but Luther dutifully held my gaze, his eyes never leaving mine for a second.

He reached first for my dagger, his fingers plunging down my thigh. I sucked in a breath.

He stilled. “I can stop, if you’d like.”

My heart took its own drunken stumble at the way his voice had suddenly gone gentle, tinged with concern.

But I didn’t want his concern. Concern meant feelings. Feelings were real, and I didn’t—*couldn’t*—want real. This was just a game.

I rolled my shoulders back and straightened my leg, forcing his hands further. “Go right ahead,” I purred.

He flashed me a whisper of a smile as he adeptly unbuckled my thigh strap and slid the dagger free of its sheath. Still holding my stare, he twisted it again and again in his hand, then leaned forward to set it on my stomach, its point stretching to the soft curve of my breasts.

When I reached to grab it, Luther stopped me with a subtle shake of his head. I frowned at first, not understanding. The dagger was heavy—I’d left Brecke’s blade behind in favor of something bulkier, wanting to show off the threat rather than hide it—and still warm from its contact with my skin. The longer it lay there, the more it felt like a hand—*Luther’s* hand, pressing me to the mattress and holding me at his mercy.

This time, he made quick work of unwinding the straps and discarding my shoe. He started at the sore ball of my foot and worked his thumbs in slow circles over my flesh, smiling wider with every whimper and mewl I couldn’t hold in.

Diem one, Luther one thousand.

My muscles tightened and loosened, lust-charged blood pounding in my ears. “When you said you wanted to serve me, a foot massage isn’t quite

what I had in mind,” I joked, my voice turning hoarse.

His face angled toward my leg, his lips nearly brushing my ankle. “Tell me then, my Queen, how would you like me to serve you?” Both palms dragged down my legs, resting low on my thighs and nudging them apart with the faintest pressure. “Shall I get back down on my knees until I earn another kiss?”

Heat exploded in my core. The room spun around me, my skin feeling like it might ignite with one more touch. I swallowed hard. “I doubt your lover would approve of that.”

His chin lowered. “Neither would yours.”

Game over.

The words were a bucket of frigid water on my desire. I tossed the dagger off, then yanked my leg from his hands and swung them to the side, hurriedly smoothing down my skirt. With several chains now broken, my dress hung off my shoulder by a single gleaming metallic thread.

I pushed past him and stalked to my wardrobe, snatching a silken robe. I threw it over my shoulders just in time for the last chain to surrender, sending the dress tumbling over my hips and pooling at my feet.

I wrapped the robe tighter and irritably knotted the sash, then slammed the wardrobe shut and whipped to face him. “You were sulking outside my room, so you clearly have something to say. Spit it out.”

Luther’s eyes narrowed, his pupils wide and midnight black. “Your first magic training session is tomorrow.”

“The ball is tomorrow.”

“The ball is tomorrow night. You can train during the day.”

“I need time to prepare.” I tried to remove my diamond hair clip and winced as it snagged in place. “It takes a lot of work to make me look this presentable.”

“No, it doesn’t.” He crossed the room and batted my hands away, deftly untangling the clip and setting it aside. “You forget the conditions I’ve seen you in. I know how easily your beauty shines through.”

He combed his fingers through my hair to smooth it back down. Tingles prickled down my neck as his hands wove through my long waves, catching on the knots and tugging lightly at my scalp.

My pulse spiked—at his touch, at the compliment, at the memory of all those times he’d seen me at my most pitiful, and how little it had done to turn his eye.

My mind felt hazy, my thoughts spinning out of control, and having him this close wasn't helping. I leaned back against the wardrobe, grounding myself on the cool press of the wood. "Fine. Training tomorrow. Are we done?"

His brows drew in tight. "You're angry with me."

"Your skills of deduction are legendary," I drawled.

He stepped closer, chest rumbling. "If this is about Iléana—"

"It's not," I lied, hating the sound of her name in his mouth. "You abandoned me at dinner. You invited me, and then you threw me to the wolves."

"You seemed cozy enough next to the biggest wolf of them all." His tone was cold, even for him.

I shrugged. "At least Aemonn stood by my side all night."

Luther slammed his hands against the wardrobe on either side of my head. "Aemonn is *using* you," he snarled.

I refused to flinch at his outburst, raising my jaw to him with an unrelenting glare. "You're *all* using me. This whole gods-damned House is using me. Just because I'm choosing to play nice for now doesn't mean I've forgotten that I'm a mouse in a pit of hungry vipers."

"A mouse?" He leaned in, strands of my hair swaying in the gust of his ragged breaths. "We may be vipers, but you're no mouse. You're a fucking *dragon*."

My chest pressed into his as it rose and fell in a harsh, unsteady rhythm. I made a half-hearted attempt to shove him away, but he only pressed closer. His eyes glittered with emotions that terrified me to name.

"What must I do to prove myself to you?" he breathed, sounding as desperate as he was furious. "Break from House Corbois, if you wish. It changes nothing—I will still serve you. Appoint every soul in the realm as your advisor but me. Marry your mortal. Worse, mate yourself off to that snake Aemonn." His gaze turned dark as a moonless night. "Exile me from the realm. I will serve you from afar."

"Why?" I demanded. "What could I possibly have done to earn such loyalty?"

Muscles twitched up and down his face, but he guarded his silence.

I laughed, harsh and humorless. "Do you know why I made Eleanor my advisor, Luther? Because she told me the truth. She didn't hide who she is, or what she wants, or how it could benefit her. She didn't keep secrets."

There were no questions she refused to answer. She showed me all of herself, the good and the bad, and she let me make up my own mind.”

Luther looked away, his shoulders dragged down by some smothering weight. His mask cracked, exposing the struggle raging in his head against the words he held back, forever just beyond my reach.

I knew enough of him now to believe that whatever he was hiding, it wasn't to hurt me. In fact, I was near certain he had convinced himself that his secrecy was somehow protecting me, in his own twisted way.

But I had spent my entire life being sheltered by people who thought their secrets would protect me. Because of it, I wore a Crown I was woefully unprepared for and faced a Challenging that would very likely kill me.

My patience for secret-keeping had come to an end.

“For all your hatred of Aemonn, at least he's honest,” I hissed. “He makes it painfully clear what he wants from me and why. With him I know what to expect, instead of the endless gods-damned mystery that is Luther Corbois.”

Outrage washed across his face. “How can you say I haven't been honest with you? There are things I've told you that I haven't even confessed to Lily or Taran.”

“Why?” I shouted. “What aren't you telling me?”

He looked miserable, tortured—but still, he did not respond.

My temper finally snapped.

“Well if that's true, then how pathetic indeed that your closest friends and family know less about you than someone you are *nothing* to.”

His entire body flinched. He recoiled, pulling away and leaving me panting against the wardrobe door. A chill filled the vacuum that his presence had left, bringing regret along with it.

He turned his back to me and moved for the door.

“Luther, wait. I didn't mean—”

“I'm glad,” he said, stopping in place. “I'm glad you see that you can't trust anyone here. It took me years to learn that lesson. And too many innocent people died in the process.”

“Luther,” I said again, softer. I came up behind him and placed a palm on his back. He tensed, then pulled away.

“But you're a fool if you think that applies only to the Descended,” he said flatly.

When he faced me again, his walls were built anew. All the churning emotions that had been pouring out of him moments ago had boiled off and floated away. Luther was gone, replaced by the cruel, uncaring Prince, the indomitable force who bent for no one—not even his Queen.

“Eventually, your mortal friends and family will come calling, too. They’ll see you as a tool to get what they want. They always do.”

I bristled. “My family is nothing like your family.”

“No?” His voice sounded so hollow, barren of the happiness I’d glimpsed in him only hours ago. His eyes had gone dim, their piercing blue-grey now a dull, lifeless slate. He was fractured, and I was the one holding the hammer. “Your mother never told you lies? Your father never kept secrets?”

I winced at the truth of it.

“And whether you’re willing to see it or not, no one wants to use you more than that pathetic mortal boy.”

“You told me to stay with Henri,” I shot back. “You said ‘*we’ll find a way.*’ Has your support dried up so quickly?”

“Do not mistake my support as agreement with your choices,” he snapped. “Outside this room, I will stand by any decision you make. I will shed my blood to protect you from any threat, even my own family.” His features warped with disgust. “I’ll give my life to protect *him*, if that is your command.”

He jabbed a finger toward the door. “Out there, I will do anything you ask of me. *Anything*. But here, in private, do not expect me to hold my tongue while you give your heart to a man you had to beg to keep from walking away.” His glare sharpened. “A man who only agreed to marry you when you offered him a throne.”

“You were eavesdropping on us,” I gasped, my eyes going wide. “You had no right—”

“*I don’t care,*” he thundered back. “It’s my job to know the true motives of the people closest to you. I will keep you safe, and I will not apologize for it. Not now, not ever.”

He roughly cupped my face in his hands, his fingers clinging to my skin like he might fall to his death if he ever let me go. “Not even if you despise me. Not even if I am *nothing* to you. Because my calling comes from a higher authority than even you can claim, Your Majesty. As she guarded my heart, I will guard over yours. Even if it kills me.”

The aura of his power flared, its pulsating energy flooding the room and seizing me in its furious, desperate grip. A thousand invisible hands clutched my face, my arms, my legs—and everywhere in between. My own power hummed in harmonious response. It clawed against the inside of my skin, pleading to be set free and match his magic's mighty wrath.

For the most fleeting of heartbeats, the world came to a stop. There was nothing but him and me and this light that burned between us, this glowing beacon we couldn't ignore, even if it lured us to our destruction.

Every moment with Luther felt like a tug-of-war against fate. Every look, every touch felt weighted with an ominous heft, like each one held some deeper, unseen consequence that went far beyond the two of us. It was as exhilarating as it was terrifying, and for once, I was sick of fighting it. Sick of fighting *him*.

I closed my eyes, parted my lips, leaned in, and surrendered.

But his hands fell from my face. His power withdrew, and the warmth of his body vanished. A moment later, the door slammed closed.

And once again, I was alone.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

“One, two, three—ow!”

“Sorry!”

“You’re doing great—four, five, six—”

“Shit.”

“Keep going! One, two, th—”

CRASH.

“Oh gods, I just broke the Princess.”

“I’m fine! It’ll heal—I think.”

Teller bit down hard on his lip to keep from laughing. “Are you two alright?”

“Is it too late to cancel the ball?” I grumbled. I helped Lily brush away the dirt on her dress after my clumsiness sent her tumbling across the dungeon floor.

“You’ve almost got it,” she chirped, her encouraging smile getting a little lost between grimaces of pain. “Let’s try it again.”

I frowned. “Maybe I should practice with Teller. I can injure him all I want without a diplomatic crisis.”

“Thanks,” he deadpanned. “But I don’t know how to dance, either.”

I sighed and placed my hand in Lily’s, setting the other on her shoulder as hers came to rest on my hip. She flashed me her usual bright smile, and for a blink I saw a glimmer of her brother in it—that sliver of joy he’d allowed me to see before our fight last night had cast him back into the shadows. My heart gave a painful lurch.

Lily counted off, and I followed her lead as we spun around the dungeon. We made an unusual sight, Lily playing the man’s role to perfection in her fine plum-hued gown while I tripped awkwardly through the woman’s steps wearing a tunic and breeches in preparation for my first training session.

“Keep reading your notes,” I told Teller as I stepped on Lily’s feet for the hundredth time. “I need the distraction.”

Teller rifled through his stacks of papers. Their classes had been canceled for the funeral and the ball, and despite my urging to stay away, Teller had talked Lily into sneaking him in this morning to pass along the information he’d gathered.

“As I was saying—among the Twenty Houses, five hold the most power. Houses Corbois, Benette, Hanoverre, Teniers, and Amraut. If those five are in agreement, the other Houses always fall in line.”

“Have any of them been friendly toward the mortals?”

“Yes, actually—House Corbois.”

I yelped, nearly colliding with a stone pillar. “Really?”

Lily nodded proudly and chimed in. “After the Blood War, several of the Houses wanted to ban mortals, but House Corbois wanted to declare amnesty and move forward. They compromised on the laws that are in place now.”

“Which House hates mortals the most?” I asked.

“Easy—House Hanoverre.” There was an acrid snap to his voice that suggested he had personal experience with their prejudice, further confirmed by the sympathetic look Lily threw his way.

“No wonder Iléana hated me at first sight,” I muttered.

A hint of devilishness corrupted Lily’s smile. “Luther said you put Iléana in her place at dinner.”

“Oh?” I tried to look indifferent, though my feeble attempts to stay upright stole my focus. “He told you about it already?”

“He came to my room last night to hide from her. She was chasing him all over the palace, as usual.”

So Luther hadn’t left the dinner with her after all.

I stared guiltily at my feet. “Did he say anything else?”

“He said he’s never seen anyone handle themselves so well with our family before. He said you were born to be Queen.”

My knees gave out on me, my feet tangling in Lily’s skirts as I crashed to the ground. My head cracked against the hard stone, and a bolt of pain splintered down my back.

Lily gasped and kneeled at my side. “Are you hurt?”

I stared up at the ceiling and groaned. “I’ve been wasting time worrying about the Challenging. It’s the *ballroom dancing* that’s going to

kill me.”

Teller popped up and walked over, not bothering to hide his obscene amount of joy at watching me make a fool of myself.

And what respectable older sister would let her baby brother get away with *that*?

They helped me back to my feet, and I gingerly rubbed the tender spot behind my head. “I need a break. Teller, take my place and dance with Lily.”

His smugness vanished. “Me? I... No. I can’t—I don’t—”

“Lily can teach you. And I learn better from watching. Besides, if I’m coronated, you’ll have to attend all kinds of fancy balls, so you better learn your steps now.” I grinned and gently smacked a hand against his reddening cheeks.

I took his seat on the steps and held his papers in front of my face to hide my prying eyes.

The blossoming romance between them was a balm to my own struggling heart. I adored how their faces flushed when they touched, how their looks always lingered a moment too long, how Teller clung to Lily with an eager tenderness, even as he tried to keep a respectful distance.

My conscience nagged at me in warning. Even with my support, a relationship between them could only ever end in sorrow. There could never be any mating bond, no growing old together. Perhaps it was cruel of me to encourage it.

But watching them laugh and twirl around the room with a glow in their eyes—that joy was real. It was something pure and innocent, a flower on a barren mountainside. Neither of them cared about the other’s title or bloodline or upbringing. They saw kindness in each other, a love that might surpass the walls that divided them. And cruel as it might be, I would challenge the gods themselves to protect it at all costs.

I looked away to give them what little privacy I could. In his notes, Teller had charted the key members of each House, their positions on mortals, the industries they invested in, and old historical rivalries. My focus bounced back and forth over the page in an effort to commit it all to memory, fueling a discouraging gloominess at how much I didn’t know. There were centuries of culture at play, entire libraries’ worth of unwritten rules that the Descended wielded like an old favorite blade.

I pushed back against the feelings of defeat and kept my father's lessons in my head. *Just keep moving. Onward, until the very last breath.*

I was so engrossed in my studying that I didn't even notice when a shadow fell across my shoulders. Even the way the air shifted, turning thick with the thrum of power, didn't rouse me from my thoughts.

It was his smell, earthy and provocatively familiar, that drew my focus up to find two shimmering pools glowing down at me in the quiet darkness.

I stole a glance at Lily and Teller—still beaming and giggling over their missed steps, blissfully unaware of who now watched their unguarded moment.

"They're helping me learn how to dance for the ball," I blurted out guiltily. "I'm only taking a short break."

Luther sat beside me, carefully leaving space between us, and silently watched our siblings prance across the room. The same conflict that plagued me was reflected in his eyes—the joy at seeing his sister so happy, the pain at knowing its inescapable end.

"Please don't make them stop," I begged.

"I won't. I've decided to take your advice and let it be."

My brows shot to the sky. "You have?"

"You told me to trust her to make her own choices." His gaze swept back to mine. His expression looked tired, his hair rumpled and unbound, the look of a man who had tossed and turned but hadn't slept. "It's not easy for me to let go when I care about someone. To watch them choose something I know will hurt them."

"Teller would never hurt her."

"I wasn't talking about Lily."

My heart was a fluttering songbird, beating its wings against the bars of its gilded cage.

"You're early for training," I said.

"I came to your chambers with breakfast, but you weren't there. I was hoping to speak with you."

"Well... here I am." Though I tried to put some iciness in my voice, it was a poor attempt at a lie.

He let out a weary sigh. "I owe you an apology. For leaving the dinner, and for the things I said last night. For eavesdropping. For all of it."

Relief whooshed from my lungs as I felt the wall between us shatter. "I'm sorry, too. What I said—"

“You have nothing to apologize for.” His jaw tightened. “You told me how you feel. I should have accepted it and let it go.”

My instincts screamed at me to correct him, to explain that when I’d said he was nothing to me, I’d only meant we had no formal ties—no shared blood or years of friendship, no advisor roles or obligations. To confess that I couldn’t understand why he trusted me, cared for me, so much more than people he had known his whole life.

And worse, that I felt exactly the same.

And how much it scared me.

But maybe this was for the best. Perhaps it was better if he thought there really was nothing between us.

I was not so in denial that I hadn’t felt the sting of truth in some of his accusations. My betrothal to Henri was built on shaky ground, and it wasn’t just because of the Crown or even my being a Descended. Some difficult conversations loomed in our near future.

But I had begged Henri not to give up on me and walk away, and now I owed it to him to do the same. Whatever existed between Luther and me, it was to Henri I had promised my loyalty. And Luther was not the only one who kept their promises.

Even if my heart was begging me not to let go.

I nodded. “All is forgiven. Friends?”

“Friends,” he agreed. “Advisor?”

“Don’t push your luck, Corbois.”

We shared a friendly smirk, and despite myself, I got lost in his smile all over again. I wasn’t even sure how long we’d been staring at each other when the sudden silence yanked us back to the present.

I looked over to see Lily and Teller watching us, the latter frowning and the former looking as pleased as a cat with a saucer of cream.

I bolted to my feet and down the stairs. “You two should go, Taran and Alixe will be here soon.”

They nodded. Teller and I exchanged a heavy look, an entire conversation passing between us through a series of furrowed eyebrows, pressed lips, and subtle tilts of our heads. At the end of it, he squeezed my shoulder. “Tonight’s going to go great. And you won’t even need the Challenging, because you’ll kill them all with your dancing instead.”

I swiped at him. He grinned and darted out of reach, only for his expression to pale as he approached a stone-faced Luther.

Luther pulled Lily in for a hug and pressed a kiss to the top of her head, all the while holding Teller's gaze in a fearsome glare. He moved into the center of the stairs, requiring Teller to awkwardly contort his body to squeeze past Luther's imposing frame. When Teller finally brushed past him, Luther released a menacing snarl, and Teller bolted for the exit.

My lips pursed as I struggled not to laugh. Luther caught my eye and winked. "That was for making fun of my Queen."

"Uh huh. I'm sure it had *nothing* to do with his interest in your little sister."

A guilty smile tugged at his lips as he descended the stairs and stopped a few inches away. "I can help you with the dancing, if you'd like." He offered out his hands. "I've certainly had to do enough of it over the years."

My eyes moved down to his awaiting arms, and I had to yank hard on the reins to hold still. I pictured the two of us moving together, his hands on my waist, our faces a breath away...

"No," I choked out, retreating a step. "Thank you, but, uh, I'll—I'm fine."

He nodded and dropped his hands, and for several painful moments that stretched on like hours, the two of us stood side by side, shuffling our weight and saying nothing.

Luther stared at the dungeon entrance, awaiting Taran and Alixe's arrival at any moment. With his attention elsewhere—a rarity in my presence—my eyes found themselves scouring his body and taking him in.

Fine. I could admit it. I was attracted to him. His muscled physique, his stone-carved features, his brooding stare, that endearing smile he only shared with me. Every last feature, even his scar—gods, *especially* the scar—seemed hand-selected for maximum effect.

But he was a Descended. They were all attractive. Even the ones I despised were so beautiful I sometimes found it hard to look away.

That's all that this was: Lust. Physical attraction. Primal, biological urges. Just my body's natural reaction to being thrust into close proximity to so many gorgeous people.

Then why does flirting with Aemonn or Taran feel harmless, but one glance from Luther and I'm swimming in shark-infested waters with a bucket of bloody chum?

My skin flushed despite the damp cold of the dungeon. I pulled at the low neckline of my tunic, fluttering the fabric to force a breeze over the

beads of sweat forming along my neck.

The movement caught Luther's attention, and his focus drifted to my collarbone. "Did you mean what you said last night about scars?"

My mind replayed the dinner conversation.

And if Luther were my King...

I cleared my throat. "Which part, specifically?"

"You don't believe we should have our scars healed away?"

"Of course I don't." My expression soured at the reminder of Iléana's nasty words. The thought of Luther without his scar tore at something in my heart. "They would have to hold me down kicking and screaming to remove mine."

The corner of his lip quirked, and I got the sense he was picturing that very image.

My fingers ran over the mark near my throat, the one Luther's eyes kept darting to when he thought I wasn't looking. "My scars make me happy. They're all memories."

"Aren't they unhappy memories of being hurt?"

I shrugged. "Not anymore. Time has a way of erasing the pain and leaving behind the laughter."

He frowned, flexing his jaw. Something was clearly gnawing at him. "You have other scars?"

I snorted. "I'm covered in them. I grew up playing in the forest and getting into fights. There's hardly an inch of me I haven't scraped up in some way."

"Why am I not surprised," he said wryly.

I lifted my tunic to show a puckered line along my hip. "Teller and I decided we were too grown up to use wooden sparring swords, and we tried to fight with Father's blades." His eyes flared wide, and I grinned. "We only made that mistake once."

I pulled the shirt off over my head, my breasts still covered by a thick bandeau, and turned my back to him as I pointed to my shoulder blade. "I challenged the boys in my class to a race. I was about to win, and one of them tried to trip me, so I tackled him and landed on a broken bottle." I looked over my shoulder and beamed proudly. "Worth it."

Luther's posture had stiffened, his focus fixed on the shirt in my hands.

I rolled my eyes at his sudden modesty. "It's just skin. You've seen me in much less, remember?"

His glittering eyes shot to mine. “Impossible to forget.”

I fought hard against a rising blush and turned to face him, pointing to a patch of pink high on my ribcage—“bucked off a horse”—then scrunching my pant leg to reveal a crooked line across my shin—“rusted chain that caught me while swimming.”

Luther took a few steps closer. His hands twitched, as if he was dying to reach out and touch them all for himself. I wondered if he’d ever even known another adult with a scar, or if he’d always been the lone drop of ink in a sea of milk. If so, it made his choice to keep his scars all the more impressive.

And all the more curious.

I held my forearm out to him, offering up the shiny trail of reddened skin that curved to my elbow.

I held my breath as he took my arm. His thumb grazed the line, tracing its path. A mix of wonder and dismay churned behind his eyes. “You got all these injuries before your healing abilities manifested?”

I nodded. “This must have been the last one. I tricked a boy who was bullying Teller into falling in some mud and embarrassed him in front of our school. He and his friends came back for revenge.” I winced as I remembered how they had ambushed me on my walk home and beaten me bloody. “Never underestimate a violent male with a hurt ego.”

Luther’s fingers tightened around my forearm, the movement faintly tugging me closer. His voice went low and gravelly. “Let me find him. I’ll return the favor.”

I huffed a laugh, trying to concentrate through the crackling current running straight from his touch to my pounding heart. “He’s long gone. He joined the Emarion Army. He’s in Fortos now.”

“I don’t care if he’s in the *afterlife*. If he hurt you, I’ll find a way to make him pay.”

My stomach fluttered. My focus caught on his scar where it disappeared beneath his jacket. “Is that your only one?”

He nodded. “You have me beat on number, but I think I’ve got you on size.”

I broke into a mischievous grin. “It’s not the size that matters Luther, it’s what you can do with it.”

He groaned and lifted his eyes to the ceiling, though my pulse spiked as his grip on me tightened. “No wonder Taran likes you so much.”

“Well?” I prodded, inclining my head toward his scar. “I showed you mine.”

He hesitated a long moment, then released my arm. I didn’t miss the way his fingers stumbled over the buttons of his jacket as he disrobed, or the way the muscles around his neck seemed so tight they might snap, or the way his gaze jumped around the room, taking in everything but me.

It was clear enough he wasn’t thrilled about revealing his scar, and I considered waving it off and ending his misery. But something inside me insisted this moment was vital—that this was a side of him I needed to see, and more importantly, a side of himself Luther needed to feel seen.

Though I promised myself I wouldn’t react or give him any reason to believe he’d been right to hide it away, when his clothes fell, all the breath punched from my lungs.

The scar on his face was nothing compared to the gruesome evidence covering his chest. The cruel slash that cut from his throat to his hipbone was at least an inch wide along the center line, with countless jagged tributaries that webbed across his torso.

Even as a healer, I had never seen anything like it. It was as if a bolt of lightning had exploded from within him and shredded his skin to tatters. The glossy lines were mottled in shades of pink and white, rippled along the edges where the scar interrupted his smooth olive skin.

My hand flew to his chest with a mind of its own, resting over the center where the flesh had been the most damaged.

Rage simmered in my blood. An injury this brutal was no accident. This wound was meant to kill. The thought of someone doing this to him at all had my heart hammering in my ears, but to know that it happened when he was so young, so defenseless...

“Who did this to you?” I breathed, feeling as if flames might spew from my fangs like a gryvern.

“It doesn’t matter. They can’t hurt me anymore, and I won’t let them hurt anyone else.”

“*Tell me,*” I snarled. “Why are you protecting them?”

“It’s not them I’m protecting.”

I glared up at him, but his face was resolute, his jaw a block of steel. I’d come to know this look by now. “I told you, I’m done with people keeping secrets for my benefit.”

“And I told you, I’ll do what I must to protect you, even if you hate me for it.”

An angry sound built low in my throat. I moved to pull away, and his hand braced over mine, holding it firm against his chest.

“I will tell you someday,” he vowed. “When I can. When it’s safe.”

“When will that be?”

He thought for a moment, then his expression turned roguish. “Get through the Period of Challenging. Make it to the Rite of Coronation. Then I’ll tell you.”

“If you’re so certain I’ll survive the Challenging, why not tell me now?”

“As I said, I have many tools to ensure your coronation.” He smiled. “Motivating you to stay alive is one of them.”

His smugness was annoyingly charming. “I don’t need to be bribed to stay alive, Luther. My survival instincts are pretty strong.”

“You threatened to cut my hand off within minutes of meeting me. You attacked the Royal Guards *several* times. You snuck around the palace alone. You ran into a burning, collapsing building. All while you apparently believed yourself to be a mortal. With respect, my Queen—” He returned my narrowed eyes and leaned his face to mine. “—your survival instincts are *shit*.”

I couldn’t suppress my laugh. He had a point—even now I felt no shame, only pride, at each of those decisions.

Reluctantly, I let him keep his secret, shifting my attention back to the scar that so viciously slashed his body in two. “How did you even survive this?”

“Blessed Mother Lumnos,” he said reverently. “I should have died that day, but she protected me.”

I thought of the shrine in his room, the candles and flowers so lovingly laid at the marble bust.

“Is this why you serve the Crown? Why you serve *me*? Because you think it’s repayment to her for saving your life?”

Our eyes met, a tempest brewing in the shimmering sea of his gaze.

“That is a complex question.”

“It’s a simple yes or no.”

His fingers wove within mine, clutching my hand where it lay on his chest. “Nothing about this is simple.”

My focus dropped to his chest, just above his heart. The night of the armory attack, I'd had a vision of the two of us, standing together on a killing field, bathed in silvery fire amid a ring of death and destruction. In it, I had raised my hand to the left side of my chest, and he had done the same. When the vision ended, Luther—the *real* Luther—had been standing in front of me making the same gesture.

Looking at him now, a bare patch of bronzed skin sat in the same place, curiously unmarred. It lay directly in the wound's path, but the lines of the scar routed around it as if deflected by some other force.

"That night," I began, "just before the roof collapsed... the vision—"

"Us, on a battlefield." He nodded. "I remember."

I frowned. "What does it mean?"

"A message from Blessed Mother Lumnos, I suspect. Though it's not always clear what her visions are meant to convey. What seems obvious at first can be—" He eyed me slowly. "—deceiving."

My head cocked. "Lumnos sent visions to you before this?"

His back went rigid, his expression looking as if he'd revealed more than he had intended.

"Wait a minute, are we doing training shirtless?" Taran's voice echoed across the dungeon. He bounded down the dungeon steps and ripped his tunic over his head to reveal a tanned chest rippling with more muscles than I knew a person could have. "Bless the Kindred for that."

Alixé paused on the stairwell as she took in me and Luther standing half-naked and chest-to-chest, my hand clasped in his. She quietly assessed us. "I can take the big dumb oaf and come back later."

I recoiled from Luther, too quickly and too clumsily to be anything other than an admission of guilt. "Not at all," I blurted. "We were just—I mean, we, uh—come on in."

I moved to dress, but Taran threw an arm over my shoulders and trapped me at his side. "You heard the Queen, Alixé," he joked. "Shirts off. Show us what you've got."

I ducked out of his grasp and pulled my tunic back into place. "Gross, Taran. She's your cousin."

"*Distant* cousin. Four generations removed. And House Corbois has never let something as silly as being related get in the way of a good pairing."

“Extremely gross. You know that can lead to facial deformities and low intellect.” I propped my hands on my hips and squinted at him thoughtfully. “Come to think of it, that explains a lot about you.”

He shot me a savage grin. “Big words for a girl who can’t shield.”

He threw out a fist and a ball of hissing shadow hurtled toward my face. I raised an arm in reflex, but the orb slowed as it approached me and grew in size until it encased my head. The darkness blocked out the world, turning my vision into an endless, gloomy void.

I staggered backward, and the orb stayed with me, keeping me blinded and lost. A pair of hands tickled my sides, and I yelped in surprise. I punched wildly, but my fists caught only fabric as Taran ducked out of range.

“I’m your Queen, you know,” I shouted. “I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to attack me.”

“Lesson number one,” Taran’s mocking voice rang out. “No rank during training. Anyone’s fair game—even you, Queenie.”

The dungeon came back into view as the shadowy sphere faded away. “Fine. But the second I’ve mastered my magic, I’ll remember this. And retribution’s going to *hurt*.”

“Good,” Luther answered. He was fully dressed, arms crossed over his chest, the imposing facade of the brutal Prince glazing his features. The sight of it in the presence of his friends took me by surprise. “Use that emotion. When you’ve used your power in the past, it was always when you were pushed to an emotional limit.”

“That’s normal for our kind,” Alixe added. “The godhood feeds off our emotions. It usually manifests for the first time when we’re extremely angry or threatened.”

I frowned as I thought of the curious *voice* that seemed to thrive off my temper. “So this godhood—it’s a piece of the goddess Lumnos?”

“Not exactly,” she answered. “Although the Kindred are considered gods to us, they had their own deities back on their home world. They brought a piece of that divine power with them when they came to Emarion. The godhood lived inside Blessed Lumnos just as it lives in you.”

I squirmed at the thought of some faraway god living like an angry stowaway in my soul. I had never been particularly religious, but if I had any loyalty to a divine force, it was to the Everflame and the Old Gods of

the mortals—not to the Kindred, and certainly not to whatever nameless force Lumnos herself had been bound by.

“Learning to summon it while calm will come with time,” Luther said. “For now, use your emotions to help you access it, just like you did that first night.”

He shot me a meaningful look, and a shiver rattled through me at the memory.

Beneath that harsh exterior he so carefully maintained, I could still see it—his beaming pride at what I’d done that night, his eager anticipation of what I could become.

How could I tell him that had been the worst night of my life? How could I explain that every time my magic stirred, it was a reminder of everything and everyone I would eventually lose?

He couldn’t understand. None of them could. This was all they’d ever known.

And even if they did, it didn’t change the reality of my situation: if I didn’t master my magic, I would be dead in weeks. Then I’d lose all those things anyway—and far sooner than I planned.

So I nodded and whipped up an obedient smile.

“Let’s get started.”

Chapter

Twenty-Four

T raining had not gone well.

For the hour that followed, Luther, Taran, and Alixe tried a number of tactics to force me into unleashing my emotions—teasing me, attacking me, encouraging me, angering me. None of it had worked. Not even a wisp of my power had made an appearance.

I had cut training short and returned to my suite, telling them I was simply tired from dinner and distracted by this evening's ball. In my heart, I knew it was an excuse. My emotions were haunting me in a way I still wasn't ready to face, and that fear had herded me back into the part of myself that was hollow and numb, a forgotten corner full of cobwebs where even the godhood couldn't reach me.

I'll try again later, I told myself. I have weeks. Plenty of time.

"Diem?"

I looked up from the foot of my bed to see Eleanor frowning.

"Is everything alright?" she asked.

My cheeks pulled tight with a false smile. "Yes—of course. What were you saying?"

She shot me a look. "You're a terrible liar. We're going to have to work on that if you're going to be a Corbois."

My smile turned real then, and a bit ashamed. I ran a hand along the beaded sleeve of one of the luxurious gowns she had set out, trying to imagine myself so elaborately adorned. I had learned from my mistake at the funeral and asked her to pull an assortment of options for the ball.

"I confess, all this is overwhelming. How I look has never mattered to anyone before."

"If that's true, you're quite lucky."

A sarcastic laugh rasped out of me. "Tell me I'm lucky after I survive the Challenging."

“You will—but that’s not what I meant.” She came over and took my hands, pulling me to my feet. “Among the Twenty Houses, everything is predetermined. Before we even get a chance to know ourselves, the realm has judged us by our Houses and the strength of our magic, the two things we can’t control.” She let out a sad sigh. “Even as your advisor, it’s unlikely they’ll ever see me as more than a weak, irrelevant Corbois cousin. But *you*...”

She spun me around to face the array of gowns, resting her chin on my shoulder as she peered down at the frills and flourishes.

“You are a blank canvas, and this ball is your palette of paint. You can create whatever vision of yourself you want them to see. You can be mysterious or meek or strong. You can make them fear you, or you can make them underestimate you. The *you* that walks into that ballroom is entirely within your control. That is a rare gift in our world.”

“It’s hardly my first impression. They all saw me embarrass myself at the funeral. How can I overcome *that*?”

“You did it well enough at the dinner. Whatever the cousins thought when you walked in, by the end of the night, you had them all looking at you with respect. You painted a vivid picture, and that’s what they saw. So... what picture do you want to paint tonight?”

Her words gave me pause. I knew what parts of myself I’d been desperately trying to hide—my doubts, my fears, my plans, my vulnerabilities. What part of me did I want them to see instead?

My eyes dragged across the outfits Eleanor had assembled, each one a character I could slip on and off. There was the regal stateswoman—a modest emerald gown to represent the forests of Lumnos, my patriotism stitched into the embroidered insignia of the realm. Or I could be the sultry firebrand—a barely there strip of red-orange that would conjure images of me in bed rather than on the throne. And then there was the fearsome warrior queen—not a gown at all, but a clever twist on a soldier’s uniform, modified just enough to veer elegant.

The latter, at least, would recognize this ball for what it really was—a battlefield masquerading as a celebration.

“They’re going to be far more interested in impressing you, you know,” Eleanor said. “You are the Queen, after all. And a Corbois Queen at that. If the other Houses have any hope of gaining more influence, they’ll have to go through you to get it.”

I had every intention of using the Crown to share power outside the Corbois circle—just not with the Twenty Houses. Not with the Descended at all.

I kept those thoughts to myself and nodded. “I need to convince them that not only am I not a threat, but I could even be their ally.”

Eleanor smiled. “Right.”

My eyes fell on a different ensemble. “This one,” I announced as I gathered it into my arms.

“Are you sure?” Eleanor’s face scrunched in thought. “It’s beautiful, but it’s not very... *you*.”

I ran my palm along the crisp fabric, and the corner of my lip curved into a devious grin.

“Exactly.”



AS THE SUN set over the forest canopy, I sat with Sorae on her perch, scouring Teller’s notes in between peeks over the marble balustrade to spy on the arriving guests.

Whatever curious magic was woven into the palace’s facade, it had altered its appearance for tonight’s festivities. The dark tangle of shadow vines had sprouted thousands of flowers that twinkled with tiny stamens of light, resembling a midnight field of sparkling flora.

As expected, the Lumnos Descended were in rare form in their most outrageous attire. Each outfit was more extravagant than the last, with bare skin galore and daring choices that had my eyes and mouth popping wide open, nearly all magic-enhanced in some breathtaking way.

Even their transport was shocking. Some arrived on horses that shimmered as if painted in living glitter, while others had elaborate carriages crafted of light or shadow itself.

Sorae kept a steady vigil, her pupils swelling and thinning furiously as she scanned each guest’s intentions, occasionally letting out small rumbles at whatever she sensed. It was no surprise that her deepest snarl marked the arrival of Iléana Hanoverre and her family, confirming what I already suspected—House Hanoverre was a threat I would need to watch carefully.

Every now and then, her ochre gaze turned to the distance, gazing beyond the forest to Mortal City. Now that I had rescinded my invitation to Henri—a decision that still sat like a stone in my gut—tonight would be a Descended-only event. I wondered at what she saw down the path to my old home, or perhaps what she feared seeing, but I felt no answers come across our bond.

Of all the arrivals, the representatives from the other realms had me spellbound most of all. A yellow-eyed couple arrived on the backs of two tigers, no doubt hailing from Faunos, Realm of Beast and Brute, while two women with fiery orange gazes, swathed in crisp white linen, rode in on slow-lumbering camels from Ignios, Realm of Sand and Flame.

At first, I was enamored by the horseless carriage-like contraption that could only be a creation of the innovative Sophos, Realm of Thought and Spark. But when the pair emerged and studied the palace with a scientist's eye, I remembered Henri's warning about the deadly fate of mortals invited to study there, and I was once again reminded of the importance of my plans.

The mortals needed a Crown that was willing to defend them—a Crown that could turn the tide in the coming war. I could not let anything, not even the friendships I was beginning to form here, get in the way of that.

Sorae was unusually agitated by the arrival of the foreign Descended, a reaction I couldn't make sense of. The Kindred's Forging spell nullified a Descended's magic while they were outside the borders of their *terremère*. Only the Crowns and on-duty soldiers of the Emarion Army were exempt from this loss of power, and an uninvited visit from either was tantamount to an act of war. As a result, these foreign Descended were powerless, by far the least threatening of the ball's guests—or so I thought. Sorae, it seemed, disagreed.

My stomach was a jar of angry moths as I returned inside to get dressed. Even Sorae's trill of approval when she saw the final product couldn't calm my frayed nerves.

A knock rapped on my door. When I opened it, I was met by a charismatic archangel. Aemonn wore a suit of white and shimmering gold jacquard, emblazoned with flame-like swirls of metallic beads, and a feather-trimmed cape that cascaded from his shoulders into a wide train on the floor.

It was an outfit fit more for a King than an escort. He even wore a wreath of gilded leaves threaded through his flaxen hair. I had to laugh at the ballsy audacity—I should have expected no less of Aemonn Corbois.

He smiled, teeth dazzling like a string of pearls. “Hello, gorgeous,” he crooned. His deep blue eyes scoured my body with no attempt to mask his carnal interest.

“You’re shameless,” I teased, flicking a finger at the diamond buttons that adorned his jacket. “Trying to steal my spotlight?”

He took a lock of my snowy hair and twirled it between his fingers. “Only hoping to bask in your glow for the evening, Your Majesty.”

I rolled my eyes, but the exaggerated sweetness of his charm had me smiling despite myself.

He pulled a cream-colored velvet box from his pocket. “A gift, in honor of your official presentation as Queen.”

I flipped open the lid to find a golden medallion on a long, thin chain. Engraved at the center was a crest encasing the outline of a phoenix, its flaming wings spread wide as it emerged from curling wisps of smoke. Two tiny sapphires marked its eyes, and a dark ruby lay over its heart.

I ran my finger along the delicate etching. “What is this?”

“The sigil of House Corbois. The ruby represents the blood of Lumnos that runs in our veins. The sapphires...” He tapped a finger beside his matching blue eyes.

“And the phoenix?”

“A message to our enemies that House Corbois always survives. Though many have tried, no one can destroy us.” He smiled. “In the end, we always rise again.”

An ominous chill crept down my spine.

“A shiny collar to show the rest of Lumnos that I’ve been claimed?” I let out a breathy laugh, trying to conceal how his words had rattled me. “What are you going to do next, pee on my leg to mark your territory?”

Aemonn lifted a shoulder, his smirk suggesting I hadn’t been too far off the mark. “You could see it that way. Or you could see it as a pretty little warning to anyone considering a Challenge. Perhaps a reminder that you’re a Corbois now, and if they try to bring you down, you’ll only come back stronger.”

I twirled the delicate pendant in my fingers. One way or another, it was a gilded threat. It remained to be seen who was its real target.

I handed it to Aemonn, then gathered my hair as he draped the necklace around my throat. His hands brushed the sensitive nape of my neck, sending goosebumps rippling down my arms.

He ran his hand along the dimpled flesh and gave a dark chuckle. "There. Now you're ready."

I glanced back at Sorae and felt a pulse of affection as she gave me a last once-over, but it curbed sharply the second she turned her gaze to Aemonn. Two trails of smoke wafted up from her nostrils.

"Behave yourself," I called out to her. "Don't eat the Faunos tigers."

Aemonn took my arm as we stepped into the hallway. "You really are stunning, Diem. I'm the luckiest man in the realm tonight."

I shot him a look. "I'd hardly call blackmailing me *luck*. Your scheming paid off well."

He halted in his tracks. "My scheming?"

"Come now, Aemonn. We both know you only agreed to stay quiet about Henri if I agreed to make you my escort for the ball."

"If that's what you think, then I have no interest in standing by your side tonight." He released my arm, and his eyes filled with icy malice. "I don't need to extort a woman to get her attention. Believe it or not, I do have *some* self-respect."

I blinked in confusion. "But Luther said—"

Aemonn laughed bitterly. "Of course he did. Kindred forbid anyone get close to you that he can't control unless he poisons you against them first. I should have known—it was always his favorite trick with Uncle Ulther."

"Are you saying Luther lied?"

"Diem, this was his idea. He doesn't want you marrying that mortal any more than I do. He knew I had already asked you to the ball, so he offered to persuade you to accept in order to keep whatever-his-name-is away from the palace." He rolled his eyes, muttering, "I should have known he had a plan to use it against me in the end."

I frowned deeply. "So you never threatened to tell anyone about Henri?"

"What good would that do? House Corbois would look weak, you would be Challenged by every House. Then I'd be stuck with Luther as King, a fate worse than death." His lip curled back in a sneer. "I'm the last person who would share that with anyone."

I scanned his face for some evidence of a lie, finding only irritation and disgust. I rubbed my temples and wrestled with this new information.

I didn't want to believe it, but it made some sense. Luther clearly didn't want me to be with Henri, and he'd been unequivocal that there was no line he wouldn't cross if he believed he was protecting me.

"Are you really so surprised?" Aemonn asked. "Have you not noticed how quickly he isolated you behind his closest friends? Do you think Eleanor and Taran are the only Corbois who desire to cozy up to the new Queen?"

I chewed on my lip as an uneasy feeling took root. "Then why haven't they? No one else has even tried."

"Luther made it known that the only way to get to you is to go through him. He's already feared for his magic. Now he fixes himself at your side, he surrounds you with his allies, he takes a bedroom nearby so he can keep watch. You speak of marking territory—Diem, my dear, he's the one marking you as his."

"I'm not his. I'm not anyone's. I can make my own decisions about who to spend my time with."

"I couldn't agree more. That's why I've never let his little threats stop me. And if you decide you don't want my friendship..." He shrugged. "I'll be disappointed, but I'll survive." His head inclined to the pendant at my neck. "I am a phoenix, after all."

I studied Aemonn. His easy smiles and suave allure, his unapologetic displays of affection, made it easy to fall under his spell. A small voice in the back of my mind shouted at me to remember how dangerous that made him.

But tonight I would be surrounded by dangerous people—perhaps having this one by my side could be more of an asset than I realized.

I sighed and offered him my arm. "I need to think about this. It's not that I don't believe you, I just..."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me." He took my hand and placed it on top of his, then flashed me one of his charming grins. "You're the Queen, and this is your show. I'm just here for the front row seat."

Chapter

Twenty-Five

Perthe led us through the palace, weaving through back hallways and hidden staircases to avoid the public areas where guests were mingling.

At one point, we entered the servants' passages, causing a severe bottleneck as staff fell to their knees at the sight of me, some dropping trays of glasses or food at the shock.

I blushed and gestured awkwardly for them to rise. "Thank you so much for your hard work this evening. I'm very sorry to get in your way."

They gaped at my words, stammering an acknowledgement and scurrying from my presence.

Aemonn snorted. "That might be the first time another Corbois has ever thanked them."

"That's not really something to brag about," I said archly. "They wait on you hand and foot. You could at least be grateful."

"We let them remain in the family and live in the palace. That's more generous than a *thank you*."

I balked. "Wait—all the servants are *Corbois*? You make your own relatives serve you to stay in the family?"

"Well we can't let mortals roam the palace, can we?" He laughed as if the thought were absurd. "There's hundreds of Corbois, Diem. They can't *all* be important. If their line is too distant or their magic is weak, they're given a choice—serve the family, or become one of the Unhoused." He shrugged. "All the Twenty Houses work the same way."

I shook my head in disbelief. Perhaps I should have guessed it sooner. Although I'd known a handful of people in Mortal City who worked for Descended Houses, it was far from common, and the jobs often kept them at a distance—seamstresses, stablemen and the like. My anger had been focused on the mortals' subjugation, but it seemed the Descended had a caste system of their own.

Shouts from behind us caught my attention. “Do you hear that? Someone’s yelling.”

“The ball hasn’t even begun and someone has already overindulged on the wine,” Aemonn muttered. “A hundred gold marks says it’s my brother.”

I stopped, straining to listen. I caught bits and pieces of muffled voices, and then—

“*Bring me Diem Bellator!*”

I knew that voice.

I spun on my heel and broke into a sprint, leaving Aemonn behind without a thought. My heart raced as I pictured what awaited me, wondering how far it had already gone. How unfixable this might be.

When the voices had grown their loudest, I shoved through a doorway into the palace’s corridors, finding myself at the back of a crowd of guards.

“Stand down,” I shouted, trying to push my way through. “Don’t hurt him!”

The guards formed a barrier with their arms to corral me backward. “Stay back, Your Majesty,” one of them yelled. “He’s armed. It’s not safe for you here.”

“I said *stand down*,” I hissed. “And get out of my way.”

Grudgingly, they obeyed, and a pathway opened up through the mob. At the end of it, a man lay crumpled on his knees, blood dripping from his nose and lip.

“Henri,” I gasped, sliding down to the floor beside him. “Look at me—are you alright?”

Two brown eyes peered up through shaggy, sweat-soaked hair. They were as familiar to me as my own, and yet so filled with lethal rage I barely recognized them.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered, careful to keep my voice low. “Didn’t you get my message?”

He wiped the back of his palm across his swollen mouth, smearing blood in a glossy red streak across his face. “I got it. But I don’t accept it.”

My gaze swept over him. He was wearing simple black breeches, a ruffled tunic, and an ill-fitting dark wool doublet. I knew it was nothing he owned—borrowed, most likely. His boots had been washed and shined, his face clean-shaven. For Mortal City, his attire would have been the height of formality.

For the Descended, it wouldn’t even have made the cut for the staff.

The guards shifted and conjured a wall of shadows to block us from the view of the guests. Shouting down the hall told me that they were herding people into other rooms, and soon the murmur of spectators had gone silent.

Still, a number of guards watched with curious eyes, and there was not a single soul in this palace I trusted enough to witness the conversation I was about to have.

"I'll speak with him alone," I announced loudly. "All of you, out."

"Your Majesty, we cannot leave you with him. He has weapons, he—"

"I gave you an order." I did my best to mimic Luther's commanding growl. "Are you disobeying your Queen?"

The guards looked to each other in obvious discomfort.

Perthe stepped forward. "Please, Your Majesty, at least allow me to stay, for your own safety. I won't—"

"Go," I snapped. "Now!"

He clenched his jaw and gave Henri a warning glare before waving the other guards off and leaving me alone with my betrothed.

"How quickly you've fallen into your new role," Henri spat. "If you have that much control over them, surely it's safe enough for me."

I reached for his hands, but he yanked them away. Heartbreak squeezed my chest. "They may obey me now, but no one here is loyal to me. I can't keep you safe—not yet."

"I don't need your protection, Diem. I can save myself."

"Not against these people, you can't. They're dangerous, and they don't trust mortals any more than we trust them."

"All the more reason I should be here. They need to learn now how to bow down to their mortal King."

I flinched, remembering Luther's words—his accusations about Henri's motives.

I reached for him again, and though he tried to jerk away, my palm curved beneath his jaw, his skin still slick with fresh blood. My eyes stung as desperation seized me by the throat.

"Please, Henri," I begged. "I'm only trying to protect you. I've lost so much. I can't bear to lose you, too."

"Lost?" He laughed bitterly. "What have *you* lost? You're the most powerful person in the realm."

Henri's features warped into a snarl of hatred and vengeance, revulsion and wrath. I could find no trace of the sweet boy I had fallen for. The man who stood in front of me now had been hardened into someone else completely.

But I saw my grief reflected in him, too. He looked at me as if he were watching me die in slow motion. As if the woman he loved was too far away to save, and he was already prepared to avenge my loss. It was the same despair-induced rage I saw in him when he talked about his mother—how they had stolen her from him, and how he would make them pay for it in blood.

"I'm still here," I pleaded, my voice breaking. "I'm still me."

"Are you?" he said archly. "The Diem I know would never send me away. We've always faced every challenge together. We trusted each other with everything. Then you become one of *them*, and you want nothing to do with me."

The hurt in his voice gripped my heart in its fist and clenched it tight. "That's not true. I do trust you, I swear it, but tonight, I need you to trust me. You and I can't take them on alone."

"We're not going to be alone."

My blood chilled to ice. "What do you mean?"

His eyes narrowed and skimmed over my face—assessing whether I could be trusted, whether I was friend or foe. His doubt was a rusted knife, carving me up unimaginably deep.

"The rebels are waiting outside the gates for my signal," he said finally. "Vance called in all the Guardians across Lumnos. Some from Fortos, too. We've got an army two hundred strong. We're going to take the palace."

The world was spinning, shattering, crumbling. My eyes struggled to stay focused on the real, too lost in visions of what could be. Everything was in flames, everything covered in blood. Bodies, so many bodies. People I cared for, children, friends—all laying dead at my feet.

I gripped him by the elbow, squeezing until I felt his joints creak beneath my fingers. "Henri, have you lost your Flaming mind? Two hundred mortals is *nothing* against all these Descended. The Guardians don't have a chance."

He tried to pull away, glaring as I held him firm. "We have weapons. We have bombs. We can fight their magic—we did it before at the armory."

I remembered what Luther had told me about Descended preferring to hide their magic from mortal eyes. I wondered now if that had been a tragically unwise choice, leaving the mortals too naive to the true danger they faced.

Or maybe that was the point—to draw the mortals into a fight they couldn't win and give the Descended an excuse to slaughter them for good.

"This isn't like the armory," I argued. "You're not just ambushing a few night watchmen. Every powerful Descended in the realm is here, along with half the Royal Guard."

"Good. We'll kill them all at once. We'll destroy the entire ballroom before they have a chance to fight back."

He said it so quickly, so casually, like running an errand or finishing a chore.

"There are children here, Henri. Innocent people who have done no wrong."

Even before I said the words, I knew they would have no effect. The radicalization of the Guardians and the unbending hatred they preached had sunk its fangs deep and filled Henri with a venom I didn't know how to cure.

"War requires sacrifice," he said bluntly. "Our children are dying, too. Do you even care about the mortals anymore?"

"Of course I do. Protecting them means *everything* to me."

"Then this is your chance to prove it."

A door clattered open behind me, followed by footsteps. By the inferno that flushed Henri's expression, and the way his palm closed around the hilt of his blade, I didn't have to guess who had just joined us.

Henri leaned his face close to mine, his brown eyes alight with challenge. "War is coming, Diem. Time to pick a side."

My eyes briefly closed as I nodded. My shoulders rose and fell in a slow, shuddering breath. I placed a hand on Henri's heart and trailed it down his chest, my tears mixing with his blood as I pressed my lips to his.

"Please forgive me," I whispered.

I snatched Henri's blade from its sheath and jerked to my feet, throwing the weapon out of reach. As I backed away, his eyes went wide with realization, and my heart shattered.

This line, I could never uncross.

"Diem, don't do this—"

“Guards!” I shouted. A horde of them rushed into the room and surrounded us. “Hold this man in the dungeon until the ball is over.”

“Please, Diem, stop—”

“Do *not* harm him. Anyone who does will pay with their life. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” they answered in unison.

I held Henri’s frantic gaze in a silent plea for forgiveness as the guards clamped down on his thrashing limbs to hold him tight. They dragged him away, roars of protest echoing in his wake, each agonizing cry a hammer strike against my ruined soul.

Just before he disappeared behind a corner, I caught his eye, and one emotion stared back at me with dreadful clarity—betrayal.

No love. No trust. No hope.

No attempt to understand. No willingness to forgive.

Only betrayal.

A heartbroken sob cracked out of me. The pain was visceral, overwhelming. I couldn’t get air into my strangled lungs. Would he ever see that I had done this for him, for the mortals—that stopping this attack didn’t mean choosing the Descended?

If anything, my hatred for them had just grown tenfold. They were taking everything from me. My life, my family, the man I cared for—everything that made me *me* was being whittled to splinters by this gods-damned Crown.

A hand settled gingerly on my shoulder.

“Are you alright?”

I went to wipe my face, then froze at the last second at the sight of Henri’s blood smeared on my fingers. A droplet of it fell and landed on the hem of my gown in a tiny scarlet pool.

“No,” I said honestly as the tears streamed down my cheeks.

A pair of hands took me by the waist and pulled me into a solid chest, enclosed within two strong arms.

My body instinctively stiffened. Something felt *wrong*.

An unfamiliar mix of cinnamon and vanilla filled my nose, then a lock of blonde hair caught my eye. It wasn’t Luther who had walked in behind me, but Aemonn. It was *his* arms wrapped around me, *his* hands stroking my hair, *his* lips offering hushed words of encouragement.

“I... I need Luther,” I stammered without thinking.

Aemonn's posture tensed, his hands freezing in place.

"I need him to issue an order to the Royal Guard," I added quickly.

He relaxed, and then he was nodding and holding me closer once more. And still, it all felt wrong.

He muttered something to a nearby guard, and a few moments later, I *felt* Luther come into the room. The power churning around him was a signature I now knew by heart. Before he even said a word, I sensed the panic rippling through him.

"What happened?" he growled. "Is she hurt? Get your hands off her—let me see her."

I was still frozen in my despair, my bloody hand trembling at my side. Aemonn pulled back just slightly and stroked his knuckles on my cheek. "What can I do, honey? How can I help?"

I looked up into his vivid blue eyes, so full of compassion.

"Can you give us a minute?" I managed to force out.

Aemonn frowned. He wiped away the tears on my cheeks and kissed my temple, then rubbed his hands along my arms a few times to warm them.

Wrong, wrong, *wrong*.

At my side, Luther trembled with restraint, his eyes following Aemonn's every touch.

Aemonn didn't even acknowledge his cousin's presence. He took my chin in his fingers and tilted it up slightly. "Diem," he said softly, "don't fret. All will be well in the end."

I gave him a tiny, thankful sliver of a smile. He threw Luther a loaded glance before turning his back and returning to the servants' passage.

Luther and I stood alone. I felt the burden lift from my heart—just slightly.

He grabbed my hand and began to swipe the blood away with the cuff of his jacket as he inspected my flesh. His voice came out harsh. "Are you wounded?"

Yes, I thought.

"No," I said. "The blood isn't mine."

"Whose is it?"

It took me a few tries to say it: "Henri's."

His eyes shot to my face. "What happened?"

I couldn't bear to look at him. "He got my letter, but he came anyway. He said... he thinks I..." My voice gave way, more tears along with it.

Luther roughly tugged me in and cocooned me in the warm steel of his arms. One hand slid to my nape and cradled my head against his chest as he whispered promises, over and over—*we'll fix this, I'll help you, you're not alone.*

It was no different than what Aemonn had done—and yet, somehow, everything was different.

A wave of calm cut through my anguish. My tears slowed, then ran dry. My fears grew more distant, my sorrows at bay. Not gone forever, but no longer at my heels with their hooks in my back.

As long as I stayed here, I was safe.

And I never, ever wanted to leave.

But when I closed my eyes, it was Henri I saw, and that final stare, so wrought with betrayal.

Reluctantly, I pushed Luther away, unable to meet his eyes. "The Guardians are outside—two hundred of them. They're planning to attack the palace tonight."

"I'll handle it," he said without missing a beat.

"I know they came to do a terrible thing and I have no right to ask this of you, but..." I hung my head, whispering. "Don't hurt them. They're *mortals*, Luther. If they die because of me..."

I stared at my palm, still stained with traces of Henri's blood. Had I really thought I could make it through this war with clean hands?

"I understand. I'll find a way."

Finally, I looked up. To my surprise, there was no judgment on Luther's face, not even reluctance, only steadfast resolve. The swift arm of his Queen, ready to administer her justice—or her mercy.

He thought for a moment, then frowned. "I may have a solution. If you release the Umbros Descended from the Forging spell's effects, they can use their thought magic to make the mortals go home peacefully."

My brows rose with burgeoning hope. "They can?"

He nodded. "But you must know, the consequences are significant. They won't just have access to the mortals' heads. They'll be able to read every mind they come across in that ballroom. They'll know everyone's secrets." His expression turned grave. "Including yours."

My insides twisted. "What will they do with that information?"

“Umbros Descended are fiercely loyal to their Queen. What they learn, they’ll tell her. It will give her immense power over the realm—and over you.” He paused, his chin lowering. “Especially if you have plans you don’t want the other Crowns to know.”

The meaningful look in his eyes, the weight to his voice, reverberated eerily through my head. He looked as if he knew *exactly* what those plans might be.

I forced down the growing lump in my throat. “Take Alixe and Taran and go. Get far enough away that your minds are out of reach. I’ll find the Umbros Descended myself.”

He shook his head. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Luther, you have to.” I started to push him away. “If they find out you’ve been smuggling half-mortal children into Umbros—”

He grabbed my hands. “They already know. My contacts there warned me the Umbros Queen read their minds and discovered it all. She’s had years to stop it. For whatever reason, she’s chosen to look the other way.”

“Still... you have other secrets you don’t want her to know. Secrets you don’t even want *me* to know.”

Luther glanced away, looking torn, then his features hardened. “It doesn’t matter. My place is with you. Wherever that leads.” His fingers curled around mine. “Whatever it costs.”

Why? The word rose to my lips, as it had so many times before. *Why will you give your secrets away for me, but not to me?*

I stared at him, trying to piece together this puzzle of a man. This had to be about something more than earning my trust, especially when his own family was in danger.

“We should hurry,” he said. “We need to act before the Guardians do.”

“What do I need to do?”

“The Forging magic that enforces the realm borders—each Crown can waive it within their own realm. You’ll need to lift its hold on the Umbros Descended and restore the powers they lost when they crossed into Lumnos.”

I slumped, my hope deflating. “I can’t even use my own magic yet.”

“The Forging magic works in a different way. King Ulther described it to me like his bond with Sorae—a connection between the Crown and the soil. It listens for you. It must obey your call.”

I shook my head in stubborn denial even as I gave in and closed my eyes, reaching my spirit out into the darkness. The Descended magic had never *listened* to me. It taunted me, made demands of me, took control of me, but never obeyed me. And I'd never felt any kind of attachment with the earth. Surely I would never be able to—

I gasped aloud.

There.

There it was.

It was so tightly woven in the fabric of my soul that I hadn't even recognized it as something new, something that once hadn't belonged.

It wasn't a thinking, breathing creature like Sorae—it was an energy, buzzing and crackling with life. It lived in the ground, but its current ran through every living thing in Lumnos, from the smallest blade of grass to the mightiest beast. I could flow with it to the shores of the Sacred Sea and glide along its edges to the southern flatlands of Fortos and the snowy, lavender mountains of Montios.

In the midst of it, I felt sixteen beings that did not belong, two from each realm. The Forging magic coated them and solidified around them like a hard shell. I somehow understood that one mental tap from me would break them free and release their magic onto Lumnos's soil.

My soil.

Because Lumnos, Realm of Light and Shadows, was no longer merely my home. It was my flesh and bone. It was a part of me—it *was* me.

A sense of overwhelming duty slammed into me like a fist to my gut. This was my realm to serve, and these were my people to protect.

All of them, mortal and Descended alike.

And what I was about to do—exposing our realm's most vulnerable secrets to the least trustworthy Crown of all—could put every last one of them in danger.

I looked up at Luther. "You're sure this is a good idea?"

"No," he admitted. "But it may be the only way to ensure no mortal blood is shed tonight."

My shoulders sagged. "Then I have no choice."

With a single thought, the magic binding the Umbros Descended shattered like broken glass. Their dark, hazy energy began to roll across the realm like an ominous fog, leaving me with a nagging dread that I might have just spared two hundred lives to risk countless more.

“It’s done,” I said, sighing. “The Guardians are waiting outside the gates for Henri’s signal. I had the guards take him to the dungeon so he couldn’t tip them off.”

Luther winced, and I knew it was for me—for what he could see that decision had cost me. “Go focus on the ball. I know your wishes. I’ll see them through.”

I hesitated. I wanted to thank him, but no words seemed enough. Had the roles been reversed—had a group of Descended come to hurt Teller and my father—I doubted anyone in Emarion could have stopped me from killing them on sight.

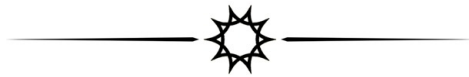
“Go,” he urged again, softer. “You have enough on your shoulders. Let me carry this one burden for you tonight.”

I glanced down at our still-joined hands. Luther continued to wipe at the crimson smudges on my palm until Henri’s blood was no longer visible—at least on the surface.

“You’re really going to do it?” I asked quietly. “You’ll let them all go... for me?”

He brushed his thumb along my palm in a long, slow trail. “You’re my Queen. Everything I do is for you.”

And yet, as I watched him press his fist to his chest in a formal salute and walk away, I couldn’t help but wonder whether Luther’s real reason for helping me had nothing to do with my Crown at all.



AEMONN WAS WAITING for me in the servants’ passage with a towel and a bowl of warm water. I offered him a wobbly smile as I cleaned myself up. Any pretense of being the cocky, savage young Queen had already washed away. Aemonn had seen the real me, broken and vulnerable. He knew where to hit me to do the most damage. I had no choice but to wait and see where it led.

He looked me over carefully. “I wish I could tell you we could cancel the ball or delay our entrance, but—”

“I know,” I answered. “This is too important.”

I smoothed my hands over my hair, then my dress, drawing in a deep breath and imagining it carried all the confidence and sureness of purpose I

so desperately needed. I took a page from Luther's book and built a mask across my features, disguising all of my pain under a solemn, steadfast facade.

"I can handle this," I assured him, lifting my chin. "I'm not as weak as I seemed back there."

"I have no doubt, Your Majesty." He gave a sly smile. "Only a fool would underestimate *you*."

When we were finally lined up in front of the double doors that led into the ballroom, Aemonn leaned down and whispered. "I have one more gift for you."

I grimaced. "I really think I've had enough surprises for tonight."

"This is a good one," he promised. He twirled his fingers in a circling motion, and a canopy of shimmers fell over our bodies, leaving a host of twinkling stars woven into our hair and clothes. The effect was breathtaking—every breath, every movement, sent tiny pinpricks of pale blue light dancing around us. We were two ethereal spirits, straight off the pages of a fairy tale.

"I can't let a Corbois Queen walk in there unadorned," he said, winking.

I stared down at Aemonn's magic and imagined it as a glimmering suit of armor. The Diem inside me was a mess, heartbroken and begging for reprieve, but the Queen on the outside didn't have the luxury of weakness. Tonight, I would have to play my part and be the bright, shiny object to distract them from the predator to come.

Behind the door, trumpet fanfare rang out, and a loud voice boomed across the room.

"Esteemed guests, may I now present the heir to the Crown, Her Royal Majesty Diem Corbois, the Unchallenged Queen of Lumnos, Realm of Light and Shadows, escorted by His Highness Prince Aemonn Corbois."

"Thank you, Aemonn," I said. "I won't forget your kindness tonight."

The doors to the ballroom cracked open, and he gave my hand one final squeeze.

"You're a Corbois, Diem," he murmured into my ear. "Embrace your phoenix. Rise from the ashes, and burn bright once more."

Chapter

Twenty-Six

I had to hand it to Aemonn—he knew how to make an entrance.

An audible gasp rolled through the ballroom as we stepped onto the raised platform in full view of a crowd that stretched as far as the eye could see.

The massive hall had been decorated to match the palace exterior. Every wall was blanketed in dark, tangled vines speckled with glittering flowers that cast dots of light in motion around the room. The vaulted ceiling disappeared beneath a thick cloud of shadow dusted with glowing orbs that bobbed as if floating in a sea of midnight ink.

If the ballroom had been crafted into a night sky, then Aemonn and I were the full moon, bathing the room in our regal glow.

My dress was the perfect choice. The sheer panels of its corset were edged with white boning and coated in minuscule diamonds that trickled down like falling stardust. Romantic swaths of softest silk hung just off my shoulders, which had been dusted with an opalescent powder, and a waterfall of glittering gossamer skirts made me appear to float as I walked.

The all-white ensemble, together with my colorless eyes and snowy, pearl-embellished hair, painted the picture of a pure, innocent Queen.

A blank canvas. A blushing bride.

A white flag of surrender.

Soft. Virginal. Harmless.

All the things I *wasn't*.

Only my dark, thorny Crown hinted at what lay beneath.

The crowd dropped to their knees, led by the Corbois cousins I'd dined with the evening prior. I caught a few of their eyes, and we shared private, knowing smiles. They knew as well as I did that this look was a costume to disguise my true self—but now they were in on the con, and my success at the dinner had earned their complicity.

Aemonn led me down to the ballroom floor where Remis and Garath were waiting. Remis looked over my attire with an approving nod. “Well chosen, Your Majesty. I presume we’re still aligned regarding our strategy for this evening?”

I fluttered my lashes with feigned empty-headedness. “Whatever you say, Regent.”

Garath’s upper lip twitched as he tried poorly to mask his distaste. “At least you dressed appropriately this time.”

His focus dropped to the golden medallion that hung between my breasts, then shifted to his son with a subtle nod.

Remis and Garath’s wives hovered behind their husbands. They gave me polite nods but otherwise made no effort to approach. In fact, unlike both their husbands and their children, neither woman had made any effort at all to speak with me since my arrival.

My attention lingered on Garath’s wife. She caught my staring and sharply narrowed her eyes. I quickly looked away.

“You look so beautiful!” Lily squealed as she bounced to my side. She ran her hand along the fabric of my dress and sighed. “I wish Teller could be here. He would be so proud of you.”

My heart clenched. “Thank you for your help this morning.” I looked nervously toward the dance floor. “Let’s hope it pays off.”

“You’ll be perfect, I’m sure of it. And Aemonn is a wonderful dancer. He’ll help you, won’t you cousin?” She targeted Aemonn with a look that was surely meant to be stern but came off adorably unthreatening, like a butterfly trying to pick a fight with a lion.

“Of course,” Aemonn crooned. “I plan to take very good care of our Queen.”

Lily leaned in to kiss my cheek. Just as she was about to pull away, she hovered close and whispered, “Perhaps you can save one dance for my brother? It would mean the world to him.”

My face flushed, and the sneaky smile that played on her lips told me she’d noticed.

I was saved from responding by Eleanor and Taran, who threw his arms around Lily’s waist and swung her in a circle, grinning as she squeaked in surprise. Their mothers jumped forward to scold him for making a scene, and he groaned loudly before setting Lily back on her feet with a rumbling laugh.

Eleanor beamed at me proudly. “You were right about that dress.”

“All the credit belongs to you,” I shouted, raising my voice obnoxiously loud so it carried deep into the crowd. “Your advice is *so very* invaluable to me. I would be lost without you, Eleanor Corbois.”

She dropped into a curtsy to hide her grin at my lack of subtlety. “It’s my pleasure to serve such a wise and selfless Queen, Your Majesty,” she answered, equally as loud.

Taran raked his eyes over my body and gave a long whistle. “Looking good, Queenie. Too bad about that ugly growth on your arm.”

Aemonn scowled at his brother. “Don’t you have a barrel of wine to drown in? Or perhaps a certain cousin’s ass to bow down and kiss?”

Taran craned his neck around to peer at my backside. “Now that you mention it, cousin Diem does have quite a nice, round little a—”

“Taran!” Eleanor cried out, looking horrified despite her laughter.

“Not her, you tactless buffoon,” Aemonn snapped. “Go find Luther and be a good little sheep. Leave the hard work to those of us who actually care about this family.”

Taran rolled his eyes and maintained his carefree smile, though the hint of a wound flashed across his expression. “I’ll steal you for a dance later, Queenie. I have to make sure you have *some* fun tonight.”

He strolled away, and I shot Aemonn a look. “A little harsh, don’t you think? He’s your brother.”

“In name only,” Aemonn muttered. “He doesn’t care. He never worries about anyone but himself.”

Before I could launch into a lecture on the value of sibling love, we were inundated with a stream of fawning Corbois. As the royal family, House Corbois had the honor of greeting the Crown first. Since I’d already met most of them, the introductions served primarily as a show of power to the rest of the room.

I caught Eleanor’s hand and insisted she stay near my side, and we all settled in for a long hour of cheek kisses, forced smiles, and fake laughter while I played my part as the hapless ingenue.

As the time droned on, it was impossible not to think of the battle that might be occurring outside the palace gates. My gaze kept wandering to the ballroom doors, expecting a mob of Guardians to burst through at any moment. Every loud drumbeat or dropped dish had my back snapping straight, my body a tightly wound spring ready to launch.

Perthe hovered nearby as my personal sentry, and though I watched him exchange words with other guards, he offered no concrete news—at least none he would share. Only the same message again and again: “Prince Luther says not to worry. Everything’s under control.”

When the train of Corbois finally ended, the representatives from Emarion’s eight other realms stepped up to greet me, each with a gift on behalf of their Crown.

On the surface, acknowledging them so early in the evening appeared to be a gesture of diplomacy. In reality, it was a not-so-subtle encouragement for them to leave the realm immediately rather than spend another night on Lumnos soil.

The muscled pair of army warriors from neighboring Fortos came first. I’d grown so accustomed to the brash mannerisms of my father’s old army colleagues that the hawkish way in which the Fortos representatives assessed me, then dismissed me, felt like being greeted by a grumpy old friend. For a brief moment, my smile turned genuine. Unsurprisingly, their gift was a weapon—a finely made blade that looked suspiciously like Brecke’s handiwork.

Next came a druidic couple from our northern neighbor, Montios. Their skin was leathery from exposure to the harsh mountain climates, with bright violet eyes that studied me from beneath heavy woolen hoods. Montios was known for its cryptic ways, and their representatives were true to form, refusing to speak even a single word.

Their gift was a thick, fur-lined cloak, presented with a note explaining it was spelled to always keep its wearer warm. Before I could ask how its magic worked outside their borders, they silently turned and walked straight for the exit.

The green-eyed pair from Arboros presented me with an emerald-hued potion said to cure any ill, save for curses sent directly from the gods. It took great restraint to keep from asking why they hadn’t offered such a gift to my predecessor amid his slow, months-long death.

Mortal rumors claimed the Faunos Descended could take on animal characteristics, or even shift into animal form, but the yellow-eyed representatives who arrived next looked disappointingly human. They presented me with two cute, furry animals that they claimed were a delicacy for gryverns, which I promptly handed off to Lily after making her swear not to take them anywhere near Sorae.

The linen-robed, red-skinned women from the deserts of Ignios came next, offering a white spydersilk scarf so strong it could not be penetrated by any metal weapon, no matter how sharp. Then came the aqua-eyed sailors from Meros, whose filthy language and irreverent demeanor won me over instantly. They gifted me with a compass they claimed would point toward whatever my heart desired most.

When I gave it an initial glance, it pointed vaguely at the back of the palace—perhaps toward Mortal City, or my family’s home on the marsh, or the island where I might be coronated, or adventure on the Sacred Sea. My heart yearned for so many things I couldn’t have, even I wasn’t sure which of them I most desired.

As the Meros pair set a direct course for the casks of ale, my pulse suddenly quickened, an odd sensation coating my skull. Slithering tentacles writhed at the edge of my consciousness, circling like a snake assessing its prey. My thoughts turned hazy and my focus grew dull.

A slender man sauntered up to me unaccompanied, studying me with eyes like two onyx pits of eternal night. His features were similarly dark, his hair neatly cut and his goatee carefully groomed. Hands in his pockets, he smirked with all the smug triumph of someone who had won a game without even bothering to play.

“Your Majesty,” he purred. His rich voice provoked an image of bare flesh gliding beneath red silk sheets. I had the vague sense that the image was not of my own conjuring.

“Umbros only sent one representative?” Remis asked coolly.

The man gave a careless shrug. “My companion is around here somewhere. I believe she’s assisting Her Majesty’s *special friend* with a pesky little problem.” He shot me a smile that warned of our illicit secret.

“Special friend?” Remis repeated. He frowned between us with brows furrowed. “Your Majesty, do you know anything about this?”

Careful, the man’s voice whispered into my mind.

My throat went dry. “Luther mentioned she was an acquaintance. I gave them leave to talk elsewhere.”

I felt Aemonn’s gaze burn into my side. He knew Luther was doing my bidding—which also meant he knew I was lying.

“My Queen sends her regards,” the man said, strolling closer. “She simply can’t wait to see you at the Rite of Coronation. She says you two have *much* to discuss.”

“Such as?” Remis asked.

“That’s between our two lovely Queens.” His teeth raked over his bottom lip. “A place I would very much like to be.”

Aemonn wedged his shoulder between the two of us. “You will keep an appropriate distance from Her Majesty,” he warned.

The man’s head cocked at an angle, and his smile turned lethal. “Will I?”

“It’s fine, Aemonn,” I rushed out. I put a hand on his shoulder and nudged him back. If he realized I’d restored the Umbros Descended’s magic, even his self-motivated desire to help me might come to an end.

The man gave a low chuckle. “What an enlightening evening this ball has turned out to be. I’ve already learned *so much*.” He drew out the final two words like a breathy moan, the sound unabashedly sexual.

His chest lay bare beneath a dark crimson tailcoat. His fingers, nails filed to points and painted with an obsidian glaze, traced a long, sensual route down his torso to the lines of his hips where they dipped below his low-slung trousers. I fought to keep my eyes on his face, but his mental claws dug deeper, and I was helpless to stop my vision from following the trail of his touch.

“I didn’t catch your name,” I gritted out between clenched teeth.

“Symond,” he answered.

My hand rose to my own chest against my will and mimicked his movements in featherlight strokes along the curve of my breasts.

My temper began to rise. It pushed against the bounds of its harness, growling to be let loose.

Fight.

I blinked at the *voice*’s sudden reemergence. It had been oddly silent since that night in the dungeon, but I felt it stir once more, raising its mighty head in recognition of the new threat.

“We are so grateful for the friendship of your realm,” I hissed. “I only hope I have the opportunity to repay the favor someday.” My eyes narrowed. “Someday soon.”

Symond gave another rumble of sensual laughter. “I can think of a few ways we can celebrate our *friendship* right now.”

He sent another image into my mind—a scandalous vision of us on the ballroom stage, naked and centered in the spotlight’s glow. Me, bent over the throne of Lumnos. Him, pounding into me from behind with one hand

wrapped around my throat as I breathily moaned his name. The crowd, pleasuring themselves as they watched us from afar.

Fight.

Unlike before, when I had fought the *voice*'s call tooth and nail, I now happily surrendered what little control I had left.

Help me, I asked it. *Free me.*

I flinched as icy fire burst through my defenses and cascaded into every bend and turn of my skin. My body flared in a sudden eruption of light, drawing a collective gasp from the crowd.

When the *voice* subsided and the silvery glow dimmed, Symond's presence in my mind was gone. He watched me with a wild stare, looking unsettled in a way I suspected he didn't often experience.

As his dark eyes jumped warily around my face, I felt the claws of his power scrape feebly at my skull. He was trying to get back in, but it was as if there was a new wall he could no longer penetrate.

"I think it's time for you to go," I breathed, panting a little as I scraped the memory of his vision from my thoughts.

His shoulders drew tight, and his languid sexual energy cooled away. "It appears so."

"You forgot your Queen's gift," Aemonn called out as the man turned to leave.

Symond threw me a glance over his shoulder, his energy now decidedly more poisonous. "My Queen's gift has already been delivered. And she says you're welcome for the advice."

"The advice?" I asked.

"Don't you remember?"

Veins quivered at his temples as his talons again screeched against my skull. Whatever shield the *voice* had constructed held firm. He lowered his chin with a glare.

"When forgotten blood on heartstone falls, then shall the chains be broke," he said in a bitter drawl. *"Life for life, old debt requires, or eternal be his yoke."*

I was instantly transported—not by his thought magic, but by my own memory—to an afternoon many months ago, when a scarlet sun hung overhead and a mysterious woman with eyes of darkest black cornered me in an alley and held my mind in her control.

Listen close, Daughter of the Forgotten, she had warned me. Stop running from who you are. Stop hiding. And stop taking that cursed flameroot powder.

Gods—the Queen of Umbros. It had been *her* in the alley on the day my mother went missing.

If that hadn't happened, would I have given up the flameroot and allowed my magic to manifest? Would I still be standing here as Queen? Did I have her to thank—or despise—for everything that had transpired since that terrible day?

Did *she* know that?

And more importantly—how? How had she known things about me, and about my mother's secrets, that no living person should?

He knows about you, your father, she'd said. He's waiting for you.

Symond chuckled darkly and turned away.

"Wait," I shouted. "Tell me, how did she—"

"My Queen looks forward to your coronation," he called out. "*If* you survive your Challenging."

I tried to chase him, but Eleanor's hands closed around my wrist and yanked me back.

"What just happened?" she hissed in my ear. "That guy was creepy. But also... kind of hot."

I grabbed her arms. "Eleanor—did the King ever invite the Umbros Queen here? Perhaps around Forging Day?"

"Impossible. She's never invited to any of the realms. Everyone's terrified of her. They say she can know the entire contents of your mind with the snap of her fingers."

A shudder rocked down my spine.

A couple with rose-colored eyes stepped forward. "Your Majesty," one of them said as they dipped their heads in unison. "We bring greetings from the Crown of Sophos."

"Yes, uh, thank you." My attention kept flitting to where Symond had fled.

"We bring two gifts," the other said, "as a token of the valued relationship between our two realms."

"How generous," I mumbled.

They offered up a blush satin pillow bearing a golden orb, polished smooth except for a maze of etchings.

The curious object finally captured my focus. I reached for it, then hesitated. “What is this?”

“The Orb of Answering. It will respond with a *yes* or *no* to three questions of your choice, so long as the answer is known to any living being with the Kindred’s blood.”

I took it into my hands and nearly dropped it in surprise. The metal was throbbing and warm to the touch, as if it were a living, hot-blooded thing. It buzzed with an energy that seemed to connect with the magic inside me, a current that flowed freely between my skin and its golden surface.

I quickly set it back on the cushion and frowned. “How is such magic possible?”

The pair exchanged a shrewd smile. “Only the Kindred can provide that answer.”

That hardly put me at ease. I longed for the innocence of yesterday, when I had believed meeting these people might be *fun*.

“Well, um, thanks,” I blurted out. “Have a nice evening.”

“Don’t you want our second gift?”

An eerie disquiet tugged at my intuition. There was something about these two that felt almost sinister, despite their polite demeanor.

A broad smile spread across the woman’s face but did not quite reach her eyes. “We understand you have a mortal brother studying at a Descended school.”

The hair on my neck prickled. “How do you know that?”

“We’re the keepers of Emarion’s knowledge. It’s our job to know such things.”

“It’s not your job to know about my family,” I snapped.

At my side, Remis cleared his throat, then shot me a pointed look. He dropped his voice low. “I believe what Her Majesty means to say is that this is not widely known. We ask for your discretion on such matters.”

“Of course.” The woman matched Remis’s hushed tenor. “Our realm knows well the importance of safeguarding sensitive information. And the consequences, should such knowledge be released.”

She cocked her head at me, still sporting that hollow smile. “We would be honored to welcome your brother. He is invited as a personal guest of our Crown at the institution of his choice for as long as he wishes to study.”

“Oh, how wonderful,” Lily gushed from Remis’s other side. She clasped her hands to her chest and beamed at me. “It’s what he’s always wanted!”

Remis frowned at Lily’s enthusiasm, but he nodded in agreement. “A generous offer. I’m sure he will be pleased to—”

“No,” I growled. “Absolutely not.”

My entire entourage gawked at me. Remis was furious, Lily looked crestfallen, Eleanor and Aemonn looked baffled.

“Your Majesty,” Remis started, “such an opportunity is exceedingly rare. It would be a great honor for the boy.”

“I said *no*.” I glared at the pink-eyed woman and tried to silently convey that I knew all too well the evils she and her kind were committing. How the mortals they invited never returned home—how they, or their families, all seemed to meet a suspicious end.

An end that put them on the involuntary side of Sophos’s highly guarded research labs.

She gave a delicate shrug. “The offer remains open, if you—or he—have a change of heart.”

There would be no *change of heart*. Teller would not set foot in Sophos—not as long as I lived.

“Farewell then,” I said acidly. “May the Sacred Sea carry you home swiftly tonight.”

“Actually, we’ll be staying a few more days.” The woman’s gaze rolled to Remis, then back to me. “We have some business to conduct.”

I shook my head. “Your business here is done.”

“Your Majesty,” Remis interrupted.

“Is there a problem?” a deep baritone voice called out.

A man with a thick mustache emerged from the onlookers. His scowl of displeasure unlocked a memory that sent a flicker of panic dashing through me. “The visitors from Sophos are personal guests of House Benette. They are welcome in my home for as long as they wish.”

“Evrin,” Remis said warmly, conjuring one of his usual diplomatic smiles. “No problem at all. A minor miscommunication.”

Before I could respond, Remis’s hand squeezed my arm, and I had to bite my tongue to keep from flinching. He leaned in and growled a warning. “Do not make an enemy of him.”

“I don’t trust Sophos,” I hissed back.

“Well Evrim Benette does, and House Benette provides weapons to all of Lumnos. If you interfere with their business, every last House will rise to Challenge you.”

I ground my teeth and tucked my hands into my skirt to conceal my fists. I was more than happy to piss off Sophos, I might even be willing to provoke House Benette. But I could not afford to make an enemy of the whole of Lumnos—not yet.

I gave the Sophos Descended a smile as empty as their own. “My mistake,” I said sweetly. “Have a lovely stay.”

With shallow bows and an ominous stare, the Sophos Descended eased back into the crowd.

“Diem!” A little girl with a mop of blonde ringlets yanked out of her panicked mother’s arms and bolted toward me, her arms extended.

I smiled and dropped to my knees. “Evanie,” I cooed, scooping her up and hugging her to my chest. “I didn’t think you’d remember me.”

“You had candy. I never forget candy.” She beamed at me. “Got any more?”

“You know my daughter?” Evrim asked.

“And your son,” I said. A young boy peered out from behind his father’s shadow, pale-faced and terrified, likely remembering his rudeness at our last interaction. I offered him a smile. “Hello again, Lorris.”

Evrим’s stare sharpened. “How is it you know my children, but not me?”

“You met her, Father,” Lorris said. Evrim’s cruel glare snapped to his son, who cowered away as if struck.

“I used to work as a healer,” I explained. “I treated your daughter when she was ill.”

He awkwardly shuffled his feet, then straightened his coat. “Of course. Forgive my brief lapse in memory. House Benette is honored to have welcomed you into our home.”

I almost snorted. My visit had been anything but *honored*. They had treated me as unworthy of their notice, and I’d repaid the favor by sneaking into Evrim’s office and stealing the plans to the armory and his list of top customers.

And with it, I signed the death warrants of all the Descended guards who didn’t survive the Guardians’ bloody attack.

I fought a fresh wave of guilt and reminded myself of the role I was supposed to play.

“And what a beautiful home it was,” I gushed. “Your children are so well-behaved. You must be very proud.”

My fakery worked, and Evrim puffed up like a fluttering peacock.

“Do you have any children of your own, Your Majesty?” his wife asked.

Aemonn jumped forward, taking my hand in his. “Not quite yet,” he said warmly, “but my Diem has such nurturing instincts. No doubt she’ll be a doting mother very soon.”

Loud chatter erupted in the ballroom. With that single statement, Aemonn had kindled a firestorm of speculation. By the end of the night, the whole of the realm would believe Aemonn had already put a baby in my belly and cemented his place as my future consort.

He pressed a kiss to my shoulder, and as his eyes connected with mine, I saw something new in them—a challenge, and perhaps a warning.

To keep my mouth shut. To play my role.

My temper bucked like a stallion. I squeezed Aemonn’s fingers until his knuckles popped. He only smiled wider and tucked himself into my side.

He dropped another casual kiss along my neck, leaning in until his lips brushed my ear. “Play nice,” he murmured.

“I look forward to our House Reception tomorrow,” Evrim cut in. “We have much to discuss.”

“Oh?” I feigned lightness as I struggled to yank my hand from Aemonn’s grasp.

“I hope Your Majesty has a strong plan for retaliation against the rebel scum responsible for the recent attack on my armory.”

If only he knew the *rebel scum* most responsible was staring right at him.

“Given her youth, Her Majesty has delegated such important matters to me,” Remis said. “I’ll be happy to discuss it with you tomorrow.”

Evrime frowned at that. He gave Remis a once-over that stunk of disapproval. “I see. Very well—until then.”

I nodded and threw a wink at Evanie, who giggled, then at Lorris, who went wide-eyed and fled.

Even before they were introduced, I knew the next House was House Hanoverre. With their upturned noses and sneering upper lips, they made no attempt to disguise that they had judged me—and found me lacking.

Iléana, of course, was front and center, hovering at the hip of her grandmother Marthe, the elderly matriarch of their House. Their too-loud grumbles contained scathing commentary on everything from my dress to my demeanor to my upbringing.

The real surprise was the warmth with which they were greeted by Aemonn and Garath, the latter rushing forward to plant a series of theatrical kisses all over Marthe's cheeks and her ring-bedecked hands. Aemonn lit up as he shook hands with Iléana's older brother Jean, who gave my breasts a lewd stare before dismissing me entirely. Even Remis jumped into the fray, breaking from my side to chat loudly with Iléana's parents.

I leaned toward Eleanor, the last remaining member of my entourage. "Should I wander off to the bar and see how long it takes them to notice?"

She covered her laugh with a cough. "Don't take it personally. House Hanoverre is even more obsessed with breeding than House Corbois. Their sigil is a single drop of blood on a white rose. They claim they've had no mortal blood enter their line since Lumnos's mortal lover, so that single drop is the only *impurity* they'll ever have."

My eyes dropped to the filmy white fabric of my skirts and the scarlet dot along the hem where Henri's blood had fallen earlier in the night.

"Perhaps you should flirt with Iléana's brother," Eleanor joked. "Make them think a Hanoverre could be King Consort and test their commitment to their principles." She gave a soft snort. "Rumor is that he's a frequent customer of the mortal brothels."

"So mortals are fine to take pleasure from, but not good enough to marry or bear their children?" I asked.

"If House Hanoverre had their way, there would be no mortals in the realm at all. Poor Jean might actually have to persuade a woman to bed him instead of paying them to do it."

My manufactured calm was wearing dangerously thin. "House Hanoverre," I called out loudly. "I'm so happy you could make it to *my* ball."

A group of scowls turned my direction.

Marthe took a few steps toward me. The elder woman's movements were shaky as she leaned on Iléana's arm for support, but her look of malice

was as steady as stone.

“How could we miss *your* ball, after such a spectacle at *your* funeral yesterday?” she asked.

A sharp gasp skittered around the room.

“My apologies—the *King’s* funeral,” she croaked with a wry smile. “With all that occurred, I almost forgot that event was meant to be about someone other than you.”

Remis and Aemonn shot me looks of warning, while Garath’s smirk said plainly, *Go ahead, dig your grave.*

Any other day I might have bent to the old crone’s provocation. But Iléana’s haughty chuckling lit a very different kind of fire.

I let loose a forlorn sigh and hung my head low, making myself the picture of penitence. “I must apologize for my missteps. I have certainly learned the importance of surrounding myself with the right advisors and trusting in their wisdom.”

Aemonn straightened and smirked, but I turned my smile instead on Eleanor, reaching out to clasp her hand. I swallowed my pride and gave a respectful nod to Remis, as well. His responding smile was tight, but he made a show of accepting my acknowledgement.

I looked back to Marthe and threw her a bright, charming smile. “I do hope you can forgive me. I promise you, in the future, I shall be far more prepared for any *challenges* that come my way.”

Marthe lips pursed into a thin line. “It’s quite unusual to have a candidate for the Crown who is unknown to the Twenty Houses. So much about you is a mystery to us all. Your parentage. Your magic.”

Iléana patted Marthe’s arm and made a soothing noise. “We’ll see her magic soon enough, grandmother.” Her spear-sharp eyes turned to me. “When she fights at the Challenging.”

I fluttered my lashes and looked up to the heavens. “I cannot say why Lumnos chose to bless me with the Crown and with the strongest, most powerful magic in the realm. I’m sure she had her reasons—and I would not dare to question the wisdom of the Kindred.”

Marthe huffed. “Let us be grateful the Blessed Kindred had the *wisdom* to give the rest of us free will to make our own choices.”

I gave her a restrained smile and beckoned to the next House in the receiving line, ready to bring this painful interaction to an end.

“I expect you to honor the late King’s agreement of betrothal between Luther and my Iléana,” Marthe declared. “They’ve been promised to each other nearly since birth.”

I held Marthe’s stare, though I could see Iléana’s shit-eating grin from the corner of my eye. I frowned and cocked my head curiously. “How interesting. I have had so many conversations with Luther, and not once has he mentioned a betrothal.” Finally, my focus shifted to Iléana. “In fact, he said you were nothing to him at all.”

The look on Iléana’s face...

Every struggle, every loss, every moment of fear and panic, every agonizing humiliation, every last heartbroken tear I had shed because of a gods-damned Crown I never even wanted...

Iléana’s outraged expression made every second of it worthwhile.

I might die a bloody death in the Challenging, but with this perfect memory tucked in my pocket, at least I’d die happy.

I let a hint of the grin I was holding back shine through as I shrugged. “As you pointed out, the Kindred did bless us with free will. I expect Luther will exercise his. He can choose for himself the woman he desires.”

I bathed in a moment of glory as Iléana went downright apoplectic, but my joy was cut short. Instead of looking perturbed, Marthe’s sneer curled higher, turning wide and triumphant.

“How interesting you should mention your close relationship with the Prince,” she said smoothly. “I’ve heard a quite upsetting rumor that you posed as a mortal healer in order to gain access to the late King throughout his mysterious illness. I heard you even enticed the Prince into bringing you to the King’s bedside the very same day His Majesty died.”

Noises of shock rose as whispers carried Marthe’s veiled accusation to the far corners of the crowd.

I schooled my features to apathy. “The King was seen by the Descended healers in Fortos. Once his condition declined beyond treatment, a team of mortal healers cared for him here in his final days.”

“So you admit you treated him?”

I swallowed. “I assisted the healers on a few occasions.”

“Including on the day of his death.”

“I... yes. Luther asked me to evaluate his condition. The King was very unwell, and we both believed he would pass soon.”

“In fact, you were left unattended with the King in his bedchamber, were you not? Armed with a weapon?”

“If you’re suggesting—”

“And a guard walked in to find you standing over the King’s body with your weapon drawn, isn’t that true?”

The hum of gossip became a roar. Iléana gave a loud, showy gasp and threw an arm in front of her grandmother, as if to suggest I might attack at any moment, while Jean shook his head and gave a low whistle. Even Remis and Aemonn eyed me uneasily.

“It was a misunderstanding.” I was practically yelling to be heard over the chatter. “Luther examined the King’s body personally. He can confirm I didn’t—”

“Where is the Prince?” Marthe asked sharply. “I, for one, would dearly like to know why the man we all believed to be Ulther’s heir saw fit to leave our ill, defenseless King in the company of a violent stranger.” Her eyebrows rose. “A stranger I hear he is now welcoming into his bedroom.”

The room erupted. My Corbois entourage exchanged expressions of shock, confusion, and suspicion. Perthe looked around nervously and edged closer to my side, his knuckles white on the hilt of his blade.

It looked as if my Challenging might come several weeks early.

Across the bond, I felt Sorae pace along her perch, stretching her wings in preparation to crash through the stone walls of the ballroom to come to my side. For a brief moment, I considered letting her.

My gaze darted around the room, instinctively searching for Luther. He would know how to fix this—he always had some clever trick to end unwanted inquiry or some curt excuse to steal me away that no one ever dared to oppose.

But he was gone, cleaning up my *other* messes. This was a battle I would have to fight alone.

I painted on a haughty look of confidence and raised my palm high into the air.

“You *dare* accuse House Corbois?”

I spoke so softly the room had no choice but to fall silent as they all strained to hear my words.

Finger by finger, I curled my hand into a closed fist. “You dare accuse House Corbois?” I repeated.

“It is not House Corbois that I am acc—”

“It was House Corbois that sent the King to Fortos to be examined there. House Corbois who chose the mortal healers who treated him for months. Corbois guards who stood at the King’s side, Corbois servants who prepared his food and drink, Corbois attendants who cleaned his body after his death.” I gestured to Remis and Garath. “It was these men, the leaders of House Corbois, who had complete control over the King’s care during his illness.”

The spectators finally turned their eyes from me to the two brothers, who shifted their weight nervously and took a step back from the Hanoverre contingent.

Marthe scoffed. “Even the finest Houses can be tricked by—”

“I wouldn’t want a simple misunderstanding to cause any bloodshed,” I said, calmly but forcefully, “so I’ll ask you again. Does House Hanoverre accuse House Corbois of murdering its own beloved Ulther?”

“That’s not what I—”

“If so, you must believe the Fortos healers to be complicit in this extravagant scheme. Perhaps the Fortos representatives have not yet departed—I’m sure their King would be very interested to hear your accusations against him.”

“I would never—”

“I’m sure you must have simply misspoken. Because if it were discovered that you had invented such a vicious lie, without even a shred of evidence to support it, in order to stir up unrest against your Queen... well, that would be *treason*.”

Marthe’s mouth snapped closed.

“Let me ask one final time: Does House Hanoverre accuse House Corbois, and the King of Fortos as its accomplice, of murdering King Ulther?”

Marthe’s lips flattened into a thin, pale line.

“No. We do not.”

The wrinkles spanning her face seemed to fill with shadows as her gaze narrowed in a dark promise. Any triumph I might have felt at surviving her and Iléana’s attacks quickly withered and died.

I might have survived this battle, but House Hanoverre was preparing for war.

Chapter

Twenty-Seven

I sank into the plush armchair and whimpered at the rush of relief that shot up my aching feet. The room was cold, lit only by dim candlelight, but the quiet was a badly needed refuge.

We were hours into the ball, and I had only just now finished the receiving line of guests. Having kissed a thousand cheeks, forced a thousand smiles, and hid a thousand scowls—mostly at Aemonn’s frequent implications that we were practically mated—I sweet-talked Perthe into a brief moment of privacy and excused myself to freshen up.

After swiping a bottle of wine on my way out, of course.

I had tucked into a nearby reading salon, where I sat with eyes closed, trying to resist the urge to walk straight out of this palace and go home to curl up in my own bed at our family’s cottage on the marsh.

Standing up so boldly to House Hanoverre had been effective at warning off the other Houses from threatening me outright, but it had also taken my strategy of playing dumb and cut it off at the knees. There was no longer any point in pretending I was Remis’s hapless puppet.

For better or worse, the Houses of Lumnos now knew that I had claws—and that I was willing to use them.

To make matters worse, a shade of suspicion now tainted every interaction I had. Marthe Hanoverre had planted her hateful seed in the soil of the Twenty Houses, and her loyal flock would be hard at work cultivating it and watching it bloom.

I could have endured it a little easier if their accusations were baseless, but a part of me wondered whether my mother really had played a role in the King’s death—and whether I had unwittingly helped.

A year ago, it would have been inconceivable that my mother was involved in a convoluted plot to overthrow a Descended King and place me on his throne.

Now, I didn’t know what to believe.

I groaned as music wafted down the hall, a signal that the dancing was about to begin. I tipped the bottle of wine back and took a heavy swig. The warmth of the magic-infused alcohol spread through my chest, and a snorting laugh bubbled out. How naive of me to have believed the *dancing* would be the hardest part of this wretched ball.

Any other day, I would have cherished a night of dancing and drinking with friends. Tonight, though, the idea of twirling in a ballgown while the mortals lived in poverty, Henri languished in the dungeon, and Luther took on the Guardians had me feeling every bit the selfish Descended monster I once accused all the people in this palace of being.

Sometimes, the line between who I hated and who I had become was paper thin.

Sometimes, I wasn't even sure which side of the line I was on.

Though I strongly considered polishing off the wine, better judgment reluctantly won out. I set down the half-full bottle with a longing look and dragged myself out of my cozy hideaway when a familiar voice caught my ear.

"What do you want, Iléana?"

My heart must have recognized him before my brain did, because a rush of familiar calm washed over me before I pieced together what I was hearing.

"No one is buying that she's really a Corbois, Luther. Your servants do talk, you know."

The fleeting moment of peace vanished. I spied a flash of golden hair through the crack of a slightly open door, where Luther and Iléana were talking in a nearby room.

What I *should* have done was leave.

Or at the very least announce my presence.

But I'd used up all my good behavior on the abandoned wine. I pressed myself into the shadows near the door.

"You cannot be serious," Iléana said archly. "She's a half-breed. She shouldn't even be alive."

"She is your Queen."

"You've been preparing for this role your entire life. You earned it. That Crown belongs to *you*."

"The Crown belongs to whomever Blessed Mother Lumnos chooses. She chose Diem, so Diem is who I serve."

“Not for long. She’ll never survive the Challenging.” Iléana smiled and wet her lips. “Maybe I’ll Challenge her myself and claim you as the spoils of my victory.”

Wisps of light sparked in Luther’s pale blue gaze. “If you Challenge her, you will not survive it. No one will. Her power is stronger than any Descended I’ve ever met.”

“Is this why you left me?” she snapped. “Is this why you can’t stop fawning over her like she’s the fucking Blessed Mother herself?”

Luther’s mouth went tight. “Jealousy does not become you, Iléana.”

“I’m a *Hanoverre*, Lu. I have no reason to be jealous of that uneducated, ill-mannered trash, whether she sits on a throne or not.”

I despised the feelings of insecurity her cruel words aroused. I was proud of my family, prouder still of my mortal upbringing, but this pedigree-obsessed Descended world of wealth and propriety made it easy to feel defined not by *who* you were, but *what* you were.

“Maybe I underestimated you,” she said bitterly. “Maybe when you didn’t get the Crown, you decided you’ll get to the throne any way you can. Tell me, has she already spread her legs for you? Have you already got that whore down on her knees while you—”

“*Watch your mouth*,” Luther thundered.

“Am I wrong? You were happy enough to bed me before that little tramp came around.”

I failed miserably at fighting back the mental image of the two of them making love, Iléana’s legs wrapped around Luther’s naked body, his lips crushed against hers. Bile rose in my throat.

“I always suspected you never really knew me,” Luther growled. “Now I realize how right I was.”

Undeterred, Iléana moved closer. “My grandmother looked into her mortal family, you know. We know *all* about them. She grew up in some pitiful hut out in the swamps. Someone like that, sitting on the throne—it’s vulgar. She’s a threat to what the Twenty Houses have built.”

I flinched at the sting of Luther’s silence.

“We both know she isn’t going to do what needs to be done to put those terrorist rebels in their place,” Iléana pushed. “Do you really think the Houses will allow that to go unchecked?”

She stepped up to Luther and laid her palm against his cheek. “Her days are numbered. Do yourself a favor, Lu. Don’t get attached.”

A shadow caught the edge of my vision, and I whirled to see Eleanor staring at me with a frown. “Diem, Aemonn’s looking for y—”

I clamped my palm over her mouth and raised a single finger to my lips.

“Just this once, Iléana, I’m going to ignore that you just spoke of treason in front of the Keeper of the Laws.”

Eleanor’s eyes flared wide as she recognized Luther’s voice. She peeled my palm away and hurriedly nestled beside me.

“Treason is putting a mortal-loving half-breed on a Descended throne,” Iléana snarled.

“Tread carefully. I will not overlook it a second time.”

Iléana scoffed. “You would choose her over me? Over all that we shared together? All that we planned?”

“Those were your plans, not mine. Diem is my Queen. I will choose her over *everything*.”

“You didn’t choose Ulther over everything.” Iléana tilted her head and gave him a critical glare. “You weren’t so loyal to him.”

Eleanor’s eyes bulged as they locked with mine, and I wondered if I had made a reckless mistake inviting her to listen in. I started to pull her away, and she yanked me back into place.

“I’m not an idiot, Luther. I saw the ways you worked around the King. Sometimes you even disobeyed him outright. What has this girl done to earn your loyalty that Ulther didn’t?”

I strained my ear closer, pressing it as far into the open door as I dared. Luther’s silence was deafening.

“Oh Lu,” Iléana sighed. She smoothed down the lapel of his jacket. “This will all be over soon enough, and once she’s out of the way and you take the throne like you were meant to, I will forgive this little indiscretion. Then you and I will finally be the King and Queen this realm deserves.”

I flinched and moved back toward the corridor. As I brushed by Eleanor, she pulled me in by the waist. “Wait,” she whispered.

“I’ve heard enough. I should get back to the ball.”

“Wait,” Eleanor insisted.

Luther’s voice rumbled out of the room, carrying in its low timbre a hint of the deep vault of power that lay inside.

“Let me make myself extremely clear. If you or anyone in your family makes a move against Diem, it will be the last thing you ever do. I will see

to it personally that House Hanoverre is destroyed.”

“Is that a threat?” Iléana hissed.

“It’s a promise.” He paused, his voice turning dark. “And you know I always keep my promises.”

Eleanor bit her lip as a smile threatened to break through. “Now we’re done.”



“MY DARLING DIEM,” Aemonn bellowed loudly at my return to the ballroom. “It’s time for our first dance.”

He strolled—pranced, really—over to me with one hand extended, the other fanning out the thick fabric of his feathered cape.

I threw a pleading look to Eleanor. “Save me?”

She laughed and shoved me toward him. “It’s a *ball*. This is supposed to be the fun part.”

Before I could protest, Aemonn snagged me into his arms and curled a hand around my waist. I begrudgingly slipped a shaky hand into his. My skin went clammy, red splotches rising along my chest.

“Nervous?” he teased.

“I can’t dance,” I mumbled, staring down at my feet. “This is going to humiliate both of us.”

“We’ll be fine.” He gave my waist a quick squeeze. “Relax and follow my lead. Are you capable of that—letting someone else take control?”

I scowled at him, and his grin spread wider. He pulled me tight against his body, lifting my weight so that when he moved, I became an extension of him, and the stumbles of my clumsy feet were lost under the flutter of my skirts.

We floated around the room with unexpected grace as he led me in a series of spins, to which the crowd responded with cooing and frequent applause. Aemonn took every opportunity to make use of his dazzling smile as my frown turned deeper and deeper.

“You’re supposed to be enjoying this, not looking like you’re plotting to stab me in my sleep,” he said beneath his breath.

“I’ve never been a very good liar,” I said flatly.

“What happened to ‘*thank you, Aemonn*’? And ‘*I won’t forget your kindness, Aemonn*’?”

My eyes narrowed. “That was when you were being nice. The moment we stepped in front of a crowd, you turned into just another pompous fake, lying about how close we are to look important.”

He laughed harshly and shook his head. “You’re welcome, Diem.”

“For what? Pretending to be the father of my unborn children? Thinking you can trick me into marrying you?”

“For shutting off speculation about who else might be in your bed,” he snapped. “If everyone here believes you have committed to me, there’s no reason for them to go snooping after any *other* lovers you might have, is there?”

My irritation faltered. He had a point—after his display in front of House Benette, not a single person had asked about my love life. And with the way he continued to paw at me and make claims on our future, it was unlikely anyone ever would.

For a young, unknown Queen, marrying a well-connected Corbois Prince would be expected. Welcomed. Unquestioned.

I knew Aemonn’s behavior was calculated. I hadn’t considered it might be calculated for *me*.

“I think you’re beautiful, Diem, and interesting, and fiery, and many other qualities I seek in a wife, but I’m not trying to *trick* you into marrying me. I would prefer to spend my life with someone who enjoys my company.”

“Aemonn, I didn’t mean—”

“I’ve also spared you a few hundred drooling suitors who would be swarming you tonight if they weren’t afraid of crossing me. So again... you’re welcome.”

I chewed guiltily on my lip. “Fine. I might have overreacted.”

He shot me a look, and I rolled my eyes, though a smile toyed at my lips. “*Thank you, Aemonn*,” I repeated. “*I won’t forget your kindness, Aemonn*.”

We shared a laugh, and the tension between us eased as we danced in pleasant silence. I begrudgingly had to confess that, with a dance partner like Aemonn, I was actually starting to enjoy myself. I didn’t even put up a fight when he took my arms and looped them around his neck, then ran his fingers in circles along my back.

“Diem?”

“Hmm?”

“What did you ask Luther to do?”

My body went stiff.

“Nothing,” I rushed out.

He gave me a hard look. “I helped you back there with that mortal, didn’t I? I at least deserve to know what I was helping you *with*.”

I pulled away, nearly tripping and falling backward in the process. Aemonn’s hands caught me and locked me in place.

“He—I—Luther made sure Henri got home safely,” I stammered, looking down to hide the lie.

“And he needed the Umbros Descended for that?”

I grimaced. “Um, I think it was a cover.” My mind raced for a plausible excuse. “I’m not certain, uh, perhaps he—”

The music ended, and a smattering of applause rose from the crowd. I yanked out of Aemonn’s grip and, in a panic, dropped into a curtsy.

A familiar snort rang out over my shoulder. I whipped around, spotting Taran in the throng, and gripped his arm. “Dance with me,” I hissed. “Queen’s orders.”

“Whatever you say, Your Majesty.” He smirked at Aemonn and swept me to the center of the dance floor, taking both hands and spinning me until I was woozy. “Dancing with my brother was that bad, huh?”

“No,” I admitted. “He’s growing on me. There’s a nice guy under there somewhere.”

Taran grunted and looked away, his expression uncharacteristically cold. The rancorous history between the brothers was something more than mere sibling rivalry. There was a too-sharp edge to every taunt that seemed designed to stab, rather than poke.

Though dark clouds lingered in his eyes, he rolled his shoulders and flashed me a wicked look. “I heard you threw a punch at old lady Hanoverre.”

My jaw hung open. “Is that what people are saying?”

“I heard you made her get down on her knees and beg for your forgiveness.”

“*What!?* No, gods, there was nothing like—”

“Then I heard you kicked Iléana right in the tits. The left one.”

“Alright, now I know you’re lying.”

—” “And then you pulled Jean’s pants down so everyone could see his tiny

“*Taran*,” I shouted, laughing.

“Wishful thinking?” he asked. I slugged him in the ribs, and he took the blow with a grin. “Just wanted to make sure this place hasn’t stolen your ability to laugh yet.”

A bittersweet gratitude filled my chest, and I pulled him close in a fierce hug. Our constant banter reminded me so much of my relationship with Teller. Though no one could ever take my brother’s place, it gave my wounded soul some peace to know that when the terrible day arrived for Teller’s mortal life to end, I might have someone in this world who could ease the void of comradeship his loss would leave behind.

“They’re definitely going to Challenge me now,” I mumbled glumly into his chest.

He squeezed me tighter. “We’ll keep training. There’s still time.”

I pulled back to offer some smart-ass quip and stopped short when I saw his stormy expression had worsened.

“Taran, what’s wrong?”

He frowned. “You’re not really going to go through with this betrothal, are you?”

The blood drained from my face. Had Luther told him about Henri? He said Taran knew all his secrets, but Luther would never betray my trust like this—would he?

“It’s... it’s my choice,” I sputtered.

“I know,” he rushed out, “and I respect that.” He sighed. “But the thought of him on the throne...”

Shit. He did know about Henri.

“I didn’t expect you to be so prejudiced,” I said defensively. “I thought you were above all that.”

“He’s manipulating you. He just wants to be King—surely you see that.”

By the Flames—Luther had told him *everything*.

My anger flared to life. I pulled out of his grip and glared at him, ignoring the pairs of dancers that whirled around us. “This is none of your business, Taran.”

“I’m just looking out for you, Queenie. I know you think you can find some good in him, but he’s a selfish prick. He doesn’t deserve you.”

I dropped my voice to a low hiss. “I know it looks like Henri only agreed to marry me to become King, but I’ve known him my whole life, so don’t you dare presume to—”

“Who is Henri?”

I froze. “What?”

“I was talking about Aemonn.” Taran’s eyes narrowed. “Who were *you* talking about?”

I staggered back a step. “I—I didn’t—no one.”

Couples around us were beginning to take notice. Perth stepped forward with a concerned look from where he stood watch on the edge of the dance floor.

Taran gave them a quick glance, then tugged me off to the side. “You’re *engaged*?”

“Yes.” I winced at the memory of Henri’s betrayed expression. “I think. Maybe.”

“To someone you knew before you were Queen...” He trailed off thoughtfully, then jolted and gawked at me. “Lumnos’s tits, to a morta—”

“Hush!” I slapped both hands over his mouth, waiting to remove them until his bulging eyes shrank to a normal size. “Yes. Someone I grew up with.”

He studied my face, frowning deeply. “Does Luther know?”

“Yes. He’s helping me keep it quiet until after the Challenging.”

A swirl of emotions passed across Taran’s expression, sadness eventually settling into his pinched brow. “I knew there was something he wasn’t telling me. He’s never... you’re the only... *fuck*, now it all makes sense.”

“What makes sense?”

“Why Luther is the way he is around you. Why he won’t...” He sighed heavily and scrubbed a hand down his face. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Why Luther won’t what?”

Taran smirked. “Aemonn’s going to lose his mind when he finds out.”

“Aemonn already knows.” I glared. “And don’t change the subject.”

His smile vanished. “Aemonn knows?”

“Yes. He’s helping me hide it, too. Actually, he—”

“Fuck.” Taran’s jaw went tight. All hint of lightness hardened into something sharp, something dangerous. Suddenly Taran seemed taller, broader, fiercer. “That’s not good, Diem. That’s really not good.”

“You’re being dramatic. Aemonn’s been very understanding.”

“*For now.* That’s how he works. He pretends to be your friend until he knows your weakness, then he’s the worst enemy you could ever have. You can’t trust him.”

“I don’t have a choice, Taran. He already knows.”

Veins jumped along Taran’s throat as his furious glare settled on his brother, who was holding court on the other side of the dance floor. “If he threatens you, I’ll kill him. I’ll actually kill him.”

The music ended, and I extricated myself from Taran’s vice-like grip, trying to ignore the hook of worry his warning had lodged in my side. “I’ll be fine. I can handle Aemonn.”

Taran’s eyes stayed on his brother. “I need to find Luther.”

I waved a hand toward the corridor. “He was in the hallway with Iléana. You three have fun.”

A throng of onlookers closed in around me as I pushed my way through the crowd. I ignored Perthe’s distant shouts to wait, desperate to get far away from the dance floor before the next song began.

A hand grazed my shoulder.

“Diem, was it?”

I spun to see Jean Hanoverre looking down at me with bedroom eyes and an impish smile. Behind him, a pack of Hanoverres crept closer. Their vicious grins turned my hook of worry into a full-blown anchor.

“Your name is Diem?” he repeated, one eyebrow lifting high. “Diem... *Bellator?*”

I clenched my jaw. “It’s Diem Corbois.”

“Sure,” he said, drawing the word out with a sinister chuckle.

My focus darted between him and his cousins. They were casually circling around me, closing me in a ring that had the hair on my arms rising.

On instinct, my hand moved to my hips in search of the daggers that had lived there for more than a decade, now finding only empty tulle.

“I apologize for my grandmother,” Jean said. “You know how troublesome elders can get, with their sharp claws and addled minds.”

“I get the feeling anyone who tells Marthe Hanoverre she has an addled mind will find themselves at the end of her sharp claws.”

His smile slid slideways, telling me just how accurate that statement had been.

“It’s practically unheard of for someone unknown to arrive at court. And when that someone arrives with a Crown...” He scoured me from head to toe. “We’re all so very curious to know more.”

“Lucky that I have a long reign ahead, then. Plenty of time for us all to get acquainted.”

“If you survive the Challenging, you mean.”

“Oh, I will.” I smiled. “You can be certain of that.”

I held firm to his gaze as he stared me down, the two of us locked in our own sort of mini-Challenge. Bodies brushed against my elbows as the Hanoverres edged closer.

“You know,” he said, “there’s a nasty rumor going around that you can’t use your magic. Some say you don’t even have any magic at all.”

“You saw it at the funeral,” I protested. “My dress, and my skin—”

“Petty parlor tricks,” someone hissed near my shoulder.

“A trick of the sun,” another called out from my side.

Jean gave an exaggerated pout. “See what I mean? I told them it can’t possibly be true. You’re the Crown. Of course you have magic.”

“I do.”

“Because if you didn’t...” A whirlpool of shadows churned in his navy eyes. “A Crown without magic would make our realm vulnerable. It would put a target on us all. If the mortal filth didn’t attack, the other realms surely would.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and sauntered in a slow circle around me. I kept my face fixed ahead in a brazen—and perhaps foolish—signal that I considered him no threat.

“And in that unfortunate case,” he continued as he walked, “every House would be duty-bound to Challenge that Crown. It would be our responsibility to safeguard our people.”

I lifted my eyes to the ceiling and tried not to lose myself in fantasies of dragging House Hanoverre to the dungeon *en masse*.

“It’s a good thing, then, that your Queen has no such issue,” I drawled.

“Prove it,” a voice behind me sneered.

“Prove it,” another repeated.

“Prove it.”

“Prove it.”

The Hanoverres echoed the statement until it was nearly a chant, a hushed drumbeat that had Jean’s arrogance growing with every strike.

“You know how it is with rumors,” he said. “Eliminate them early, or they take on a life of their own.”

I shifted into his walking path, forcing him to a halt. “Perhaps I didn’t make it clear enough earlier to your family how willing I am to *eliminate* anyone who spreads lies about me.”

He shrugged, unmoved by my threat. “Then prove it’s a lie. Surely someone as powerful as a Crown should have no trouble giving us a display.”

“I don’t have to prove myself to anyone.”

“What are you afraid of, Diem?” he asked with mock innocence. “It’s just a little magic.”

I bit my tongue and said nothing.

“Come on,” he pushed. “Show us what you can do.”

He circled around me again, now no longer looking at me but at his kin. “Show us.”

“Show us,” another person echoed.

“Show us.”

“Show us.”

Nerves crept along my back as they penned me in, hungry wolves stalking a stray lamb.

I could do this. I could use my magic. I’d used it earlier tonight—I *think*. I wasn’t sure how, or what I’d actually accomplished, but I’d given in to the *voice*. I just had to do it again.

I burrowed down into my soul as I searched for the godhood.

Come on, I pleaded. *Come out and play*.

The *voice* was silent.

“Having problems, Diem?” Jean asked. The crowd snickered, their grins bordering on bloodthirsty.

I remembered Luther’s advice about needing strong emotion to call it forward. Internally, I grasped at the hollow cavern of my heart, looking for a loose thread of feeling to unravel, but every attempt slipped right through my fingers.

Help me, I begged.

Still, the *voice* was silent.

Perhaps there was no emotion left to draw from. I had spent the night being grabbed and teased, insulted and challenged, threatened and cornered, and the onslaught had finally left me numb.

Even the thought of failing now inspired no meaningful fear, because I knew this game of theirs had nothing to do with my magic. The only point of this charade was to humiliate me. And for better or worse, for all my faults and weaknesses, one thing was true:

Diem Bellator was not a woman *anyone* could humiliate.

“No,” I said simply. “I won’t.”

“Won’t?” Jean asked. “Or can’t?”

“Won’t,” I lied.

He let out a breathy chuckle, then let his gaze drop brazenly to my chest, sneering at the sight of the scar on my collarbone. His tongue clicked disapprovingly as he reached out to touch it. “Oh dear, Diem. What will we do with you?”

“*Kneel.*”

A broad, masculine hand closed around Jean’s wrist and squeezed, trembling with the force of its angry grip.

“Kneel to her, Jean. That’s what you’ll do.”

Jean’s face turned a ghostly pale. I didn’t have to follow his panicked stare. I would know that voice—and that hand—anywhere.

Just like I knew the silky aura of power caressing my skin.

“Keep your hands off my Queen,” Luther snarled. “And you will address her by her title, or I will rip out your tongue with my hands and nail it to the door of House Hanoverre.”

Jean grimaced, struggling to tug free. “We were only having a friendly chat. Diem here—” He moaned in pain as Luther’s grip tightened. “*Her Majesty* is refusing to show us her magic.”

Luther released him with a violent shove, sending Jean stumbling backward into the arms of his jackals.

“Consider yourself lucky,” Luther growled. “When Her Majesty revealed her power to me, she nearly flayed my skin from my bones and brought down half the palace.” The corner of his mouth curled up slightly, and my stomach went weightless.

“Then surely she’ll have no issue giving us a taste.”

“It’s not safe.”

Jean scoffed. “So it’s too much power for her to handle?”

“It’s too much power for *you* to handle. A single shot of her magic burned through my strongest shield. A weaker Descended like you would be left in a pile of ash.”

I propped a hand on my hip. “When you put it that way, maybe I should show him.”

Luther’s eyes slid to me. A crackle of energy passed between us that said more than any words ever could.

“In this crowded chamber, I would not recommend it, Your Majesty,” he said with a deferential nod. “The risk of an innocent person being harmed is too high.”

Though we were both playacting our roles, shielding our truths from the world, there was a sliver of truth to his words. I *had* ripped through Luther’s shields without even trying. And if I really did unleash my magic in this packed ballroom...

I scolded myself for even attempting it, and I half wondered if that was exactly why the godhood hadn’t answered my call to arms.

“Sorry,” I said to Jean with a shrug. “I wouldn’t be a very wise Queen if I ignored the counsel of my own High General.”

Jean glared at us both. “I guess my sister was right. We’ll see what you’re capable of soon enough—at the Challenging.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It turned out dancing wasn't half bad.

Eleanor appointed herself master of my evening dance card, determined to keep me trapped and out of any more trouble. The end of each song brought her back to my side to swap out my partner and whisper instructions.

"Ask about his grandchildren and you won't have to talk for the whole song."

"Don't mention carrots, it's a sensitive subject."

"Breathe through your mouth, she's very nice but she smells like feet."

The majority of Eleanor's picks were much older Descended. Several I recognized as leaders of their Houses—no coincidence, I suspected. A long string of handsome young men pestered her while throwing hungry looks my way, but she waved them all off, to my grateful relief.

Hours flew by, and as the end of the evening neared, I felt as if I'd danced with nearly every person of importance in the room.

All but one.

After my run-in with Jean Hanoverre, Luther reunited me with Perthe and gave him a scathing lecture about my penchant for wandering off alone, then stalked away before either of us could speak. By the time I spied him tucked into a shadow near the stage, I was stuck on the dance floor, stealing glances between spins and dips, greetings and goodbyes.

Even at a distance, we were somehow connected. Every time I looked his way, his pale eyes were locked on me as if I were the only object of interest in the room.

Taran and Alixe eventually joined his vigil, the three of them whispering as they stood guard. Occasionally, I spied a woman approach Luther for a dance, and more than a few times, that woman was Iléana. He only relented once—a turn with Lily to a fun, jaunty tune that had our shoulders brushing in passing and the brief escape of a smile on his lips.

When the crowd grew thin, Eleanor filled in the rest of my dance card with her own name. We grabbed Lily and careened across the room, laughing until our sides ached. Although Henri and the Guardians were never far from my mind, I gave myself permission to have fun for this one fleeting moment, all too aware that my life might not have many more chances at happiness left.

One of the musicians stepped forward to kiss my hand and accept my gushing praise, and he announced to the room the next song would be their last.

My eyes snapped to where Luther had been standing. Taran was throwing his arm around a reluctant-looking Alixe and hauling her toward the dance floor with a downright evil grin, but Luther had vanished.

“Diem, dear,” Aemonn crowed loudly. He flipped the edges of his cape, molting feathers flying in a cloud behind him. “How blessed I have been to spend this evening at your side.”

I shoved down the sting of disappointment and tried to muster a smile.

Aemonn extended his hand out to me. “Let us honor your reign by finishing this night as it began—together.” He paused at the center of the dance floor and twitched his fingers in a beckoning motion. “Come.”

My teeth ground together at being *summoned* like a dog to heel. I tried to remind myself that everything about this night had been a calculated performance, and this was no different. I swallowed down my pride and started toward him.

“Honey,” he crooned, “may this be the first of many evenings we spend as—”

A brooding shadow slid into my path.

“My Queen. A dance?”

Luther held out his palm, and my heart thundered. My hand was in his before I could think through the wisdom of so publicly snubbing Aemonn for the man he hated most.

Luther wove his fingers through mine and nestled our joined hands close to his chest. His other hand pressed high on my back, gently coiling me in until my soft curves melted into his hard lines, then slid beneath my hair so his fingers brushed against my skin.

His touch was the changing of the seasons, the dead, cold grey of winter thawing and giving way to the colorful hope of spring. The promise of something new, something exquisitely *alive*.

It's just lust, I told myself. Physical attraction. You're lonely, and he's... very pretty to look at. Nothing more. It can't be more.

The rest of the world seemed to fall away as we plunged into a spotlight of our own creation. The musicians, the crowd, the angry sputtering from Aemonn—even the room itself tucked behind a shadowy veil, leaving the Queen and her Prince, forged together as one.

Looking in his eyes was a gamble I was certain to lose, so I tucked my chin, my temple resting against his cheek. I hooked my other arm over his shoulder, and a shiver rippled through him as my fingers grazed the nape of his neck. The power of knowing how my touch affected him made me acutely aware of every place our skin connected.

Lust. Physical attraction. Nothing more.

“Is everything taken care of?” I asked, my voice coming out more husky than I’d planned.

“Yes. The woman from Umbros made them believe they no longer wished to attack and sent them home.”

“She can do that? Plant ideas in their head and make them believe those thoughts are their own?”

He nodded. “I knew the Umbros magic was powerful, but seeing it in action was unsettling.”

“If that power is unleashed in a war...” I shuddered, and he pulled me closer. “They’re going to be furious when they realize what happened. What if they come back?”

“I let them keep their blades, but I had their other weapons and explosives dumped into the Sacred Sea. They won’t be able to try another attack like that any time soon.”

Luther spoke of the rebels more as a nuisance than a threat. While I was grateful he didn’t seem to share his kinsmen’s desire to see them all slaughtered, a part of me worried he did not see how dangerous the Guardians were—and the lengths they would go to see their plans fulfilled.

I blew out a long breath, my heart conflicted. “What do we do now?”

And when did this become a ‘we’? I wondered.

“We stay focused on the Challenging. If the Umbros Queen believes she can control you with what her Descended learned, she’ll want you on the throne. Any move she makes will come after the coronation.”

I tried to clamp down on my burgeoning dread. I had once thought surviving the Challenging was my greatest obstacle, but between Iléana’s

threats, the Guardians' war, and the Umbros Queen's plans, surviving long enough to be coronated might only be the beginning.

"Eleanor told me about Marthe Hanoverre's accusations," he said tightly. "I'm sorry I was not there to step in."

I bristled a bit. "I handled it."

"I know. Very impressively, I hear. Still... I should have been there."

"You can't fight all my battles for me, Luther."

"I seem to remember you claiming me as your High General." He pulled back to look at me, his features warming. "Fighting all your battles is quite literally my job."

I dipped my face to hide my smile, and a low chuckle rolled out of him, the sound of it raising goosebumps on my skin. My fingers curled, my nails gently scratching against the back of his neck. His grip on me tightened.

"You're still not my advisor."

"Patience, my Queen." His thumb stroked a slow trail up my spine. "The most precious rewards come from the battles most fiercely fought."

My body was a sparkling chandelier, every nerve ending alight in a symphony of flames that flickered with each unsteady breath. The feeling of being in his arms—the rightness of it, the overwhelming sense of being safe and protected. Accepted.

Loved.

I inhaled sharply. My pulse broke into a sprint.

Lust. Physical attraction. Nothing more.

It can't be more.

"Henri."

I wasn't sure if I thought it or said it aloud, but the shift in Luther's posture told me Henri's name had spilled from my lips. His back went rigid, and cool air rushed between us as he shifted to give me space.

"I sent him home. I didn't think his spending the night in the dungeon would serve either of you well."

Indeed. It would have driven the knife of my betrayal so deep, it might never be dislodged. Perhaps that would have served Luther's interests—and yet he'd put me first. Put *me and Henri* first.

"He'll forgive you," Luther said quietly. "If he loves you, he'll understand why you did it."

I shook my head. "I'm not so sure. Maybe there are some things love can't survive."

"It can. If the love is true, there's nothing it won't endure."

"How do you know?"

When he didn't answer, I lifted my eyes to his—a critical mistake. The depth of the emotion I saw there crested over me and pulled me out with the tide.

I was drowning in this man. From the moment I met him, I had been kicking against the current and holding my breath, struggling to get back to the safe, familiar surface—but every look, every touch, dragged me deeper still. I felt the burning of it in my lungs, as real and visceral as if I were plunging into the Sacred Sea itself.

And maybe it made me weak, or a traitor, or a fool, but *gods* did I want to close my eyes and sink forever.

My throat squeezed tight with emotion—for all the things I should want, but didn't, and all the things I did want, but couldn't have.

"I don't know what to do," I whispered, my walls cracking open and exposing the raw nerve of my deepest, most vulnerable fears. "About the mortals and the Guardians. About my magic, the Twenty Houses, the Challenging. About Henri, and..."

About you.

"Diem," he murmured.

My shoulders drooped. "I pretend like I know what I'm doing, but it's all a fraud. I'm letting everyone down—"

"You're not."

"*I am.* So many lives are at risk, and I can't stop making mistakes. How am I supposed to take down the Crowns and stop the Descended when I can't—"

I froze.

Shit. Oh, *shit*.

I shrank back, terrified at how much I'd just revealed. It had felt so easy, so natural to show him the parts of myself I never let anyone else see. But he was still a Descended Prince—and I'd just flashed the knife I'd been hiding behind his back.

"I misspoke. I'm not... I wouldn't—"

"Diem," he said again, firmer this time, his dark brows furrowing.

"I... I didn't mean—"

“I know what you meant.”

Fuck.

I started to pull away, but something in his eyes—something bright and tenderly guarded—held me still.

“You’ve asked me why I serve you,” he said. “*This*, my Queen. This is why.”

I shook my head, too scared to even breathe. “I don’t understand.”

“More than any of the other Kindred, Blessed Mother Lumnos loved the mortals. She never wanted them forced into submission—she commanded her Descended to guard them from harm, not be the cause of it.” He took my face in his hands, cradling it in his palms. “Even before you had the Crown, I felt her urging me toward you. The more I see of you, the more I understand why. She wants change, and she believes you can achieve it.” His thumb brushed across my cheek. “And so do I.”

I could do little more than gape in silence. Though I knew Luther harbored sympathies for the mortals... was it possible our goals were truly aligned?

“I do want that,” I finally stammered, “I want that more than anything, but what can I do? I can barely get through a day without getting myself killed.”

“You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for. You are the bravest person I’ve ever met, and you are resilient, even when you fail. You are unswerving in defense of those you love and the things you believe in. You never stop fighting—”

“Those things don’t make me wise, Luther, they make me reckless.”

“They make you the Queen that we need. I know you have no fondness for the Descended, and yet you see beyond the blood that runs in a person’s veins. I have seen that in the kindness you’ve shown Perthe, my family... even Aemonn, for Kindred’s sake. And I saw it tonight, in the mercy you asked me to show the Guardians. Any other Descended Crown would have slaughtered them, and any mortal Crown would have let them slaughter *us*. But you...” He looked at me like a flower raising its head to the life-giving sun. “You chose the harder path. If we ever wish to see peace in this land, we need a leader like that—a leader like you.”

I closed my eyes, overwhelmed by the weight of his words and the calling he was laying at my feet.

I arrived here with an ill-thought-out plan to *destroy the Descended*. Though I still believed their unjust rule needed to be brought to ashes, I had found good people here, people that I cared about and wanted to protect. And I knew firsthand that the rebels were no innocents, either.

There had to be a better way.

A war was coming. Two sides were preparing. But maybe instead of joining an army... I could lead one.

Maybe I could *become* one.

Luther tipped his forehead until it lay flush with mine, our eyes closing as we bathed in the charged air humming around us. “You are my Queen, and I am your sword. Point me at your enemies, and watch them fall. Lead this world, Diem, and I will follow you—into war, into death, into the tundra of hell itself.” He took my palm and set it against his chest, just above the patch of unscarred skin that lay beneath his jacket. “You are the fate my heart was spared for. As long as it beats, you will never fight alone.”

My own heart exploded, filling my body and straining against my skin, my emotions too vast to be contained. He shifted his face just enough, our noses grazing as his lips came dangerously close. My hand slid up his neck and wove into his hair, fingers trembling with restraint as I fought the urge to close the distance.

Lust. Physical attraction. Nothing more...

“What would happen,” I breathed, “if we gave into this *thing* between us?”

“I don’t know,” he said roughly. “But that question consumes my every thought.”

His chin lifted almost indiscernibly.

Waiting for me. Letting me choose.

I swallowed hard. “At the dinner, you said you had no interest in marrying me, only in serving me. Was that... did you...”

The unasked question hung in the silence, every second thick with anticipation. It felt as if my future was holding its breath, waiting for his answer as eagerly as my heart.

“Every person in this room wants something from you,” he said after a heavy pause. “They look at you, and they see the things they want to *take*. I know, because I lived it. From the moment I became heir, everyone wanted to be either my friend or my lover. When you took the Crown, I swore to be

different—to serve *your* goals, not mine. I told myself that even if you had no one else, you would at least have me. I never wanted to become just another person who wanted to steal a piece of you for themselves.”

He let out a shuddering sigh. “And I have failed. Completely, irreversibly failed. I don’t just want a piece of you—I want them all.” His thumb raked across my lower lip. “I want every breath, every laugh, every tear. Every taste of your mouth, every inch of your skin. I want to kneel at your feet, soaked in the blood of your enemies, then worship your body until you scream my name.” His hands slid to my hips and tugged me closer. “Yes, Diem, I want to serve you—in every way a man can.”

I couldn’t think. Couldn’t *breathe*.

“I want to burn alive in that fire in your eyes. I want it to melt me down and forge me into the weapon you need me to be. I want to stand by your side for the rest of my life, and I don’t need you to marry me and make me a fucking *king* to do it.”

“Luther,” I rasped, begging—for what, I wasn’t sure.

“I pledged you my loyalty, and you have it, no matter your choice. But I cannot keep lying to you or to myself. I want all of you, Diem.” His lips brushed against mine, his words breathing straight into my lungs. “You already have all of me.”

The music crescendoed to its final note, and the applause of the crowd shattered our cocoon. I staggered back, flushed and blinking. Suddenly, Eleanor was murmuring something in my ear, and then Aemonn was there, looping my arm around his and tugging me toward the remaining guests to say our goodbyes. All of it was a confusing haze—the lights too dim, the voices muffled and far away.

Except him.

Luther’s smoldering gaze held mine as the crowd consumed me and exploited me for every last ounce of influence they could siphon. When the throng of faces had nearly blocked him from my sight, he raised his palm to his chest, just above his heart, dipped his chin, and walked away.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“I ’d say that was a successful ball, don’t you think?”

Eleanor nudged me with her shoulder as we walked arm-in-arm to the palace’s formal meeting rooms. Today was the first of the House Receptions and my first time with Ulther’s Crown Council at my side, along with the additions of Eleanor and my father.

“No one died,” I agreed. “That’s a positive.”

“Everyone’s talking about how beautiful and confident you were. At court, there’s really no higher compliments.”

I had plenty of thoughts on the Descended prioritizing beauty and arrogance over all else, but her expression was so radiant with contagious joy, I forced myself to hold back.

“Everyone was too far gone on the wine to notice my dancing. That’s another positive.”

She laughed and squeezed my arm. “You were a lovely dancer.”

“It’s treason to lie to your Queen, Eleanor.”

“Your last dance with Luther seemed to go especially well,” she teased. “Anything you want to tell me about?”

My cheeks turned hot. I had barely thought of much else since that final dance. I tossed and turned all night, my conversations with Luther running on a torturous loop.

His words. His touch. How he protected the mortals without question. The way he defended me to Iléana. His belief in my reign.

What he’d confessed about how he felt.

I’d risen before dawn overwhelmed with guilt over Henri and determined to put Luther out of his misery with a firm but polite rejection. For an hour, I paced my room and rehearsed my speech while Sorae watched with skeptical eyes and the occasional snort of judgment.

By the time Luther arrived for our daily breakfast, I’d felt confident both my speech and my resolve were solid as godstone, until one flash of

that smile he reserved just for me had a very different response rising to my lips—one I hadn't yet dared to speak aloud.

But he hadn't come alone. Alixe had joined in to give a report on the latest movements of the Emarion Army, which eventually devolved into the three of us swapping stories about our most memorable fights and embarrassing training mishaps.

It made for a lovely morning of laughter and budding friendship, but now I felt more confused about what I wanted than ever.

"Well?" Eleanor prodded. "You two were dancing like you were the only people in the room."

"We had a long talk," I said carefully.

She snorted. "Did he finally admit he's fallen head over heels for you?" I stopped and stared at her, and Eleanor's jaw dropped nearly to the floor. "Blessed Mother, he *did*."

"No! I mean... not in those words. He—he said..." I toyed with the ends of my hair. "I asked about what he said at the cousins' dinner—about wanting to serve me, not marry me."

"And?" She seized me by the arms and shook me with brows high. "*And!*?"

"And... he said he wanted me. All of me."

Eleanor gazed at me with honest-to-gods *hearts* in her eyes and made a high-pitched swooning sound. I buried my head in my hands and groaned.

"Do you feel the same way?"

"I'm engaged, Eleanor."

"That's not what I asked."

"I'm *engaged*."

She pried my hands from my face, forcing me to meet her stare. "If you weren't engaged... would you feel the same way?"

Because Eleanor had been a loyal friend to me—maybe the only one I'd ever had, other than Henri—and because I was tired of hiding my soul away and pretending to be unbreakable, I let the armor fall, and I let her see all the anguish and doubt that was rending my heart in two.

"I had a life before this Crown, Eleanor. I had a family and a career, a man I cared for. And now I'm being given a *new* family, a *new* calling, and feelings I've never had before..."

I squeezed my eyes closed in a desperate bid to keep my composure.

“I’m losing myself. I feel like I’ve been set on fire, and everything that makes me who I am is burning away, bit by bit.”

Eleanor pulled me in and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. “I know we haven’t known each other long, but I can already see the woman you are. I see your kindness and your values. Those things are what define you, Diem. Not your titles or the person you marry.”

She pulled back and tapped the medallion at my chest bearing the House Corbois insignia. “Everyone says this phoenix represents dying and coming back as something new, but I disagree. I think it’s a symbol of surviving when the world burns down around us. It’s a reminder that no challenge can destroy the parts of us that truly matter. We’re not reborn in the flames. We’re *revealed*.”

She brushed my tears away, her fiercely loving expression reminding me so much of my mother it hurt. “This man you’re engaged to—if you love him, then fight for him. But if you’re only holding on to him because you’re afraid of losing who you are...” She took my hands in hers. “Nothing can take that away from you, Diem. No Crown, no man. Not even the Kindred themselves.”

I let her words sink in, and I let myself consider what it might mean to accept them—not just the consequences for my heart, but for all of Emarion, if I followed this path Luther believed I was being called to walk.

“You’re a wonderful advisor, Eleanor Corbois,” I said between snuffles, touching my forehead to hers. “And you’re an even better friend.”

“Are you two about to kiss?”

Eleanor let go of me as her eyes rolled to the ceiling with an exasperated groan. “I swear Taran, you really know how to ruin a moment.”

We turned to see Taran and Luther sauntering down the hall. They were both smirking, their postures relaxed, but as Luther took in my reddened eyes and wet cheeks, his smile vanished. His shoulders pulled tight, his expression turning sharp.

“I knew every man in the palace was trying to get in your bed, Queenie,” Taran joked. “I didn’t know you had the women lining up, too.”

“What can I say Tare-Tare, I’m just so sweet and well-behaved, it’s irresistible,” I teased back, laughing weakly as I wiped my face dry.

“What happened?” Luther asked tersely.

“I’m fine,” I rushed out. “It’s nothing.”

“*Tare-Tare*?” Eleanor howled. “I’m calling you that from now on.”

Taran glowered. "You might want to rethink that, *Ellie Belly*."

She scowled.

"Who hurt you?" Luther demanded, ignoring his cousins. Two gauntlets of light appeared on his hands, tendrils of power crackling around him as he clenched his fists.

Taran looked at me, then at Luther, then shrugged. "Go on then, tell us who to kill." He held out palms, and two hissing orbs of shadow hovered over his hands. "Is it Aemonn? Please say it's Aemonn."

"Aemonn?" Luther snarled, eyes narrowing. "Did he—"

"Blessed Kindred, put the magic away," Eleanor scolded. "No one hurt anyone. We were just talking about our *feelings*. It's a thing people do sometimes. You two should give it a try."

Taran chuckled as his orbs disappeared, but Luther held firm. My heart reeled at the protective fire blazing in his eyes.

I offered him a small smile. "I'm alright. Really."

Eleanor walked up to Taran and linked her arm with his. "Come on Tare-Tare, walk with me. Maybe we can make a drinking game out of these House Receptions." Their laughter echoed down the corridor as they continued ahead.

Luther dissolved his magic and looked me over carefully. He offered out his elbow. "May I escort you?"

I hesitated, then slipped my hand through and set my palm on his forearm. Even through the thick fabric of his doublet, I felt the same buzz of energy pass between us as if our flesh were bare.

"Your father is here," he said. "I had the guards take him to the meeting room." He paused. "I have to ask... are you certain about this? Once you present him as your advisor, there's no going back. The Houses will want to know everything about him, including his relationship to you."

I forced down a lump in my throat. No, I wasn't certain. Just the thought of exposing my father to the powerful Descended at these House Receptions made my pulse race.

I glanced up at him. "You promised me that if I claimed House Corbois, you would protect my friends and family. Do you still intend to keep that promise?"

He said nothing, but it was the look he gave me, the vow that smoldered in his expression, that spoke a thousand words. A vow to fight—with his life, if it came to it—to protect me and everything I cared for.

“And you still believe you can keep them safe, even if their connection to me is known?”

“I have my most loyal guards on your father and on Teller, as well as with Maura and the healer’s center.” He frowned. “But Henri...”

“I know,” I sighed. “Having guards watch him would do more harm than good.”

Luther nodded. “I trust my men, but if they were to discover his involvement with the Guardians, it would be dangerous—for both of you.” He stared down the hall as his jaw flexed. “Once you present him as your betrothed, I’ll make arrangements for an escort, if he will accept one.”

I didn’t respond. Henri would never consent to being followed by Descended guards, but that did not answer the real question that lay in Luther’s words.

We walked in silence, our steps heavy with the weight of everything that had passed between us last night.

“Any last suggestions?” I said with a chipper smile that I was certain he could see right through. “Eleanor already warned me not to ask Evrim about his brother’s gambling habit or bring up what happened at the last Forging Ball.”

“Good advice. He’ll never live that night down.” His lips slid into a smirk. “He’s also *very* touchy about his height.”

My grin turned real—and wicked. “I’ll tuck that little gem away for use at a later date.”

Luther let out a dark chuckle that made my chest go fluttery, then a calm focus took hold of his features.

“Evrim uses fear over the mortals to cover his real interest, which is the profit he stands to make if the war escalates. The more scared everyone is, the more weapons they buy from him.”

“Interesting. So you don’t think he really hates the mortals?”

“No, though he’s happy to encourage it with the other Houses. Other than House Corbois, House Benette is the most powerful of the Twenty Houses, but also the easiest to manipulate. They will always go where the money is.”

My mind wrestled with the potential of that information. As we approached the meeting room, the sound of belly laughter roared from within. Luther and I shared a confused look.

When I entered, Taran had his arm slung around my father's shoulders in a near-headlock. Though my father was strongly built for a mortal, he looked comically tiny beside Taran, who was massive even by Descended standards. Eleanor's hands were clasped in my father's, the three of them laughing so hard tears had formed at the corners of their eyes.

"Queenie!" Taran called out. "Your father's telling us how you refused to wear clothes for a month straight."

"And how you set all your dresses on fire because you couldn't climb trees in them," Eleanor added.

I blinked at what I was seeing—my father, joking with my new Descended friends as if they were old chums. Something warm and precious burst in my heart.

"When she was four, she couldn't pronounce the letter S without spitting," my father said with a grin. "For months, she walked around drooling all over the house."

"Father!" I shouted, laughing. I ran up and gave him a kiss on his cheek. "You're supposed to advise me on how to torture *them*, not the other way around."

"Too late," Taran said. "We're going to make him a regular at Corbois dinners."

My stomach churned at that suggestion.

"Your Highness," my father said to Luther with a deep nod.

Luther returned the gesture, his expression now hardened into his typical firm facade. "Good to see you again, sir. And please, call me Luther."

Between the four of us, I wasn't sure whose face looked the most shocked. Luther's insistence on titles bordered on pathological. Every time I gave someone leave to call me Diem rather than Your Majesty, he cringed so hard I thought he might be experiencing actual, physical pain. Though he tolerated his closest friends using his name in private, I'd never seen him permit it from a stranger—and certainly not in formal meetings such as these.

"How nice to finally have some pretty faces to look at during these dreadful Council meetings," Aemonn said, flashing me a smile as he strolled in with his father.

"What are they doing here?" Garath demanded, jerking his chin to Eleanor and my father. "They aren't on the Council."

“Good morning to you, as well,” I clipped.

He scowled. “Your Majesty,” he gritted out in reluctant greeting.

I gave him my sunniest smile. “Actually, I have appointed Eleanor and my f—Andrei as my advisors. They are the first, and thus far *only*, members of my Council.”

“Along with your High General,” Luther corrected, his eyes still twinkling with victory over his accidental appointment at last night’s ball.

Garath eyed my father. “The other Houses will be furious to see a mortal on the Council when they’ve been demanding their own seat for centuries.”

“Andrei was already an advisor to the late King on mortal matters,” I said. “This is merely a continuation of Ulther’s approach, as Remis and I discussed.”

Garath started to spit something back, and I rolled my eyes and turned my back to him in a blatant dismissal. I could feel the daggers slicing into my back from his incensed glare.

My father stared at me with a tight expression that seemed to rotate through awe, confusion, and dismay. “If my presence is a problem, I’m happy to—”

“Nonsense, *Commander*,” I said firmly, hoping he heard the pride in my tone. “The Crown Council is mine to appoint. End of discussion.”

Voices approached, and soon Remis appeared with Evrim and a small entourage. We briefly made introductions while Eleanor took my father’s hand and lurked in the background.

I took my seat in the center of the room, a large stone-walled chamber that was far more austere than the rest of the palace. A tapestry of the goddess Lumnos hung as a backdrop behind a throne-like wooden chair, which was carved with the sun-and-moon sigil of the realm and surrounded by the crests of the Twenty Houses. Remis and Garath sat on either side of me, with the rest of the Council spread in an arc behind us. Evrim sat directly opposite me, his chair far simpler and slightly lower-set, with his own advisors seated behind him.

“Welcome, Evrim,” I started, keeping my tone light and amiable. “It was a pleasure to see your family again last night. I only regret I never had the chance to meet your mother. I hear she was the most beautiful woman in all of Lumnos.”

Evrin gaped at me for a long beat, then a shade of fondness softened his features. “Yes, she was.”

“She would have been so proud of all you’ve built. Of her beautiful grandchildren, too.”

Evrin went a bit moony-eyed, and I nearly turned around and kissed Eleanor. She’d given me a wealth of advice on how to woo Evrin, and so far, it was working brilliantly.

“I hear your son is in the top of his class.” I batted my lashes prettily. “He takes after his father, I’m sure.”

“Not enough to my liking. He’s got a rebellious spirit, but with the right discipline, I’ll break it soon enough.”

My heart twisted at his cold tone.

“Interesting that you should mention my son,” he went on. “Lorris tells me that when he met you, you claimed to be from one of the smaller Houses.”

I stiffened. “I didn’t—”

“Her Majesty was born to Harold Corbois,” Remis interrupted. “His line was quite distant. He never resided at the palace with the rest of the family. He died before her birth, and she was raised by kind neighbors who took her in.”

“And your mother?” Evrin asked me.

“Died in childbirth, sadly,” Remis answered for me. “Her name is lost to history. From a lower House, I hear.”

I clenched my jaw. I had never planned to hide my status as a half-mortal. Risky as it might be, the half-mortal children Luther had smuggled out—and the ones he couldn’t save—deserved a Queen willing to claim them as her kin.

With one smooth lie, Remis had just taken that choice out of my hands.

“Marthe Hanoverre seems to believe Her Majesty was born of a mortal parent,” Evrin said.

“House Hanoverre accuses everyone they dislike of being a half-breed,” Garath said dismissively, and I had to curb my stunned look at his joining in the ruse.

Evrin drummed his fingers against the arm of his chair and studied me closely. His gaze roved my body, lingering on my chest a beat too long. A quiet growl rumbled from a chair behind me.

“Such a tragic upbringing,” Evrim said with false sympathy. “House Corbois abandoned its ties to you as a child. If you’re looking for another House to take you in, House Benette has much to offer.”

Remis and Garath squirmed in their seats. I rubbed my chin and let the offer hang for as long as I dared, reveling in their discomfort. I sighed and set my hand over the phoenix medallion. “A generous offer, but I will never, *ever* turn my back on my family.”

If only they knew the true intention behind those words.

Remis gave me a gracious smile shaded with relief, then looked back to Evrim. “Her Majesty is keen to continue the prosperity of my late brother’s reign. Since I have been ruling as Regent for several months, I will continue to take the lead—”

“The last several months have been *disastrous*,” Evrim said. “We’re losing business to Umbros, and my top clients have been receiving threats. Now those terrorists have destroyed my armory. If that is your leadership, it hardly gives me comfort.”

“What would give you comfort?” Remis challenged.

Evrim’s gaze slid to the chairs lined up behind me. “You can hardly expect me to speak openly with one of *them* in the room.”

“Andrei is a celebrated Commander in the Emarion Army,” I cut in. “His loyalty is indisputable.”

“He’s a mortal,” Evrim spat. “His very presence here is an insult.”

“He was an advisor to Ulther and helped him suppress several rebel uprisings,” I shot back. “I brought him here to show you how committed I am to preventing further violence.”

Evrim leaned forward and laid his elbows on his knees, glaring at me from beneath his brows. “I don’t want to prevent further violence. I want to hit them back ten times harder. I want to show those mortals the consequences of not knowing their place. We’ve allowed them to live here —”

“We—the *mortals* were here first,” I snapped.

I prayed my slip of the tongue went unnoticed, but too many of them shifted their weight, too many eyes narrowed in.

“This realm was given to us by the Kindred,” Evrim said.

“With a mandate to protect the mortals.”

“With a mandate to rule over them as we see fit. It is no coincidence the Crown has only ever been given to a Descended. It is our divine right.”

“My divine right. And I will rule over them, and you, as *I* see fit.”

Evrin leaned back in his chair and tilted his head to the side as he stared me down. Any friendliness I’d earned with my earlier flattery had crumbled to ash.

Garath cleared his throat. “Let us speak bluntly, Evrin. What will it take to avoid a Challenge from House Benette?”

“I want the people responsible for the attack on me found and tortured until they reveal everyone in their network.” Evrin spoke icily and without hesitation, his answer clearly settled long before today. “I want every Guardian found and executed. Publicly. Gruesomely. And then I want their families imprisoned to show the rest of them what happens if they cross us again.”

“You would have me punish innocent people?” I asked.

“I’m not done,” Evrin barked. “I want every eligible mortal enlisted in the army. They started this war, let them go off and fight it.”

“Fortos doesn’t have the resources to take on that many new soldiers,” my father’s voice rang out. “They barely have enough weapons as it is.”

I winced, proud of him for speaking up but knowing it was the worst possible thing to say.

Evrin smiled, visions of gold coins practically glinting in his eyes. “Then let them buy more. We’ll happily accommodate their orders.”

“Conscripting unwilling soldiers does more harm than good,” my father countered. “They may work against the army from within, sabotaging missions or diverting weapons to the rebels.”

“As long as they’re off Lumnos soil, I don’t care what they do. Let the Fortos King punish them.”

“The Emarion Army serves the entire continent. We can’t just think of ourselves—”

Evrin scoffed at me in disgust. “This is the kind of advisor you keep? A mortal who prioritizes other realms over our own home? Perhaps House Benette should Challenge you, after all.”

The room chilled into a deep silence. My fingernails dug into the armrests of my throne as I paused to choose my next words. Remis cut in before I could decide between diplomacy and annihilation.

“I’m sure we can find a compromise,” Remis said brightly. “Perhaps exceptions from army service for mortals who work for the Twenty Houses. As for the families of the rebels, we can give them a week’s notice to leave

the realm. If they're innocent, they will go. If not, we'll consider it an act of solidarity with the rebels and arrest them for treason."

Wood creaked beneath my fingers, my composure beginning to crack. *This* was Remis's compromise? This was the plan he expected me to sit quietly and accept?

My godhood swirled excitedly in my chest, sensing my spiraling temper.

Fight, its *voice* goaded.

A light formed beneath my palms, followed by a wisp of smoke and the scent of burning maple. The sensation of frost and fire spread across my skin as the back of my hands began to shimmer.

Something tugged at my attention, as if my name were being called in a timbre only I could hear. I looked back to see Luther's stare drilling into me. Sparks of his own power writhed angrily in his eyes. The air between us rippled, thick with the auras of two formidable godhoods screaming to be unleashed.

Almost too faintly to see, he shook his head. I took in a ragged breath and lifted my chin, and he did it again.

I looked back at Evrim and bit down hard on my tongue until I tasted the metallic tang of blood.

Evrim gave an offhand shrug. "I suppose I can take it under consideration."

"As will I," I snapped.

"It was *your* counter-offer."

"It was the Regent's counter-offer." I straightened in my throne. "I'll need to speak with all my advisors before making such an important decision."

In truth, I'd Challenge House Benette myself before I would ever agree to any such deal, but I needed time—time to plan, time to negotiate, and time to determine whether I could train my magic enough to survive a Challenge.

"Very well," Evrim said. "But decide quickly, Your Majesty. The Period of Challenging is short, and judgment day is coming."



“THAT COULD HAVE GONE BETTER,” I said sullenly, staring at the room of empty seats.

Garath and Remis had left to escort House Benette from the palace, while Luther had taken one look at my expression and made a quick excuse to pull the others away so my father and I could talk in private.

“You wear your emotions on your sleeve, Diem,” my father chided. “Your temper has always been your weakness.”

“They want me to execute innocent people and force families out of the realm. If anything is worth getting angry over, is it not that?”

“Does your anger actually help those people, or does it make you feel righteous while the situation gets worse?”

I crossed my arms and looked away. The wound cut deeper than he could possibly know, in no small part because I knew he was right.

“My silence won’t help them either,” I said defensively. “What good is being Queen if I don’t fight back?”

“Being a leader is about more than barking orders when people don’t do what you want. And how many times have I taught you that giving in to your emotions is the fastest way to lose a battle? You should know better.”

I didn’t answer for a long time, frowning as I stared at the empty chairs where House Benette had sat. Where each of my enemies would sit in these coming days, one by one, forcing me into more impossible choices.

He let out a long sigh. “I think I should resign as your advisor.”

My focus shot to him. “No.”

“My presence here hurts you. You need distance from the mortals.”

“I need *you*. You’re the only person I can trust.”

“You’re being selfish. Stop thinking about what you want, and think about what’s best for the realm.”

I flinched at the criticism, closing my eyes as my chest suffocated under the weight of his shame. I hadn’t realized until now just how badly I wanted my father to be proud of me as Queen—to be impressed by me and my plans, to be willing to stand by my side, whatever may come.

And I hadn’t realized until now just how badly it would hurt that he wasn’t.

“I’m sorry to be such a disappointment,” I said quietly.

He shook his head. “Diem, sweetheart, that’s not what I meant.”

“I accept your resignation.”

“I’m only trying to help—”

“Go home, Father.” I leapt out of my chair and stalked for the door without a final glance. “I’ll just have to do this alone.”

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Chapter Thirty

“Oh Teller, it was so lovely, Diem looked beautiful, she was so sparkly and queen-like, and everyone from school was there, and there was food and music, and we danced all night long, and then Elric got into the wine and made tiny light ponies that stampeded around the ballroom and kept burning everyone’s dresses, and then...”

My thoughts wandered as Lily gushed over the details of the ball to my brother, who was gazing at her in rapture like it was the most interesting thing he’d ever heard.

Though he smiled and nodded along in encouragement, I couldn’t miss his twinge of sadness at having not been invited. Teller would never admit it, but he desperately wanted to be a part of this world.

Lily’s world. *My* world.

After my fight with our father this morning, I’d been wrestling with how my mortal family fit into this new life. I wanted them close by, but with that came consequences. For them, for me, and for the realm.

Sometimes I thought about cutting them off altogether. Though it would destroy me, it would liberate them—let them live out the rest of their days in anonymity without the burden of my Crown hanging over them, too.

But then I thought of my mother, and Luther’s promise to bring her home by year end. Her loss had fractured our family, put us each on our own separate paths, with distance both real and emotional pushing us apart. But maybe, once she was home again—if I could survive that long—we could find our way through this.

There was nothing the Bellators couldn’t take on, as long as the four of us were together.

“...you should have seen it, the Hanoverres were awful, making all of these horrible accusations, and Diem went all angry Queen on them and she

was all, ‘Do you dare challenge me?’ and they were all, ‘No, Your Majesty, we would never’ and they got scared and ran away, and then...”

Teller arched an eyebrow at me, and I subtly shook my head. We both grinned at the silent understanding that Lily’s retelling had taken on some dramatic embellishment.

“...oh, and there were Descended from the other realms there, and they all gave her these fascinating gifts. There was an orb from Sophos that can answer any question, and—”

Teller perked up. “The Sophos Descended were there? Are they still in Lumnos?”

Lily nodded eagerly. “And they know about you! They even said you can come st—”

“*Lily*,” I snapped. She pursed her lips, cringing under my hard stare.

Teller looked between the two of us and frowned. “They knew about me?”

“It’s nothing.” I played with a loose thread to avoid meeting his eyes. “They just wanted to scare me by mentioning you. But I’m not going to let them hurt you.”

Neither of them responded.

I let out a harsh sigh. “Can we talk about something other than the ball?”

Teller’s eyes darted around my face as he tried to work out what I wasn’t telling him. “How did the House Reception go?”

“Fine.” I continued to tug absently at my sleeve. “Father resigned as my advisor. He says I’m selfish.”

“That doesn’t sound like him,” Teller said, his frown curving deeper. “I know you two have had your problems lately, but Father would do anything for you.”

“Apparently not,” I muttered. The wound from my father’s disapproval was still too raw, too painful. I shot Teller a rueful smile. “I’ll be grateful for the day when you’re done with school and you can join my Council.”

He sat up straighter. “You would make me an advisor?”

Lily gasped and grabbed his arm. “Oh Teller, that would be perfect for you! You would be *such* a good advisor. You always know everything, and you never share secrets. Oh, and then you could come live here in the palace!” Her cheeks turned bright pink. “If... if you want to, that is.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know. Our house in Mortal City... that's my home." Lily looked a little crestfallen, and Teller reached out to clasp her hand as a matching blush rose to his face. "It would be nice to not have to sneak in to see you, though."

"How do you get him in here, anyway?" I asked Lily. "I should probably have my High General executed for his dreadful security."

Lily grinned at my empty threat. "There's an underground canal that runs to a boat dock under the palace. The door to it is just across the hall from the entrance to the dungeon."

Memories of my failed Guardians mission sprang to mind. I had been attempting to sneak into that same secret dock when Luther had trapped me, effectively ending my tenure as palace healer.

"And there are no guards along this canal?" I asked.

"There's two of them, but they're easy to distract."

"Too easy," Teller agreed, shooting me a displeased look. "Half the time, they're asleep."

"But the door in the canal has a bloodlock," Lily added. "It only opens for royal family blood."

"Aren't there hundreds of Corbois?" I asked. "If any of them can open it, that doesn't seem very secure."

"Not anymore. The Bellators are the real royal family now, so only you and Teller can unlock it."

My gaze darted to Teller as a sudden realization punched the breath from my lungs.

"And that works?" I gasped. "You're sure of it, Teller? Your blood opens that door?"

He nodded, and my heart felt as if it might claw its way right out of my chest. Ever since being revealed as a Descended, a tiny part of me had wondered if my mother was really my mother. We shared so many features and mannerisms, but her secrets had infected everything in my life with doubt, and my mind had succumbed to wild speculation about the real origin of my birth.

But if the bloodlocks opened for Teller, it could only mean one thing—my mother's blood ran in both our veins.

And while I didn't need that to consider Auralie my mother or Teller my brother—just like I didn't need a blood tie to consider Andrei my father

—the comfort of knowing that at least this one piece of my identity had not been a lie...

Gods, it meant *everything* to me.

I was moments away from tackling Teller to the floor in a weepy embrace when the door to the dungeon flew open with a heavy bang.

“Your Majesty?” a voice cried out from the top of the stairs. “Are you down there?”

“I’m here,” I answered.

Frenzied footsteps echoed through the cavernous space as Alixe rushed inside. Her eyes had grown too large, her face deathly pale.

“I need you to come with me, Your Majesty. There’s been a... an incident.”

I shot to my feet. “Where? What happened?”

“Come, I’ll take you there now.”

I glanced at my brother. “Teller, go home immediately.”

“No!” Alixe said.

Too quickly.

Too forcefully.

I stared at her as dread began to crystallize in my veins. My bones felt leaden and heavy, the heft of them holding me in place and begging me not to go with her. Not to learn anything more.

Muscles tightened on Alixe’s throat. “Your brother should stay at the palace. I can get him to your suite unseen.”

My mind and my body pulled at the rope that bound them sanely together, the cords unravelling and snapping under the strain. I watched numbly as Teller disappeared with the help of Alixe’s illusion magic, then felt my legs carry me up the stairs and through the palace to my chambers as if controlled by someone else.

“Where is Luther?” I choked out. “Is it... is he...?”

“He’s there now. He sent me to get you.”

For one singular heartbeat, the anvil on my chest lifted, and I could breathe again.

“What happened, Alixe?”

She looked across her shoulder at the empty air, where only the quiet breathing that followed us signaled Teller’s masked presence, then looked back at me.

The horrible pity in her eyes was the swing of an axe. It severed the last frayed thread that held me together. My last hope that my world had not just shifted in a way I could never put back.

Once we reached the royal chambers, Alixe gave orders for Lily and Teller to stay in my suite and for Perthie not to let anyone in or out until we returned. Lily nodded emphatically and clutched Teller's hand to her chest, while Teller watched with a look of confusion.

"What's going on?" he asked, his eyes jumping between Alixe and me. "Was there another attack?"

I knew if I opened my mouth, it wouldn't be words that came out, so I only nodded.

I lied.

The truth would come soon enough.

Sorae was frantically pacing on her perch and letting out scratchy, pained sounds I had never heard from her before. She sounded as if she were being ripped apart from the inside out and holding herself together through sheer force of will.

Alixé put a gentle hand on my back and nudged me toward her. "We'll get there faster if we take Sorae."

I obeyed and mutely climbed onto my gryvern's back. Alixe whispered something in Sorae's ear, then mounted behind me and clutched me tight against her as we launched into the sky.

My heart was no longer racing. Instead, it had slowed to the pulse of Sorae's flight, each wingbeat reverberating with an ominous thump in my chest. My blood was slowing, my thoughts were slowing, *time* was slowing.

I wanted it to stop.

I *begged* it to stop.

But when that beautiful, modest cottage on the marsh came into view—that home so full of laughter and memories, so rich with loyalty and unbreakable bonds, the one place in the world where I had always, *always* felt loved—something in me fissured wide open.

Sorae landed with a smooth gait on the front lawn, the same place where my father and I had spent hundreds of nights sparring.

Luther stood in the open front door. His dark hair had spilled free from its usual restraint, now shielding his face like a veil. His arms were quivering and soaked in blood to his elbows as he stared at a headless body that lay at his feet.

Scattered around the clearing, I spotted two more bodies, their heads resting too far from their necks.

“No,” I whimpered. “No, please, no...”

The word kept falling from my lips as I broke into a sprint toward the door, my eyes fixed on the body at Luther’s feet. But as I stumbled on the front steps and crashed to my knees, I saw that the corpse wore the uniform of the Royal Guard.

I scrambled to my feet and tried to force my way past Luther. He grabbed me by the shoulders.

“Don’t,” he said, his voice rough. “Don’t look.”

I shoved against him with all my force, straining to look over his shoulder. He held me tighter and forced me away from the door.

“Don’t go in there,” he pleaded with terrible softness. “I’m begging you not to look.”

I finally stared up at him. His eyes were so filled with shadows they were nearly black, and the skin under his scar was angry and red like a fresh welt. His dark brows were drawn painfully tight, deep lines creasing his face with visceral anguish.

This face had revealed so many guarded emotions these past weeks. Frustration, amusement, pride, worry, affection. Maybe even something deeper.

It was the face I had come to look for in every crowd. Even when we were cross, it was his face that calmed me every time I spun out of control.

But today, his face spoke only of despair. Relentless, unfixable despair.

“Move,” I breathed.

Heartbreak slashed across his features. His shoulders sank, his hands dropped to his sides, and he stepped away.

At first, all I saw was blood.

Blood everywhere.

Pooled on the floor. Streaked across overturned furniture. Dripping from the drapery and the cabinets.

And then I saw the writing. Large, angry letters smeared in dark crimson on every wall.

Mortal lover.

Half-breed.

Rebel scum.

“Where is he?” I scanned the room, but everything was camouflaged under a blanket of wet, shimmering scarlet. “Where is my father?”

Luther set a hand on my shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Diem. It’s too late.”

No.

“Where. Is. He?” I ground out, my fists clenching tight. “*Where is my f—*”

Then I saw him.

In the kitchen.

The last place I’d stood with him in this home. Where I’d screamed at him, insulted him, broken his heart. Where I’d told him he wasn’t my father, then left and never came back.

There he lay, in a lake of red, his body so terribly, impossibly still.

Dead.

My father was dead.

My father, who had taken me in when I was no one to him but someone else’s bastard child, and who had cherished me as the most precious jewel in his life.

My father, who taught me everything he knew. Who never saw me as *weak* because I was a girl, who taught me to embrace it as my strength.

My father, who had loved me unconditionally, even when I hadn’t deserved it.

Andrei Bellator, war hero, legendary Emarion Army Commander, Advisor to the Crown of Lumnos, beloved husband of Auralie, devoted father of Diem and Teller, was *dead*.

A broken sob tore from my chest, a scream that was inhuman in its agony. Outside, Sorae roared into the sky, my grief consuming me so fully that it spilled across our bond and exploded into her. The house rattled with the force of our combined cries.

I staggered forward and crumpled to my knees at his side. His beautiful caramel-brown eyes were open and glassy. His mouth gaped in a permanent scream, his face forever frozen in a mask of disbelief.

I had never wanted to turn my healer’s mind off more than in this moment, but my training seized control against my will, cataloguing each injury.

His face was bruised, his lip and eyebrow split open, tissue under his nails, all suggesting a struggle. His throat had been slit, likely the wound that killed him. Puncture wounds littered his body, many of them bloodless,

suggesting the murderer had continued to stab him long after his heart stopped beating.

Not *just* a murder—a punishment.

A message.

For me.

The murder weapon was still lodged in his chest, its handle sticking straight up into the air. Between my trembling hands and the thick, syrupy blood coating my palms, I could barely pull it free.

It wobbled in my watery vision under the thunderstorm of tears I feared would never stop falling.

Even when they dried up, they would still be falling. Until my last breath, until I crossed into the afterworld and back into his open arms, they would forever be falling.

Luther knelt at my side. The sudden awareness of him broke through my fog. My eyes cleared for a moment, and I leaned in closer to examine the blade.

If the dark, smoky grey of Fortosian steel hadn't marked it as a Descended weapon, the jewel-encrusted handle would have. The blackwood hilt was inlaid with copper scrollwork and pale pink gemstones that twinkled as the dagger quivered in my palms.

A violent, poisonous darkness infected my veins. I had once believed that, as a healer, I could never take a life. That seemed laughable now. Once I found the person responsible, I would do *so much more* than simply take their life.

I would make them suffer in cruel, unimaginable ways. Make them beg me for mercy, and then make them beg me for death. I would make real every terror that haunted them, and when there was nothing left of them to wound, I would put them back together so I could do it all over again.

Devourer of Crowns. Ravager of Realms. Herald of Vengeance.

Fight.

"Yes," I whispered in response to the *voice's* savage cry. "I will."

I clutched the blade to my chest in a vow of retribution. A promise to my father—and to the dead man walking who had stolen this precious star from my sky.

Fight.

"You should go," I murmured to Luther.

His hand gently stroked my back. "I'm not leaving you."

Fight.

“Go, Luther,” I said, louder this time.

“No. I won’t let you be alone.”

My skin began to shimmer, then glow, then blaze a glittering white-hot. Dark shadows spilled from my palms and curled around me like a rolling fog, staining the blood on the ground until I knelt in a sea of ink. Deep in my soul, a churning ball of ice and heat doubled in size with every shuddering breath.

I was a bomb about to explode, ready to annihilate the world with the jagged shrapnel of my grief.

Fight.

“Go, Luther,” I gritted out. “I’m ordering you to leave.”

“I will not abandon you when you need me,” he growled.

“Sorae, *take him.*”

“No, Diem, wait—”

The doorway shattered into a cloud of dust and splintered wood. Sorae’s talons tore away at the walls until the front facade of the house was gone, exposed to the dusky glow of the twilight sky.

Luther yelled at her to stop, but my command was clear, and Sorae was loyal only to me. She snared Luther into her talons and shot into the sky.

“Protect them,” I said. Across the bond, I felt Sorae’s heart, bleeding for me, thump in answer: *I will.*

I took my father’s hand. The cold stiffness of death had already set in.

It was a gut-punch of awareness that I would never again feel the warmth of his hand on my arm or the scratch of his beard against my cheeks. I would never again experience the tender strength of his arms as he wrapped me into a hug.

He was gone.

My beloved, cherished father was *gone*.

Because of me.

Fight.

Kill.

Destroy.

So I surrendered to my grief, and to the *voice*.

And I detonated.

Raw, silvery power blasted around me in an expanding sphere that was at once hot and cold, dark and light, life and death. It hissed with a

deafening hum of energy that sounded and felt *ancient*.

It obliterated everything it touched. My father's body—gone. The blood on the floor—simmered, then boiled, then evaporated. The Corbois medallion around my neck, the jeweled dagger in my hand, Brecke's blade on my thigh—all of it melted away, dripping to the soil before charring into hunks of ash.

The house vaporized, taking with it every material possession that had ever mattered to me. Drawings, journals, art, books, weapons—all the treasured objects our family had collected over this brief, happy lifetime together.

Gone.

Just like him.

Even the clothes on my back burned away, leaving me naked in the center of an inferno of unearthly power.

With my mother's disappearance, there had been grief, but also hope, however distant and unrealistic, that she might return. But there was no returning from *this*.

No hope left at all.

I screamed until my throat was raw. I clawed at my chest, desperate to tear my own heart out to stop this unbearable pain. My power flared brighter, and I burned, and I burned, and I burned.

My body felt weightless in the worst kind of way, like being shoved off a cliff. I was plunging to my doom, caught in the agonizing anticipation of that final, painful end.

Shouting penetrated the haze of my grief. A woman's voice, then a man's, then inhuman snarls.

A moment later, two hands wrapped around me. An immediate feeling of safety told me instantly who it was.

He knelt beside me and gathered me into his arms. His clothes had burned to ash, though somehow, his skin was unscathed. I was too broken to question it. I laid my palm against the scar on his chest, then buried my face in his neck and wept as my magic consumed us both. With every tear that spilled from my cheek to his skin, he gripped me tighter, held me closer, laying tender kisses on my temple and hair.

He didn't say a word, and I was grateful for it. I could not have borne any false assurances, however well-intentioned, that everything would be fine.

Things would *never* be fine. Not ever again.

For hours, I sat in Luther's arms, burning and sobbing, screaming as the excruciating pain of loss devoured me whole. I had the vague sensation of a well inside me slowly draining. My sorrow flooded out with my magic, leaving me hollow and certain I would never again feel whole.

Eventually, the sky turned dark, and my power faded to embers. Luther rocked me in silence, curled up at the center of a smoking crater. The heat faded from my skin, and the chilly night air set my body shivering. He rose, still cradling me in his arms.

"If you're not ready to see Teller, I can take you to the lodge," he offered softly, his voice coarse with emotion.

I shook my head as fresh tears pushed through my closed eyelids. "I have to tell him."

He nodded and pressed a long kiss to the top of my head. I felt him climb onto Sorae's back, then the breeze of the wind as she took flight.

I stared at the ground as we flew away. My beloved home was gone forever, replaced by a circle of black, a scar on the earth to mark the unhealable wound on my soul.

I had been crafted here. I was born a lump of molten metal, shaped by my mother, honed to a point by my father, engraved on the hilt by my brother. I had so foolishly believed the trials of the last few months had been the final firing that would harden me into a righteous sword of justice.

But that had only been the beginning. That had been the pounding of the blacksmith's hammer, the grinding against the wheel until my edges were sharp and my aim was true.

This night—*this* was the fire that had forged me. And someday soon, when the burning glow of my grief cooled away, I would show my father's killer, and all of Emarion, just how deeply my blade could cut.

Chapter

Thirty-One

Four days passed.

Teller and I holed up in my rooms, cycling between numbness and a grief so acute it felt lethal. Telling him our father had died was awful. Telling him how, and why, was infinitely worse.

Mortal lover.

Half-breed.

Rebel scum.

This was because of me and the Crown on my head. Because I had not lied, or kept silent, or played the game well enough to avoid making enemies.

Someone else murdered our father—but I had killed him.

Teller's heart was forgiving by nature, and if he did blame me, I doubted he'd ever admit it. He held me as I cried myself to sleep, and he allowed me to do the same for him.

But I knew.

I still hadn't told him what I'd learned about our mother, and every night, I laid awake agonizing over that decision. The prospect of seeing her again was a hope he badly needed, but if something happened before she could return... I could not bear to make Teller grieve her loss a second time. Especially not now.

Though time had stopped ticking for the two of us, the rest of the world moved cruelly on. The missed schoolwork Lily brought home for Teller began to pile up, and although the House Receptions had paused while I mourned, if I delayed them any longer, I would be forced to extend the Period of Challenging another thirty days.

I would have welcomed that, but one evening, Teller broke down in tears and confessed that he was suffocating with anxiety over the Challenging, and he could not truly breathe again until it was over. There was no sacrifice I would not make to spare my brother further pain.

So today we would both claw our way out of our dark pits and face this broken new world.

“Are you sure?” I asked as Teller rifled through a pile of clothing Eleanor had gathered for him. “I’ll talk to the school if you need more time.”

“I can’t miss any more class. Losing my notes put me too far behind as it is.”

Fresh guilt tore through me. His school notes, filed into the drawers of his desk at home, had been reduced to cinders. Yet another thing I’d taken from him.

“I can walk with you to school, if you want,” I offered. “Just like old times.”

“I’m walking with Lily,” he said brusquely before disappearing into his new bedroom to change.

With our home destroyed and nowhere else to go, Teller had been forced to move into the palace. There were several smaller bedrooms in my royal suite—a relic of the harems of past Crowns—and I had insisted he take one so he could remain under the watch of Sorae and my now significantly increased contingent of guards.

I suspected he’d rather stay in the family wing with the others his age, but until our father’s murderer was caught, I could hardly stand to let him out of my sight.

“I can make the Corbois cousins give you their notes,” I called out, “or I can have the school delay your exams, or arrange for tutoring, or—”

“Diem.” Teller reemerged from his room with a stern expression. “Enough.”

Something had changed in him these past few days. He looked so much older now, the boyish lightness gone from his features, as if our father’s death had shoved him firmly into manhood.

And that voice... the Commander’s voice.

The strong set of his jaw, the deep command in his tone—suddenly it was not my brother standing in front of me, but my father.

My shoulders shook as a sob broke free and rattled the pile of shards where my heart once sat.

Teller tugged me into his arms. “We’ll get through this,” he whispered, his own voice beginning to crack.

I nodded and pulled back to see fresh tears brimming in his eyes, still swollen from days of weeping. “You reminded me so much of him just now.”

“Because I raised my voice?”

“Because you were begging me to stop annoying you,” I said, and we shared a quiet laugh between our snuffles.

“Comparing me to him is the best compliment you could ever give me,” he said gently. “Even if it is for losing my patience.”

A knock on the door brought the arrival of Lily, with Luther, Taran, Eleanor, and Alixe in tow. I hadn’t talked to any of them since my father’s death, other than a few murmured words of thanks as they took turns bringing up food and other supplies.

I couldn’t even look at them. Every pair of blue eyes reminded me of those blood-inked words.

Mortal lover.

Half-breed.

Rebel scum.

I knew none of them would have ever hurt my father. But until I uncovered who had, I was having a hard time not seeing every Descended as a threat.

As an enemy.

I rushed to the pile of gifts presented at the ball from the foreign Descended and pulled out the blade from Fortos, the weapon-proof scarf from Ignios, and the cure-all potion from Arboros.

“Here.” I draped the scarf around Teller’s neck and chest and shoved the other objects into his hands. “Take these. Keep them with you at all times.”

“You’re fussing again.”

“They’ll keep you safe. We don’t know who—”

“D, it wasn’t a kid at school who killed him.”

“We don’t know who it was,” I snapped. “And until we do, we trust no one.”

We stared each other down. Teller must have seen the terror underlying my stubbornness, because he sighed and gave in.

“No weapons allowed at school,” he said, handing the blade back. “I’ll take the rest.”

“Good. I’ll walk you out.” He started to protest, and I raised a hand to cut him off. “It’s on my way. I’m meeting with House Hanoverre.”

He wrinkled his nose at the mention of the Hanoverres, a sentiment I deeply shared.

I attached the Fortos dagger to my own waist, adding it to the arsenal of weapons I’d already strapped across my body. There would be no fancy dresses for this House Reception—today I’d chosen some clothing gifted by Alixe, a regal twist on the armored uniform of the Royal Guard.

It was a message—this was war, and I was prepared to fight.

I took Teller’s arm and wordlessly pushed past the pack of Corbois, eager to avoid being left alone with their sad eyes and pitying words. Someday, I might be healed enough to appreciate their sympathy.

But not today.

Today, my grief was a sharp, pointed thing. A weapon—a mace, covered in poisoned spikes, ready to demolish anyone it swung at.

So I was doing my best to aim it in the right direction.

When we arrived at the sprawling front doors, I turned to Teller and rearranged the spydersilk scarf until it covered all his major organs.

“Be safe,” I ordered. “Don’t take any risks.”

“Don’t kill any Hanoverres,” he muttered. “Not yet, at least.”

We shared a dark look, then he followed Lily down to the palace gates. Despite the absurdly large collection of guards that accompanied them, my hands trembled as my brother walked away from the safety of my side. I stood watch until they were no longer visible, and even for a little while after that.

“Follow them,” I whispered. Across the bond, Sorae pulsed back an acknowledgement, then sprang skyward in a direct line down the path to the Descended school.

When I spun to reenter the palace, the four Corbois cousins had arranged themselves in a line at my back, and I nearly ran straight into Taran’s chest. He shifted to the side to open up a path.

“I’m so sorry about your father, Diem. We all are.”

His use of my name instead of his silly nickname, the tender hesitation to his voice—I nearly broke all over again.

“If there’s anything we can do—”

“Thank you,” I clipped, shoving past him.

Today, I needed strength. Even if that strength could only be found in anger.

None of them said another word as they followed dutifully behind me and we filed into the meeting room. I headed for my throne but stumbled to a pause when my eyes fell on the chair where my father had last sat.

He was gone.

My father, my beloved father, was *gone*.

We were just here, talking together in this very room. He was laughing with Taran and holding Eleanor's hand, teasing me about my childhood mishaps.

And now he was so utterly gone that I didn't even have a body to bury. Just a memory—a name on my lips, and nothing more.

Alixé slid into my father's chair. The rage that roared through me must have shown on my face, because she took one look at me and went deadly still.

"What are you doing there?" I demanded.

"I asked her to come," Luther jumped in. "Given the demands made by House Benette, I thought her insight on the army might prove useful."

I whipped to face him. "More useful than my father was, you mean?"

His face went ashen. "No, of course not. I didn't mean to suggest—"

My eyes narrowed. "I seem to recall you pushing me to choose Alixé instead of my father. How quickly you got your wish."

He shook his head with a tortured expression. "I would never wish this on anyone, least of all you," he said, his voice heartbreakingly soft. "He was a good man and a wise advisor."

"I didn't mean to upset you," Alixé said, rising from the chair. "I'll leave."

"Wait," I hissed. "Just... wait." I stared at the empty chair and ordered myself to breathe as I yanked on the reins of my temper. I felt wholly out of control, a helpless passenger to my own rage.

"I'm sorry," Luther murmured. "I only meant to help."

I'm only trying to help.

The last words my father had spoken to me.

My eyes slammed closed as grief battered its fists at my chest. Strange, how armor could be both a shield and a cage, keeping the arrows out while trapping the monster in.

Hateful, intrusive thoughts poked and prodded at the edge of my mind.

You can't control yourself.

Your temper ruins everything.

Your father was right—you're a selfish, useless Queen.

Choosing not to postpone these House Receptions had been a very bad idea.

"You might as well stay," I gritted out. I turned my back to them all and sank into my throne. "He's dead, and he's not coming back."

The Corbois cousins stiffened as House Hanoverre arrived in noisy fashion with the rest of the Council. Aemonn had Iléana on his arm, the two of them walking alongside Jean and laughing, while Marthe Hanoverre shuffled forward with one arm each on Remis and Garath.

Their merriment faded as they entered and saw me already seated. I didn't bother to stand or even turn my head. Between my volatile emotions and their place high on my list of suspects for my father's killer—second only to House Benette—silence was the best I was willing to offer.

I locked my focus on the chair directly ahead as Marthe Hanoverre took her seat, and her own formidable stare slid into the path of mine.

As our eyes connected, I sent every spark of suspicion, every burning flame of hatred, hurtling her direction.

Though she did not cower, there was an apprehension to her weathered face. "I heard the news. My condolences for your loss."

Vicious, murderous words climbed up my throat.

"I understand it occurred the day after the ball," she continued. "House Hanoverre had a large gathering at my home that day in preparation for this meeting."

At least she was smart enough to know she was a prime suspect.

"There are many servants who can attest that we remained at our estate until late in the evening, with no visitors coming or going."

"How convenient," I said flatly.

Perhaps sensing my crumbling self-control, Remis quickly changed the subject and launched into a monologue about my "plans" for Lumnos, most of which I'd never heard before, and my desire to maintain Ulther's status quo.

For nearly an hour, Remis and Marthe discussed various trade agreements, appointments, and other meaningless boons of wealth and power. Occasionally, members of my council or Marthe's would speak up,

including more than a few snippy comments from Iléana while she brazenly devoured Luther with a possessive gaze.

I listened closely, memorizing every morsel of information revealed. I took turns staring down each Hanoverre until they shifted uncomfortably in their seats. All the while, I kept my silence, offering nothing in return.

On the surface, the meeting was going quite well. Their requests were mostly reasonable, and they pleasantly considered our arguments on the points where Remis held firm.

But I was not so naïve—not anymore.

I was a snake, coiled and ready to strike, and I recognized another one when I saw her.

“We will appoint a Hanoverre to the councils you requested, provided you’re willing to accept our terms on the silk shipments,” Remis offered.

Marthe considered, then gave a curt nod. “That is acceptable to House Hanoverre.”

“Splendid,” he purred, rising to his feet. “What a productive meeting this has been. Shall I pour some wine so we can toast to an amicable future for our two Houses?”

“A lovely idea,” she agreed. “But there’s one final point we wish to discuss.”

Marthe’s eyes cut to me. I could almost hear her tail rattling.

“I spoke with Evrim Benette. He informed me of the deal that was discussed with respect to the mortals. I’m afraid those terms are simply not sufficient.”

“I’m sure we can come to some agreement,” Remis said hesitantly. “What is your request?”

“It’s quite simple, really. We want all mortals exiled by the end of the year. It’s time we cleansed them from our realm once and for all.” She tapped her knobby, wrinkled fingers along the armrest. “And it is not a request. It is a demand. We will require a bonded bargain to ensure the Crown’s commitment.”

“That is a substantial demand, Marthe.” Remis shot me a wary glance. “Her Majesty takes matters related to the mortals very seriously, given her upbringing.”

“As does House Hanoverre,” Marthe said frostily. “Given her upbringing.”

All eyes in the room turned to me, waiting to see if I would take her bait and fight back.

Instead, I held my silent vigil.

“By the time Her Majesty is coronated, year end will only be one month away,” Remis said. “Perhaps we could simply close our borders to new arrivals, and outlaw any further procreation. Let them die out naturally.

“We’ve already had one attack on our soil, Remis. We must eliminate the threat before things get worse.”

A biting nausea grew at the casual indifference with which they debated the genocide and exile of living, breathing people—*my* people, in my heart if not wholly in my blood.

Marthe gestured to me. “If Her Majesty truly cares for the mortals, she can announce her decision now and give them more time to prepare.”

Remis huffed. “Surely there is some alternative—”

“There is none. House Hanoverre will accept nothing less.”

Again, a host of curious eyes turned my way.

Again, I held my silence.

Remis cleared his throat. “Her Majesty will discuss your offer with her advisors and provide an answer before the Challenging.”

“I’m afraid that’s unacceptable. We require an answer *today*.”

“Marthe, there are still many House Receptions to come. Her Majesty must consider all requests before—”

“That is precisely why I demand an answer today. House Hanoverre is a powerful family with a long history and impeccable breeding. We will not be made to wait on lesser Houses.”

Remis let out a weary sigh, firmly backed into a corner. He could not agree to a bonded bargain on my behalf. If House Hanoverre would not yield, he had no choice but to await—and accept—my response.

He turned to me. “Your Majesty?”

I said nothing. Did nothing.

After a long beat, Marthe went on. “In the unfortunate event that Her Majesty declines our terms, Jean is prepared to represent House Hanoverre at the Challenging.” She swiveled in her seat and placed a bony hand on her grandson’s knee. “Such horrible business, these fights to the death, but my darling boy will do what he must for our House.”

Jean flashed an adoring look at Marthe that turned venomous as it shifted to me.

“Well?” Marthe asked me. “Do you have an answer?”

I cocked my head lazily to one side and gave Jean a bored once-over. I allowed the corner of my lip to quirk up for a brief moment before settling back into my stony stare.

Still I held my silence.

Iléana huffed loudly. “A well-placed source tells me you can’t even control your magic. We all saw your failed attempt at the funeral.”

“And again at the Ascension Ball,” Jean added.

“I have seen the extent of her power myself,” Alixe spoke up from behind me. “And there is no equal. Certainly not in Lumnos, and I suspect not in all of Emarion.” She paused. “You have known me for a long time, Iléana. You know I would not lie about such things.”

Iléana scowled, though the beginnings of doubt crept onto her features.

Marthe waved her hand with an airy shrug. “It is not the extent of one’s power that determines a victor, but one’s ability to control it. Jean’s training in combat is second to none. He will easily eviscerate a novice, even a strong one.” She leaned forward in her chair. “Are you truly so eager to rush to your death, girl? Don’t you value your own life?”

A cold, joyless smile eased onto my lips. I rose to my feet and sauntered to a nearby table where a spread of refreshments had been laid out. I poured myself a goblet of wine, then made a show of staring into the deep red liquid before indulging in a leisurely sip.

I began to move in a broad circle around the room, my pace deliberately slow.

“My father was a Commander in the army,” I finally began. “The highest ranking mortal in its history, in fact. And he taught me everything he knew: How to fight. How to strategize. How to defeat an opponent—” I paused, gesturing with my goblet toward Jean. “—even if their training is second to none.”

I spun on my heel and strolled the opposite direction, keeping my tone light and my expression indifferent.

“But the most important lesson my father taught me was courage. He stepped out into battle again and again, even knowing each one might mean his death, because he believed in what he was fighting for. His convictions, his principles of right and wrong, were worth more to him than his own life.”

I halted my pacing in front of Marthe's chair and stared down at her with a frosty glare.

"He and I didn't see eye to eye on everything. But on this topic, I assure you, I am very much my father's daughter."

I stepped backward and sat on the edge of my throne, holding Marthe's gaze as I took another measured sip of wine.

"Whoever killed my father thought they could threaten me, or perhaps intimidate me, but you see, they made a grave miscalculation. Because now, when my life ends—whether at the Challenging, or by the act of some cowardly assassin, or even, gods willing, at the end of a long and happy life—I know my beloved father will be waiting for me on the other side." My eyes narrowed. "So no, Marthe. I do not fear death. I do not fear a Challenge. And I definitely do not fear the petty threats of House Hanoverre."

The Hanoverres fidgeted in their seats, some looking furious, others looking unnerved. I drained the rest of my wine, then held the goblet out to my side and let it fall to the floor. Marthe flinched at the loud, startling clang of metal against stone.

"Here is my counter-offer to you," I said, my tone defiant. "If you want a bonded bargain, I'll give you one. I will swear to rule fairly and compassionately for *all* my subjects. I will promise to never sell my justice to the highest bidder. I will ensure that not a soul in my realm goes without a roof over their heads, a meal on their table, or the medicine to cure their ills.

"I will protect the vulnerable and strike down the evil. I will do whatever it takes to protect this realm from its enemies abroad—" My eyes swept across the Hanoverre contingent. "*—and* from its enemies within. And I will vow on my magic and on everything I hold dear that I will never, *ever* value my own life above the lives of my people. Mortal or Descended."

I relaxed back into my chair, leaning casually against a single armrest and resting my chin atop my fist.

"Those are my terms, Marthe. That is the only kind of Queen I will ever be. And if that answer isn't good enough for House Hanoverre..." My gaze flicked to Jean. "Then I'll see *you* in the arena."

The room sat in stunned silence.

“Take all the time you need to consider my offer,” I said blithely. “I look forward to your response.”

Marthe opened her mouth to speak, but I waved my hand in the same dismissive gesture she had earlier directed at me. “You may go now.”

Marthe was trembling in her fury, Iléana doing much the same. Jean was sizing me up with new sincerity, evaluating me as a threat for the first time in earnest. I began to wonder if House Hanoverre might have genuinely believed I would cower to their threats until this very moment.

Marthe struggled to rise from her chair, and Jean darted to her side, extending an arm. Iléana stood and shot a pointed glare over my shoulder.

“Really, Lu?” she sniped. “*Her?*”

Remis and Garath moved to follow Marthe, and I cleared my throat. “Crown Council, you will remain seated. The guards can escort the Hanoverres out.”

Remis and Garath gawked at me, then each other. Garath gave a dramatic grunt and dropped back into his chair, and Remis’s jaw tightened as he murmured farewells to a few Hanoverres.

When I was alone with the Corbois contingent, I stood and turned to face them, though my eyes lingered on the doorway.

“Clearly, our strategy hasn’t worked.”

Garath seethed. “It hasn’t worked because you can’t ever keep your fucking mouth—”

“Watch your tone, Father,” Taran growled. “She’s our Queen.”

Mine were not the only eyes that shot to Taran in surprise. Even Luther seemed startled by the confrontation.

“It hasn’t worked,” I started again, “because we were ignorant to believe we could avoid discussing the mortals. After the rebel attack, we should have known the Houses would demand retribution against all mortals. And that is one issue on which I will never bend.”

I nearly let loose a bitter laugh at the irony. The attack on the armory happened because of me, and now it had become the very thing that could seal my fate.

“I am not selling this realm off to the rich and powerful to save my own life. Go and make the deals you need to make with the other Houses. If those deals are in the best interest of the realm—the *entire* realm—then I will honor them. But the only bonded bargain I will consent to make is the same one I just offered to House Hanoverre.”

Garath chuckled darkly. "Then I hope you're prepared to fight. After that little display, it would take a miracle from the Kindred to keep you from being Challenged."

I flashed him a malicious smile. "Garath, if I were you, I'd start putting that sharp tongue to work on persuading the other Houses. If I die, the next Crown might be another mortal-loving half-breed who likes you even less than I do."

Taran snorted, and even Aemonn cracked a smile, though one angry look from his father had his amusement fading fast.

"Brother, a word?" Garath hissed, looking at Remis before storming out. Remis sighed and looked as if he wanted to say something to me, but his lips stayed closed. He gave a shallow bow and left.

Aemonn took my hand, pressing it to his lips. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Diem. What happened to your father is terrible." His brows rose. "Perhaps we could go walk in the gardens? I'm sure some sun and fresh air would brighten your spirit."

"Brighten my spirit?" I laughed, the sound of it coming out vicious. Aemonn had always walked a thin line between kindness and exploitation. Today, that tightrope was fit to snap.

"Or a fine dinner, if you prefer," he added. "I can arrange a private dining room for the two of us."

"I'd rather be alone," I said sourly.

He bristled, his expression cooling. "Yes. Of course." He lingered a moment, but when none of us moved or spoke further, he cleared his throat, bowed, and excused himself to leave.

I turned to the others, finally forced to look them in the eye. I had expected to find pity there, at best, or perhaps judgment, like my father. Possibly even distrust, if they had previously believed me committed to their kind.

To my surprise, I saw something else.

Something deeper.

"Out of respect for what you four have done for me, let me speak plainly," I began. "My loyalty is not to House Corbois, nor to the Twenty Houses, or the Descended, or even to the goddess Lumnos herself. My loyalty is to the people who *need* my protection, not those who feel entitled to it. I will bring justice to this realm, even if it costs me my life."

I retreated a step, my heart already building its walls. “I would never ask you to choose between me and your family. If you cannot stand with me on this, I underst—”

“We’re with you,” Taran interrupted.

Eleanor nodded. “There’s no Crown I’d rather serve.”

One by one, the four of them placed a fist to their chests and bowed their heads. The tiniest sliver of my misery fell away.

“I’m going to make enemies,” I warned, swallowing thickly. “House Hanoverre is only the beginning.”

“We’ll continue training to prepare for a Challenge,” Alixe said. “Once you learn to control it, you’ll be unbeatable.”

My focus cut to Luther. He gazed at me with one of his heavy, burning looks, his eyes glowing with enough devotion to steal the breath from my lungs.

He dipped his chin. “You already know how I feel.”

I quickly looked away.

I tried to find the right words to express how much their support meant to me, but when I reached down to pull them to my lips, too many other words tried to fight their way to the top. Desperate, heartbroken words, angry words, words that would crack me wide open and leave me in pieces on the floor.

I couldn’t have been more grateful for Eleanor’s keen talent at reading a room as she nudged Taran and Alixe toward the door. “I know you’re not ready to talk yet. Whenever you are, just say the word, and we’ll be there.”

As they said their goodbyes, I found myself in the one situation I had been dreading even more than facing House Hanoverre—being alone with Luther.

I had spent so much of the last four days thinking about the man who stood before me. In those dark moments when I couldn’t take one more second of picturing my father’s mutilated corpse or my brother’s devastated reaction, I had turned my thoughts to Luther.

At first, he had been my refuge. I’d soothed myself with memories of how he had looked at me as the armory roof began to collapse, the words he’d whispered as we danced at the ball, how he’d held me while I burned—all the times he’d made me feel cherished in a way no one else ever had.

But in its fractured state, my anger over my father’s murder spilled over into my feelings toward the Prince. I’d fixated on the secrets he kept

and the questions he still refused to answer, his role in my mother's disappearance, the seeds of doubt Aemonn had planted.

And his promises—one broken promise in particular.

"We'll find a solution," Luther said, shattering the silence. "There must be something House Hanoverre cares about more than the mortals. A prime parcel of land perhaps, or an appointment to the Crown Council."

"Were you not listening?" I snapped. Luther's brows drew inward at my severe tone. "I'm not going to sell off the realm piece by piece. My life is not worth so great a price."

His lips parted, the muscles along his throat tensing as if he badly wanted to dispute that statement.

I moved to leave, and he reached out and clutched my hand. "I *will* find his killer," he swore. "I will not stop until they are brought to justice. I promise."

"Like you promised me you would keep him safe?"

Luther did not flinch. He didn't even react.

He didn't have to.

The shame, the regret—it was already on his face. It had been there from the moment I'd found him standing at the door of my family home, bloody and shaking. There was no blame I could aim at Luther that he had not already turned on himself.

"You can't keep my family safe. You can't keep me from dying in the Challenging. You can't guarantee my mother will return home. In fact, the only promise you've kept is the one you made to her to keep secrets from *me*." I snatched my hand from his grasp. "And that's only because she knows your secrets, too."

I waited for him to deny it, apologize, beg forgiveness, yell at me, renew his vow—do something, *anything*. But he just watched me, not saying a word, with that same anguished expression.

And it was that silence that set my mace swinging.

"I'm sick of begging you for answers, Luther. I'm done with your secrets, and I'm done giving you my trust. Your promises mean *nothing* to me. And neither do you."

We stared at each other in silence, his heart breaking in his eyes, mine shredding in my chest. I couldn't take one more second of looking at the despair on his face, because it was far too much like a mirror of my own.

I pushed past him, my shoulder slamming into his and finding little resistance as he dipped his chin and yielded a step.

Something—some small spark of feeling, buried deep under a mountain of hurt—stopped me at the door.

“You make so many promises, but the only thing I ever really wanted was honesty. And it’s the one thing you still refuse to give.”

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Chapter

Thirty-Two

Maura clutched my hand as I pressed my dagger into the freshly turned soil beside the matching blade Teller had set down moments ago. We stepped back, and two of my father's friends began to shovel dirt onto the knives.

With no body to bury and none of his possessions surviving my blast of magic, the only piece of my father I had left were the twin daggers I'd stolen from him as a young girl. So, in a makeshift grave where our home had once stood, we'd yielded the blades to the earth in his memory.

A formidable man and an extraordinary legacy, reduced to two dull, scratched-up hunks of metal and wood.

I had carried the daggers every day of my life until the night I arrived at the palace as Queen, when I'd cast them aside for being useless against the Descended. Burying them now felt poignant in all the worst ways.

I slipped my free hand into Teller's while Maura murmured the Rite of Endings. Old instincts flared with warning as she read the sacred words of the Old Gods, forbidden under the late King's laws, in earshot of the small cluster of Descended that had joined us. It took me a moment to remember—first, that these Descended were loyal to me, and second, that as the Crown, I was exempt from Ulther's decrees.

And third—that I no longer gave a damn about anyone else's rules but my own.

Teller and I had arranged the funeral to give ourselves some measure of closure and the chance to say goodbye. Maura and the healers had come, as well as a few of my father's army friends. Henri's father was there, though Henri was not—an absence I didn't have the nerve to question.

The usual Corbois had come, too—Luther, Eleanor, Taran, Alixe, and Lily—as well as a few of the younger cousins Teller had befriended. Eleanor had assured me they would take Teller in as one of their own, but to

see it happening in earnest, especially with the Challenging only two weeks away, filled me with grateful relief.

They kept their distance, standing across the clearing, just inside the now-flattened tree line of the surrounding forest. I hadn't asked them to do so, but I guessed they'd been taught to keep themselves segregated from mortals, and I didn't have the emotional strength today to shepherd them through a cultural revolution.

Luther watched me, as always. He wore his usual indifferent expression, though I saw the agony bleeding through it, and I wondered if I might look the same to him—dying, drop by drop, as my crimson grief stained all my flimsy attempts to pretend that I was healing.

The mortal guests and I took turns sharing stories of my father. Teller and I spoke of the wise lessons he had passed on. Maura offered sweet recollections of our mother and father growing into their roles as newlyweds and young parents. My father's friends alternated between hilarious stories of a young soldier bumbling through missions to prove himself and tales of glory of the great mortal Commander and his renowned leadership.

There was hardly a dry eye to be found... except mine.

My tears had dried up. These days, my grief was numb or it was angry—any other emotion had been stomped on and flattened.

"Hard to believe the great Andrei Bellator was taken down by a house fire," one of my father's friends said. He shot a dubious glance at the blackened crater nearby. "Must have been some fire."

Teller and I exchanged a look. Though the search for his killer continued, we'd agreed to publicly declare our father's death as an accident—a forgotten candle, tragically fallen over while he slept. Teller hadn't liked it, but I was barely keeping the war off our doorstep as it was. If the Guardians discovered the Descended had murdered an innocent mortal in his own home, their retaliation would be swift—and deadly.

"We heard about the attack in Lumnos City," the man went on. "If you need the army's help, Your Majesty, we'd be honored to serve you."

I swallowed down my disgust. I didn't want the army anywhere near my realm. More soldiers, more weapons—it could only end in blood.

"It's getting bad everywhere," another man said. "The rebels have destroyed damn near half the ports in Meros."

“They’re ruining things for everyone,” another spat. “I hear Meros might close its borders to mortals. Soon, there won’t be any place left for us at all.”

Several nodded, while others watched me curiously, awaiting my response.

When I offered nothing, one of the older men—Gavert, a mortal who still served as an army officer, looked down at the grave with a heavy exhale. “We could have used Andrei’s wisdom. He had a talent for setting aside his emotion and striking right at the heart of the issue.”

“Indeed,” I murmured.

I was haunted by my last interaction with my father. At the time, his advice had felt like an insult, so much like a blow.

I’d give everything to be wounded by him like that again. I would bleed at his hand forever, if it meant he was still at my side.

“Maybe we should talk this genius brother of yours into enlisting,” Gavert said, jerking his chin at Teller. “When the war heats up, we’ll need smart men like him in the rank and file.”

I shot Teller a look that said *don’t even think about it*, but I already knew he wouldn’t be tempted. Though he could fight as well as I could, he’d always seen our training as a chore. His dreams of greatness lay in books, not in battle.

“You really think war is coming?” Teller asked him.

“It’s already here,” I said. A few of the men confirmed my words with solemn nods.

With the stories and tears both dried up, I thanked everyone for coming and brought the funeral to a close. The guests fell into idle conversation, and Maura came around to my side.

“How are you holding up, dear? With your parents, and with—” Her eyes flicked up to the Crown. “—everything else?”

“I’m fine,” I said mechanically, flashing a false smile.

“I’ve known you too long to believe that lie,” she scolded. “Your mother disappears, your whole world turns upside down, your poor father dies, and now your home is gone.” Her bottom lip quivered. “It’s too much. The gods are asking too much of you.”

A laugh broke free before I could stop it, causing Maura’s frown to worsen. I didn’t feel as if the gods were asking anything of me—I felt they’d abandoned me entirely.

“Truly Maura, I’m alright.” I reached out to brush her tears away, and I pushed a bit more effort into making my smile look genuine. “How are things at the healers’ center? I hope my departure hasn’t been too much of a burden.”

Maura swatted at my hand. “Don’t you dare worry about us.” She beckoned the other healers over, and they offered up condolences, which I accepted with the hollow, edgeless calm that had become my permanent facade. “I promoted Lana to full healer status, so she’s taken on your work. The others are putting in extra time to join her as soon as they can.”

Lana loitered at the back of the group, as far from me as she could politely stand. Ever since spotting each other at my first Guardians meeting, things had been awkward between us. I felt ashamed for having failed her as her mentor, and considering my dramatic exit from the rebels and my new status as a Descended Queen, I imagined she felt petrified I might have her executed as a traitor.

“You’ll tell me if you need anything, won’t you?” I asked Maura. “I’ve already placed orders to the other realms for the herbs mortals aren’t allowed to buy. Send me a list of supplies you’re short on, and I’ll ensure it’s taken care of.”

“That’s very generous, Di—I mean, um, Your Majesty,” she corrected with a blush.

“I will always be Diem to you, Maura. All of you.” My eyes roamed the other healers, pausing on Lana with what I hoped was a meaningful look.

“Is there anything we can do for you?” Maura asked.

“There is one thing,” I started slowly. “There’s a kind of test I must pass before I’m coronated.”

“The Challenging,” she said, nodding. “We’ve heard the details around town.” Her chocolate-brown eyes sparkled with new tears. “Such an awful thing.”

“I’m confident I’ll get through it,” I lied, “but if I don’t, my brother—he’ll be...” Fear tangled with the words in my throat.

Maura squeezed my hand. “My wife and I will take care of him. As long as we live, Teller will have family here.”

“Thank you. The royals have promised to care for him, too, but...”

I stopped short of admitting that, if I died, I wasn’t convinced the Corbois would remember me as anything more than a sad story to share

over drinks. They meant well now, but Descended lives were long, and my time in their family would last only a month.

Luther won't forget, my conscience pushed at me. He'll keep his word to you, even if you die.

I winced and banished the thoughts.

"We'll look out for him," Maura insisted with a pat on my hand. "Don't you worry."

I pulled her into an appreciative hug and promised I would come into town to see them all again soon. As they walked away, I tugged on Lana's arm and dropped my voice low. "Lana, I know you and I have never discussed our, um... mutual acquaintances."

She stared, wide-eyed and shaking. "Are you going to punish me?"

"How could I? You've committed no crime I am not guilty of myself."

Her look of relief quickly gave way to suspicion. "The night of the ball... they said someone controlled their minds. That was because of you, wasn't it?"

I stepped closer, and she edged away. "There were children in that ballroom, Lana. And the Guardians were far more outnumbered than they realized. They all would have died—*Henri* would have died. I couldn't let that happen."

Her throat worked. "So you still love him?"

I stared at the ground, unsure how to answer. Unsure if I even knew the answer.

"I doubt it matters," I said. "He must hate me now."

We both looked painfully uncomfortable, shifting on our feet and avoiding each other's gaze. I knew Lana often worked with Henri on rebel missions, and from how I'd seen them chat excitedly at meetings, I suspected they'd become friends. I couldn't bear to look her in the eyes and risk seeing my fears confirmed.

Henri's father started toward us, to Lana's deep relief. I gave her arm a final squeeze. "Be careful, Lana. The Guardians' purpose is honorable, but their methods..."

Perhaps it was wishful thinking, but I swore a shadow of troubled agreement wavered in her eyes before she bolted away.

"Mr. Albanon," I said as Henri's father approached. "Thank you for coming."

With their warm eyes and kind faces, he and his son looked so much alike, my heart twisted at the sight. It was a harsh reminder of what Henri might look like in a few decades, as his mortal body aged while I stayed in a near-permanent youth.

“Of course,” he said gruffly, then paused. “I understand congratulations are in order on your betrothal to my son.”

“He told you?” My heart leapt for a brief moment—until I saw the stark doubt scrawled across his face.

“You know I’ve always adored you, Diem. I’ve been telling my son to propose to you for years. I’ve always believed you two were meant to be, even now that you’re—” He cut himself off and glanced furtively at the Corbois cousins across the clearing, lowering his voice. “I’m sure I don’t have to tell you his dislike of them has grown quite... passionate.”

I nodded but offered nothing more. Henri had always tried to hide his true feelings about the Descended from his father. I would not betray him any more than I already had.

“I barely recognize him these days. He used to be a happy boy, and now he just seems so... so *angry*.” He rubbed at his eyes with a mournful stare. “The more I try to reach him, the more he pushes me away. He’s a shell of himself. Whatever he’s going through, it’s eating him alive.”

My heart ached, his words hitting a bit too close to home.

“You’ve always brought out the goodness in my boy’s soul,” he went on. “I prayed his love for you would give him a greater purpose. Without you... I confess, I fear what he might become.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” I choked out. “Henri’s a good man.”

His features turned grave. “Even good men can lose their way.”

My already crushing guilt swelled. I couldn’t bear the look in his eyes—his desperate hope that I might still be his son’s salvation. But how could I save Henri’s soul when my own was so irreparably broken?

I excused myself before the conversation could spear any further into the dents in my armor and walked toward the group of Corbois. They, at least, would not expect me to talk—I’d hardly spoken a word to any of them since the meeting with House Hanoverre.

Even my daily breakfasts with Luther had become wholly one-sided. Gone was our playful teasing, our swapped stories about our lives, our prolonged looks and private smiles. Now I merely listened while he gave his reports and studied me with that damn all-seeing stare.

Once or twice, he had sat up straighter and looked at me with sudden fire in his eyes, as if he might say something more—but in the end, he never did. He kept his walls, and I kept mine.

And each day, my heart hardened a little more.

“Thank you for coming. Teller and I appreciate your support.” My voice felt artificial, even to my own ears.

“We would never miss it,” Eleanor said. “Your father seemed like a wonderful man.”

“He was a hero to all of Emarion,” Alixe added. “A man who led with courage and heart—just like his daughter.” Her reverent look had me swallowing hard.

“He would be very proud of you,” Luther said quietly.

“No,” I clipped. “He would not.”

He frowned deeply, and I looked down, awkwardly smoothing the lines of my simple black frock. My chest warmed as I realized the Corbois had all worn black instead of their traditional glittering red, a small but significant gesture from people so accustomed to overriding mortal culture with their own.

When I finally mustered the strength to look back up, Luther’s attention had moved to something over my shoulder. His eyes were narrow and streaked with shadow, his fists hanging clenched at his sides.

“Diem?” a familiar voice called out.

The beating of my heart stopped in an instant.

I spun around to see Henri standing halfway across the clearing. Vance, the leader of the Lumnos Guardians, stood beside him, scowling, arms folded over his chest.

“Henri,” I breathed. I broke into a run to meet him. “You came. I didn’t think... that is, I wasn’t sure...”

He shifted his weight, his apprehension evident. His expression was pinched, almost conflicted—not exactly *love*, but far from the hate-filled betrayal I’d been dreading.

Hope sparked anew, and adrenaline burned like fire in my veins as I fumbled for words. There was so much I wanted to say, so much to make right.

“Please, Henri,” I begged, “you must know I did it because I care about you. I didn’t know what else to do. You would have been killed, and I —”

“Henri was prepared to die,” Vance said matter-of-factly. “We all were.”

“Then you’re all fools,” I shot back.

Vance’s glare sharpened. “That was our best chance to take the palace. You betrayed us to protect *them*.”

“I was protecting *you*. All of you. You would never have succeeded, and I could not let so many mortals walk into their own slaughter.”

“You could have called the Descended off,” Henri finally spoke up. “I saw the guards obey your commands.”

“It’s not so simple,” I said, my voice softening as my focus shifted back to him. “Until I’m coronated, the Regent’s orders overrule mine. He would have told the guards to kill all of you.”

He watched me quietly, uncertainty slithering into his features. I rushed forward and took his hands.

“You know me, Henri. You really think I would ever turn my back on the mortals?”

Vance scoffed loudly. Henri shot him a scowl that was surprisingly severe and turned to pull me aside.

Vance reached out to grab his arm. “Brother Henri,” he said, his low tone loaded with warning.

“Are you going to accuse me of being a traitor now, too?” Henri snapped.

I watched mutely as the air thickened with tension, my grief momentarily overshadowed by my shock. Vance stared him down, but Henri didn’t budge. Finally, he let go, and his expression smoothed. “Of course not, Brother Henri. I know you’re with us.”

Henri’s expression darkened. He tugged me away until we were out of earshot.

“Do you really mean what you said back there?” he asked. “You did it to save us—not to protect them?”

“I... yes, of course.”

The truth—that I’d done it for both reasons, as unwilling to allow the murder of my Corbois friends as I was to permit Henri’s execution—was a nuance I wasn’t sure he would ever accept.

I slid my hands to his chest, clutching at his tunic. “You have no idea the risk I took to send the Guardians away without bloodshed. It could still cost me everything. But I was willing to do it—for you. For the mortals.”

His hands slowly lifted to my hips, his eyes jumping across my face. “What about the flameroot? You promised to get us some.”

I swore internally. I’d completely forgotten about that offer, blurted out in a last-resort bid to keep his trust. “Right now, I’m just trying to stay alive. After the Challenging, we can come up with a plan—”

“Vance thinks we need to act before the Challenging. Just in case...” He trailed off, struggling to look at me.

Hurt clouded my thoughts, and I pulled away. “Is that all I am now—a resource to exploit as much as you can before I die?”

“No,” he said quickly. “But what if we could stop the Challenging from happening at all? If we take the palace before then, they’ll have to cancel it, and you’d be safe.”

“They would send in the entire army to take it back. Do you really believe the Guardians can survive that?”

His defeated expression said he didn’t, though traces of doubt lingered. I reached for him and he stiffened, and just like the day he’d found me in the palace, a desperate kind of frenzy began to overtake my better sense. I’d already lost my father, and now I was holding on to Henri by the barest thread. If I lost him, I feared I’d lose myself forever, too.

“Let me prove to you I still want to help. Remember that mission I failed? The Guardians wanted the details of the Crown’s boat—I can get them access to it.”

His face lit up. “You would do that?”

“Only if it’s done my way.” He looked as if he might argue, and I raised a hand to cut him off. This was a line I would not cross, not even for him. “If the Guardians want my help, our targets have to be in the right place—ending the unfair laws, ensuring all mortals are cared for and protected. Justice, not murder.”

He nodded, slowly at first, then more emphatically. “Yes—yes. We all want those things. Surely the others will see that. Although...” Henri frowned and raked a hand through his hair. “Vance thinks you only support *them* now.” His eyes shot across the clearing, his tone turning chilly. “You two have made friends quickly.”

My gaze followed his to the Corbois. One of the cousins had their arm around Teller, Lily clutching his hand as they quietly talked. Eleanor and Taran were pretending that they hadn’t just been staring at us, while Luther glared at Henri like a nocked arrow, ready to fly. Alixe had wandered to the

scorched soil of my old home, where she knelt and held up a glittering onyx rock, turning it over in her hands.

I couldn't deny it—I *had* befriended them quickly, even though I'd always struggled to make friends with mortal peers. I couldn't help but wonder, was it just because of the Crown? Or had I isolated myself from other mortals because, somewhere deep down, I'd always known I wasn't like them?

"It's not as black and white as we thought when we were kids," I confessed. "A lot of them are good people. Some of them even want to end the injustice just as we do. A few are as evil as we imagined, but..." I looked at Vance, noting his sour look as he eyed us from afar. "So are some of the mortals."

Henri slumped, looking queasy. "I'm so sorry, D. I let my anger get carried away, and everything spun so far out of control."

I snaked my arms around his waist and buried my head in his chest, needing to feel him against me and know he wasn't gone forever. Tension eased from his muscles as he pulled me close. For a blissful moment, it felt like we had gone back in time, back when our love was untainted by war and unburdened by the weight of a Crown.

"I miss you," I whispered. "You were my best friend, and then suddenly you were just... *gone*."

"I regret so much of what has happened," he murmured against my hair. "This isn't the man I want to be." He leaned away and raised a hand to cup my cheek. "Let's put all this behind us. Forgive each other for everything we've done and start over. A clean slate."

I managed a weak smile and nodded. "I'd like that."

He nudged my chin up and pressed his lips to mine. It was tender and soft, so different from the breathless frenzy of our last kiss. That kiss had been like a plea—a promise, of what I might offer him if he would agree to stay by my side. This was a plea of a different kind.

Henri let out a groan as he deepened the kiss. He gripped my waist hard and my eyes fluttered open in surprise, falling instantly on two familiar pools of blue-grey across the clearing, stormy and teeming with emotion.

Regret. Hurt. Loss.

Taran wrapped a hand around Luther's arm and tugged him back, forcing him to look away.

I pulled back so abruptly that I yanked clear of Henri's grasp. He bristled, cocking his head with a frown.

Suddenly, I needed to be *anywhere* but here.

"Tomorrow," I rushed out, falling back a step. "Meet me at sunset. The cove where we used to collect oysters."

"Dien—"

"I have to go. I... I'll see you then."

I turned, and I ran—through the forest, past Mortal City, and down the road to the palace. Even as my guards shouted in confusion, Perth chasing me with pleas to slow down, I ran and I ran, and I didn't stop until I was back in my chambers, gasping for breath under the scrutiny of Sorae's dark ochre eyes.

But no matter how hard I fled from my problems, there were truths chasing me I couldn't outrun much longer.

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Chapter

Thirty-Three

“Try it again.”

“I’ve tried it ten times.”

“So try it an eleventh.”

“I tried it twenty times yesterday. And the day before that, and the day before that. It’s not working.”

“Then you need to try harder.”

“Oh, is that all? Why didn’t you just say so?”

Taran and I scowled at each other from across the dungeon. My magic training sessions had been going poorly, to put it mildly. They hadn’t really been *going* at all. After countless daily sessions, I hadn’t been able to manifest a single spark.

Initially, Taran and Alixe had been supportive, dismissing it as a consequence of my grief, but their patience—and mine—had begun to wear thin. Taran had changed tack, deciding to force an outburst of power by provoking me in increasingly juvenile ways, and I had been responding in kind.

Luther continued to attend, though he kept a careful distance. At first, he had offered occasional advice, but every word from him only pushed me further into my head. Eventually, he took up a silent vigil, always watching but never speaking.

I wanted to beg him to leave. I wanted to tell him that every time I stumbled in front of him, every time he watched me dig into myself and come up empty-handed, it was an excruciating reminder of his words at the ball—the peace-bringing Queen he believed me destined to become—and the smothering heaviness of my own inadequacy. Failing was embarrassing, but failing in his eyes was almost more than I could take.

But, true to form, my stubborn pride won out, and instead of being honest, I retreated deeper into my own foul mood. So Luther watched, Taran teased, I sulked, and Alixe just tried to keep the peace.

“Maybe you need motivation,” she offered, scratching the shorn side of her midnight blue bob. “Perhaps we need to give you something to fight for.”

“If I can’t make my magic work, I die,” I said flatly. “I doubt you’ll find better motivation than that.”

“That will motivate you in the Challenging itself—”

“We hope,” Taran muttered.

“—but it may not be enough to trigger your magic in these training sessions,” she continued.

“Just imagine the target is Aemonn’s face,” Taran said. “That’s what I do.”

“What is it with you two?” I asked, propping my hands on my hips. “He’s not *that* bad. You’re brothers, you should put this feud behind you.”

“Never going to happen. Not all of us fall for his tricks just because he bats his eyes and kisses our hand.”

“Taran,” Luther warned.

“I’m not an idiot,” I shot back. “I’m giving him a fair chance. That doesn’t mean I don’t see his flirting for what it is.”

“So you give ‘*fair chances*’ to the people who use you while you punish the ones who actually care?”

“I have an idea,” Alixe offered, stepping between the two of us. “I could use my illusions to take on the appearance of someone you want to fight. Perhaps that would put you in the right mindset to attack.”

“How are you at replicating Taran?” I grumbled, drawing a smirk from the man himself.

“Maybe we should invite Iléana to one of these sessions to spar with you,” he said.

I mirrored his smug look. “Finally, an idea I can agree with.”

He stepped around Alixe and came nose to nose with me, angling his head and grinning savagely in my face. “But then again, why would Iléana’s presence bother you, when you’re so happy with your mortal boy?”

“Taran,” Luther barked as he pushed off the wall. “Back off.”

“*You* back off,” I snapped back at Luther, halting him in place. “I can defend myself.”

“Not against anyone with magic, you can’t,” Taran mocked. To prove his point, he shot a cloud of dark spikes at my feet, forcing me to jump out of the way to avoid them.

I growled and launched myself forward, shoving my palms into Taran's chest. My emotions made my form sloppy, and he spun easily out of my grasp and sent me sprawling to the floor.

He stared down at me, brows raised. "Is that the best you can do?"

I scowled and held out a hand to him. "Quit gloating and help me up."

He flashed me a victorious grin as he reached for me, but before he could haul me to my feet, I hooked an ankle around his knee, throwing him onto his back with a loud thump.

I climbed to my feet and brushed the dust from my clothes. "Honestly Taran, that's the oldest trick in the book. I'm disappoi—"

A boot slammed into my back and sent me staggering forward. Before I could turn around, Taran had an arm around my neck and another circling my waist, pinning my wrists to my sides.

"Lu said you were a good fighter." Taran laughed as I squirmed against his grip. "All I see is a puny little girl."

"Use your magic," Alixe scolded. "Both of you."

I wriggled one arm free and jammed my elbow into his ribs, forcing him to release me as he coughed for air. He managed to snatch my arm as I jumped away, but I twisted until his wrist bent awkwardly, and he let go with a curse.

"Having some trouble with the '*puny little girl*'?" I mocked.

He let out another raucous burst of laughter, then threw a fist out toward me. He was too far away to land the punch, but a shockwave of serrated darkness raced my way, barely missing me as I ducked out of its path. I had no time to recover before he launched another series of blasts that I had to dive, lunge, and roll to avoid.

"Use your *magic*, Diem," Alixe shouted.

Taran crowed loudly like a clucking chicken. "Too scared to fight like a Descended? Never took you for a coward, Queenie."

"Screw you," I hissed. I waited to hear the *voice* call out to me and push me to fight, to kill, to destroy, but where the godhood had once pulsed like a volcano, I now felt only an empty cavern.

"Maybe we should train out on the roads, since all you seem to know how to do is run away," Taran jeered.

Red filled my vision, my fury writhing like a serpent on a hot stone. I let out a hoarse, frustrated cry as I scraped inside myself, begging for some scrap of power to rise to the surface. Inside my head, I screamed in anger—

at myself, mostly, and at the goddess Lumnos, demanding to know why she had given me power but not the ability to use it.

The cloud of my rage broke for a moment, giving me a good look at Taran's devious grin. There was something false about it, something not quite sincere. Hiding in his bright blue eyes was a scared, desperate prayer.

Taran wasn't picking on me. He was *worried* about me.

My anger instantly drained away.

Once again, I was a crumbling shell, held together by a glue of guilt and self-pity. Taran had been willing to make himself into a punching bag just to help me—all because I was too much of a failure to do it on my own.

"Session's over," I mumbled and turned away.

"Come on, Queenie," Taran pleaded, following behind me. "I was just teasing. We can fight physical if you want. We'll make it a bet: loser has to kiss Aemonn. Wait, no, that's a lose-lose for me."

I trudged up the stairs. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Come back, I have a *much* better idea. Winner gets a kiss from Luther!"

I slammed the door as I exited the dungeon. Even Taran's jokes couldn't bring a smile to my face.

Sometimes, I wasn't sure anything ever would again.



"SHOULD I be worried you're planning to assassinate me?"

I hovered on the edges of the lantern's amber glow, arms crossed as I leaned a shoulder against the wall.

Vance threw a snide glance in my direction. "I was about to ask you the same thing."

"If I wanted you dead, I would have just let you go through with your plan the night of the ball."

He grunted, but said nothing more.

I strolled along the winding stone pathway lining the underground canal. The passage smelled of seawater and moss, the damp silence broken by the soft lapping of water. I feigned boredom, pretending to be engrossed in my nails, but my eyes never strayed far from the two men scouring the Crown's personal boat.

Sneaking them in had been disturbingly easy. With a dropoff in the forest from Sorae to avoid being followed, and the old make-a-noise-and-sneak-in-while-they're-investigating trick to distract the guards at the canal's entrance, I'd led Henri and Vance to the royal dock with barely any effort.

Against their fervent protests, I'd forced them to wear blindfolds to conceal the exact location of the canal, an awkward reminder for all three of us how little trust we shared.

Even now, a voice in my head was shouting at me, warning me that this was a bad idea, that every time I helped the Guardians, innocent people got hurt. I told myself things were different this time. I could be strategic, use my influence to temper their violence and prevent further bloodshed.

But I couldn't stop wondering if I was making the same deadly mistake all over again.

"What are you looking for, anyway?" I asked.

The men shared a weighty look. Vance went back to his work without answering, and Henri grimaced at me with an apology in his eyes.

"If they find me here helping you, they won't bother waiting for the Challenging to kill me," I said archly. "The least you could do is tell me what I'm risking my life for."

"Considering what happened the last time you discovered our plans, you should understand why we're hesitant to share them again," Vance grumbled.

"The only person allowed to use this boat is me. If you're planning to load it with bombs and blow me to pieces, I'd really prefer to know that in advance."

"She's right," Henri said to Vance. "She deserves to know."

Vance sighed irritably. "We plan to borrow it. We need to transport some sensitive cargo, and the Crown's boats are the only vessels the army patrol won't stop and search."

"We're looking for hidden areas on the boat to store supplies and people," Henri added.

My brows dipped. It seemed like a harmless enough plan, unlikely to get anyone hurt, as long as they didn't get caught. But the Guardians always seemed to have a way of taking things too far.

"Am I going to be on board this boat when it's '*borrowed*'?" I asked.

Henri started to answer, but Vance cut in. “You’ll just have to wait to find out.” His lips thinned. “Trust goes both ways. We’re trusting you not to betray us. Now you have to do the same.”

I scowled. Vance seemed to see it for the reluctant acceptance that it was, because he shrugged and turned back to his searching.

Henri climbed out of the boat and onto the stone pathway, striding over to join me.

“I’m so happy you’re doing this.” He took me by the waist and dragged me close. “It means everything to me for you and the Guardians to work together. If they see you as their enemy...” His jaw ticked. “I never want that to happen again.”

“I never was their enemy,” I protested.

“I believe you,” he said quickly. “And I trust you.” He stroked a thumb along my hip, hope brightening his features. “We’re going to win this war together. We’re going to make up for everything we’ve lost.”

His mouth leaned down to mine, and a heavy feeling coated my stomach. I held still as he kissed me, pouring into me all his desires and dreams, his hands caressing my body in a way I thought I’d desperately longed for.

On paper, things were better between us than they’d ever been. We’d worked past our issues, and we’d recommitted to each other. I had once struggled with what our future might look like, whether our goals for our lives could align, and now, we had a perfect solution. A plan to do something meaningful—*together*.

I should have been grateful.

I should have been happy.

And yet I’d never felt worse.

“Someone’s coming,” Vance whispered. Henri pulled back abruptly. I swallowed a lump in my throat at the quick flash of relief I felt as his hands dropped from my side.

Vance scurried out of the boat to dim his lantern and join us in the alcove. We held our breath as the shuffle of approaching footsteps grew louder, the soft blue light of Descended magic dancing along the walls.

“It’s the guards,” I hissed.

Vance’s hand moved to the blade on his hip. “I’ll take care of it.”

I seized his arm. “No!”

Both men whipped their heads toward me. “You’d let us die to protect the lives of a few Descended guards?” Vance snarled.

“No one is dying,” I snarled right back. “Not every problem has to be solved with murder.”

I led them further down the canal to a nondescript wooden door with a black stone disc affixed to the handle. I unsheathed a small knife strapped to my forearm, then dragged the edge of the blade along the pad of my thumb.

“This lock only opens for me,” I said, swiping the blood onto the disc, “so don’t get any ideas about coming back here alone.” The onyx plaque glowed bright, and the door popped open.

The three of us piled into the stone staircase on the other side just in time for the guards to round the corner. I kept the door slightly ajar to watch them turn to the boat and inspect it for any sign of interference.

One guard’s attention turned our way, and I hurriedly yanked the door closed. We froze in heart-thumping silence as he walked up and jiggled the handle, but mercifully, the lock held firm.

I pressed my ear to the wood and heard their footsteps move deeper into the canal. “We should go,” I whispered. “If we run, we can get out before they see us.”

Vance grunted. “I’m not done with the boat.”

“I can’t take you through the palace, and we might not be able to distract the guards again. We have to go now.”

I cracked the door open and confirmed my suspicion—the guards had followed a turn in the canal that put them out of sight. I threw the door open and shoved Vance and Henri ahead of me, and the three of us took off at breakneck speed.

In our haste, we abandoned our lantern, and with only the faint light from my Crown to guide us, the walkway was nearly pitch black. One wrong step would send us tumbling to the ground or into the water. Both would cost us dearly.

“Is someone there?” a guard shouted behind us.

The sound of running grew louder. Orbs of magic-made light shot through the tunnel, lighting our way but putting us on clear display if the guards got close enough to spot us.

“Keep going,” I hissed. All my survival instincts roared in protest as I slowed my steps to distance myself from the two men. Getting caught alone, I could talk my way out of. Getting caught showing a secret palace

entrance to two mortals was a death sentence—for me or for the guards, and that was a choice I had no desire to make.

Neither man looked back as they sprinted ahead and disappeared through the leafy curtain of weeping willow branches that disguised the canal's entrance.

"You there, stop!" a guard barked.

I picked up my pace and darted through the thick drape of vines, then shot toward a patch of brush that was still shaking with movement.

As my eyes adjusted to the dim moonlight, I caught sight of Vance and Henri running ahead. I followed in their path until the sounds of pursuit faded and my racing pulse soothed with the relief of a successful escape.

"Henri! Vance!" I whisper-shouted. "Come back, we lost them!"

But they didn't slow.

"Stop running!" I called out, louder.

Vance threw me a look over his shoulder, and I saw it in his eyes. He was no longer running from them, but from me.

Because now, he knew *my* plan. He knew I would blindfold them again, take them on another winding path to disorient them, then drop them off somewhere far away so they couldn't find their way back to the canal without me.

Vance had seen an opportunity to get more information from me than I was willing to give—and he was taking it.

"Stop," I bellowed. "We had a deal!"

Vance sped up and vanished into a tangle of foliage, leaving me panting out a colorful string of swears. Henri followed fast behind him.

"Henri—*wait*."

He skidded to a stop, looking back at me, then at the spot where Vance had gone. Conflict simmered in his gaze.

"Don't," I warned, but my words were ripped away as my fiancé shot me an apologetic look and disappeared into the forest.

Chapter

Thirty-Four

Shrieks of laughter filled the skies as a blur of golden fur and black scales went whizzing past.

“Sorae, if they get hurt, your hide is going to make a beautiful rug for the library floor.”

The gryvern snorted in amusement, undeterred by my threat, and spiraled into a roll. The downdraft of her wings sent my hair whipping around my face, leaving the echo of Teller and Lily’s giggles in her wake.

Eleanor yelped and lunged forward to hold down the fluttering blankets. In an effort to cheer me up, she had organized a spread of cakes, berries, and sweet wine on a grassy knoll in the palace gardens. Although winter had fully arrived and it was too brisk to comfortably picnic, we had cuddled together under the warmth of the spelled cloak gifted from Montios at the ball. She had even arranged for some musicians to play nearby. I suspected it was no coincidence they only seemed to have the cheeriest songs in their repertoire.

Nearly two weeks had passed since my father’s funeral, and the Period of Challenging was nearing its end. My mood had not improved—every day I woke up feeling more hardened, more numb, and more isolated than ever—but Eleanor was trying so hard, her kind heart so obviously hurting for me, that I had forced myself to at least pretend.

Teller and Lily had joined us, scarfing down as much sugar as they could eat, then begging to take a ride on Sorae. It was the first glimpse of happiness I’d seen in my brother since our father’s death, so I’d had no choice but to swallow my overprotective instincts and agree.

Teller had taken the brunt of Luther’s efforts to atone, and a small army of guards followed him everywhere he went. While it made him perhaps the safest person in the realm, maybe even the continent, it also made spending time alone with Lily next to impossible.

Unfortunately for him, his pleas for me to convince Luther to relax went unanswered. I was both too grateful for Teller's safety and too unwilling to have any conversation with Luther that wasn't strictly necessary.

But today, they'd been momentarily spared, and Sorae was giving them the ride of their lives. Although my pulse went soaring at each death-defying maneuver, the sound of my brother's laughter slowly chipped away at the glacier that had formed around my heart.

"The House Receptions are going well," Eleanor said brightly. "You haven't had to give your *I'm-going-to-be-a-fair-and-righteous-Queen-whether-you-like-it-or-not* speech in at least a week."

I huffed an empty laugh. "Are they, or are the smaller Houses just more afraid of Remis than they are of me?"

She didn't answer, turning her eyes instead to the gryvern twirling through the air, but I saw the truth of it in the tight press of her lips.

"At least we're almost finished." I folded my arms beneath my head and closed my eyes as the sun and wind took turns warming and chilling my face. "Only four more days and this will all be over."

"Five," she corrected. "Only four until the Challenging, but don't forget about the Rite of Coronation."

I held my tongue. I hadn't forgotten. And I hadn't misspoken.

"How is your training going?" she asked. "I hope those three haven't been too hard on you."

My jaw clenched. "You don't have to pretend like you don't know. I'm sure Taran told you I still haven't been able to use my magic."

"Taran and I don't talk about that," she said defensively. I cracked an eye open. She was propped up on her elbows, frowning at me.

"It's fine if you do."

"But we don't," she insisted. "What you and I discuss stays between us. And Luther, Taran, and Alixe made a bonded bargain not to tell anyone about your training."

My lips parted as I blinked at her, speechless at the idea that they had been willing to put their magic on the line to protect my secret.

"You still don't think you can trust us, do you?" she asked. "When we pledged ourselves to you, we really meant it, you know."

The hurt woven into her features needled at my guilt, which had become my constant companion as of late. "I do trust you, I just..." I

wincing, knowing I wasn't being entirely honest. "You four are family. And as kind as you all have been, I know I'll never fully be a part of that."

She looked at me for a long moment, her features creased thoughtfully. "Have I ever told you about my parents?"

I shook my head, and Eleanor reclined onto the blankets, snuggling at my side.

"Both of them were very powerful. They never wanted children, but Garath and Remis said they owed it to the House to pass along their strong magic. In House Corbois, if you're told to get married or have a child, you obey."

"But Ulther was the most powerful Corbois, and he never had children," I said.

"Once his mate died, he refused to consider it, and he was King. No one could force him. My parents had no titles, so they made a deal with Remis. They gave birth to me in exchange for a prestigious appointment to the army."

I scrunched my nose. "You make it sound so transactional."

"It was. As soon as I was born, they handed me over to Remis and left for Fortos. They visited a few times, but once my powers manifested and everyone realized I wasn't strong like them, they stopped coming back to see me."

"They abandoned you? Because of your *magic*?"

She leaned her head against my shoulder. "Descended Houses aren't like mortal families. Unless you're in the direct line of the House leaders like Luther and Taran, or unless your magic is powerful like Alixe, then you're just one of many *cousins*. You live together, eat together, go to school together. A few remain close with their parents or siblings, but it's not common."

My heart ached for her as I imagined growing up in that way, surrounded by kin yet lacking any family. I had never considered the Descended's view of half-mortal offspring as expendable commodities might extend to their own children, as well.

"I don't tell you this to earn your pity," Eleanor said. "Luther and Taran looked out for me, and I had luxuries many would kill for. I only want you to understand that the bond you have with Teller... it's not like that here. We protect each other because it keeps the House strong, and without the House, we would have nothing. But family in the way you see it, full of

loyalty and unconditional love—we make those bonds by choice, not by blood.” She took my hand and held our joined palms to her chest. “You’ve shown more faith in me than anyone ever has. You are as much my family as any Corbois could ever be.”

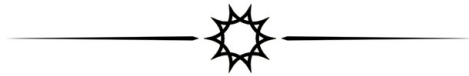
Something clicked in my heart—a lock opening, or perhaps a door creaking ajar. I sat upright and pulled a blade from the small arsenal I’d taken to wearing, and I cut a shallow line across my palm. When I reached for Eleanor’s hand, her eyes gleamed with understanding. She sat up and gave me a nod, and I dragged the blade as gently as I could across her flawless, uncalloused skin.

Beads of scarlet formed in our palms. I pressed them together and wove our fingers together until our hands were fully clasped.

“Now I have Corbois blood in my veins, and you have Bellator blood in yours. Let us be family in every sense of the word.”

She held her chin high, even as her lip quivered. “Family,” she agreed.

“You are my sister Eleanor, now and for the rest of my days.” I gazed down at our combined hands with a doleful smile. “However few they may be.”



LATELY, the hardest part of getting through the House Receptions had just been staying awake.

As the Houses grew smaller, both in size and importance, the meetings became less about bargains or threats and more about angling for favor. The lower Houses had little to gain from Challenging me. Even for those bold enough to take the risk, every political boon they might have sought had already been demanded by Houses with greater leverage. Instead, the Period of Challenging was an opportunity to raise their standing by building alliances.

As a result, I’d spent the last several Receptions being fawned over like a newborn babe. They raved about my beauty, waxed poetic about my confidence at the ball, and offered me lifetime supplies of baubles, silks, and artwork. Lumnos was home to some of Emarion’s finest artists and artisans, and I now had my pick of the very best the realm had to offer.

Today, my favor was being bribed with pearls and emeralds. House Byrnum specialized in both, and they had filled the room with a truly dazzling assortment. Their House leaders, green-haired twins named Ryx and Ravyn, were taking turns blathering on about what a fine Queen I was sure to be and our two Houses' "*special future together.*"

Some other time, I might have reveled in having riches I could once have only dreamed of, or I might have made Teller laugh until he cried recounting how I'd been praised for my *grace* and *elegance*.

Instead, every compliment had the opposite effect. Each one was an offering to a false idol, a reminder of my unworthiness, a scoop of dirt burying me further in my self-made grave.

It was impossible not to imagine Luther in this seat. He would have known exactly what to say and do, how to accept the flattery with humility and negotiate the threats with ease. He had the right pedigree, the right upbringing, the right demeanor, even the right color eyes. For him, the Period of Challenging would have been a mere formality—the fulfillment of a long-expected promise.

He would have been the King the Descended wanted. The King the realm needed.

Perhaps in a few days, he still would be.

I shifted in my seat and stole a glance behind me, unsurprised to find his unyielding stare fixed on me.

Watching my back. Awaiting my command.

These days, I hated looking at him. Hated being in his presence, under his constant watch. Hated that he no longer challenged me or reined me back in, in his quiet, clever way. Hated the pain I saw every time our eyes met. Hated that a part of me wanted to forgive him. Worse—that despite my broken soul, a part of me wanted to console *him* and bring the smile I once cherished back to his face.

I hated that I missed him. Hated that I longed to hear his dry humor, hungered to bait him into a conversation that was as much flirting as sparring. Hated that he no longer found reasons to put his hand on my back, that I no longer had excuses to loop my arm through his and nest into the warm safety of his side.

I hated that when I lay in bed at night, lonely and scared and yearning for a pair of arms to wrap me up and give me strength against all I had to

face, it was not a pair of sweet, honey-brown eyes I pictured staring back to me, but a set of brooding grey-blue.

Eyes that I suddenly realized I had been staring at for too long to be casual—eyes that were now staring back at me under furrowed, questioning brows.

“Your Majesty?”

“Huh?” I whipped around and jolted upright. “What? I mean, uh...” I cleared my throat and gestured to a mountain of gemstones set out on a nearby table. “My apologies, I was, um, distracted by these beautiful emeralds. They’re so... beautiful, and so... so *green*.”

The twins reacted in unison, two perfect smiles stretching up to two perfect sets of gleaming eyes.

“We’re so pleased you enjoy them,” Ryx purred. “After the wedding, we’ll ensure Your Majesty is covered in jewels everywhere you go.”

“Wedding?” I frowned. “What wedding?”

“The wedding to our son, of course,” Ravyn said.

I was thankful that Eleanor’s forewarning kept my expression clear of the disgust now roiling my stomach. She had explained that the twins of House Byrnum were mated to each other. Though they shared no offspring—*thank the gods*—Ravyn had children from a different sire that Ryx had adopted as his own.

“We so look forward to the joining of our families for the happy occasion,” Ryx crooned.

“Who is it you think is marrying your son?” I asked slowly. The crease between my brows deepened. “If you believe I’m selling my hand...”

Remis rose and stepped forward with an arm extended. “This is a private matter, there is no need to—”

The twins dissolved into a fit of eerily identical laughter. “Your Majesty, we would never presume such a thing,” Ravyn giggled. “The wedding isn’t to *you*, of course. Though we do expect you to be there. It is part of the agreement, after all.”

“Really,” Remis started again, “this isn’t a matter for the Reception.”

“What agreement?” I demanded. “Who is your son to marry?”

“The Princess,” Ravyn answered. “Our darling Roderyck is betrothed to your Lilian. They are to be wed just after the new year.”

I spun to face Luther again, but for once, his eyes were not on me. He was glaring at his father with enough rage to level a realm. The aura of his

power shuddered darkly against my skin, raising the hair on my arms.

My gaze jumped between Remis and the twins. “Does Lily know she’s betrothed?” I snapped.

Remis didn’t answer, though he gave me a look that was an unmistakable order to *stand down*.

But I had seen Lily’s untroubled demeanor this morning as she clung to Teller and squealed with delight on their gryvern joyride. That wasn’t the face of someone who knew she’d been sold off like chattel.

“Lily isn’t marrying anyone unless she chooses for herself,” I said. “If Roderyck wants to marry her, he can court her and propose, and she will decide.”

The twins’ smiles fell as one, their eyes sliding to Remis. “Regent,” Ryx said, “we had an agreement.”

“Lilian will do what’s best for her family,” Remis soothed. “She will accept whatever betrothal I arrange for her.”

“You bastard,” Luther snarled.

“The hell she will,” I said. “She is my family, and she’s not for sale.”

Luther stalked forward to stand at my side. A scorching heat radiated from his presence, borne of his imposing body and his fiery wrath.

The twins shared a prolonged, wordless look, then Ryx turned to me with a calculating stare. “It is in your best interest to uphold the agreement, Your Majesty. Roderyck is one of the most powerful Descended in the realm.”

My gaze narrowed. “Is that a threat?”

Ravyn let out a gasp that was a little too loud, a little too dramatic. “We wouldn’t dare threaten the Queen. But our dear boy does have such a temper, and he is so thrilled about the wedding. If the betrothal were to be broken off now...”

“He might be inclined to do something rash,” Ryx finished for her.

“Let me guess... something like a Challenge?”

Ryx gave a casual shrug, as if he hadn’t just threatened my life—and his own son’s.

“There will be no need for any of that,” Remis cut in, once again stepping between us. “Lilian will do her duty.”

“Marriage is not her *duty*,” I clipped.

“Perhaps we should allow you two to discuss this in private?” Ravyn offered with a sprightly smile. She took her brother-mate-husband’s hand

and cuddled into his hip. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Your Majesty. You’ll look stunning in our pearls at the wedding.”

Remis cut me off before I could snipe back a response, shooting an unspoken warning to his brother that had Garath dragging Aemonn forward to escort House Byrnum from the room. Remis waited until the corridor was empty, then slammed the door and turned to me with a hiss.

“Are you truly so determined to get yourself Challenged?” he growled. “That was not your business to interfere with.”

“Nor was it yours. Lily will marry whomever she pleases, whenever she pleases, but it certainly won’t be forced on her by you.”

He scoffed. “I don’t have to force her. Lilian is a smart, well-behaved girl. She knows her place.”

“*Her place?*” Luther and I repeated in unison.

“I am the head of this House,” Remis said, “and I will decide—”

“Are you?” I asked, tilting my head as I crossed my arms. “You’re not the oldest. You’re not the most powerful. You’re not even the highest ranking.” I gave him a slow, unimpressed once-over.

Remis’s temper finally snapped. His composed demeanor melted away, replaced with a predatory rage reminiscent of his son’s. “You think you can steal this House from me?” he boomed. “You were a backwater, uneducated nothing. If I hadn’t allowed you to associate with my House, you’d be dead already.”

Luther moved to intervene, and I stopped him with a laugh. “You *begged* me to claim House Corbois. I walked in, soaking and muddy, and you practically groveled at my feet. You were so desperate to hold on to a crumb of importance, you gave your entire House away.” I shot him a pointed look. “Maybe now you’ll learn a lesson about selling off family for power.”

Remis snarled and bounded toward me. In a flash of movement and light, Luther shoved me into Taran’s arms and unsheathed the jewel-encrusted sword strapped to his back. Magic seeped from his hands and illuminated the blade in a soft glow.

I’d only seen him wield it once before—the day he confronted me at the hunting lodge, believing I’d killed the late King. I’d teased him then about the gaudy weapon, but from the way the entire room had now gone still, with Remis’s eyes bulging and fixated on the gilded hilt, it was clear there was more to it than I had realized.

“You dare draw the Sword of Corbois on me?” Remis spat. “That sword is only to be used to defend our House.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing,” Luther said, his voice quiet but deadly. “She’s our leader now. Your reign is over.”

Remis huffed. “I am your father!”

“*And I was your son,*” Luther thundered. “That did not stop you from drawing blood then. And it will not stop me from doing so now.”

Taran’s posture drew tight as he gripped me closer. A sourness hung in the silence, the pungent reek of an old, festering family wound being reopened that I did not fully understand.

Remis’s gaze moved beyond Luther to me and narrowed. Luther raised his sword in warning, his magic crackling in the air, while Taran shifted me further behind him.

“You’re lucky I cannot Challenge you,” Remis muttered.

I lifted my chin. “Why wait? I’ll take you on right now.”

He smiled, clearly considering it.

“You’d have to kill us both,” Luther warned. “Are you so certain the Blessed Mother will select another Corbois if you slay two of her chosen in a row?”

Luther’s words struck their target. Remis took a step back and smoothed down his jacket, his expression resuming its usual ambassadorial calm.

“I hardly need to dirty my hands with such things,” he said frostily. “If the progress of her magic training is any indication, the Challenging will take her off my hands very soon.”

Luther, Alixe, and Taran stiffened and exchanged confused glances. “You don’t know anything,” Luther accused, somewhat unsteadily.

“I know more than you think.” Remis turned his back and strode calmly to the door. “Those dungeons are so poorly guarded after all, practically anyone can slip in and hide in the shadows. If only we had a High General with a more vigilant eye for security.” He paused in the doorway. “Maybe then the Queen’s father would still be alive.”

The mention of my father had my temper shredding and rage exploding out of me. Taran barely had time to lock his arms in a cage around my chest to hold me back before I hurled myself forward, thrashing and snarling with the nastiest swears I could invent.

But Remis had no interest in my ire. His barb had been intended for his son, and from the way Luther's sword drooped and his head hung low, it seemed that, too, had hit its mark.

"Don't think for a second you will not pay a price for this betrayal, son," Remis said, "whether she is coronated or not."

He left, and no one spoke. Luther kept his back to us as he stared at the open door, sword still in hand, the rapid rise and fall of his shoulders the only evidence of the storm brewing within. We all seemed to be holding our breath in wait.

When he finally turned to us, his rage had tempered, his gaze now hard with focus. One by one, he stared us down, barking orders that left no room for even a Queen to debate.

"Eleanor, stay with Lily. Keep her away from my father."

Eleanor gave a swift nod.

"Alixé, you're with Teller. Keep him out of sight as much as you can until the Challenging."

"Understood," Alixé said.

Luther looked at me for a long, torturous moment, then turned to Taran. He sheathed his sword, clapped his palm on his cousin's shoulder, and leveled him with an unforgiving stare. "Do not let her out of your sight. Not even for a second."

"I won't," Taran vowed. "She's safe with me."

Luther didn't move, holding his gaze in silent challenge. "Taran," he said quietly.

Taran placed his own hand on Luther's shoulder and gave it a firm shake. "I know, cousin. With my life."

Luther let out a sharp breath and pushed away, heading for the door.

"Wait," I called out as I ran to his side. He didn't stop at first, seemingly lost in the darkness of his thoughts. I reached for his hand, and the moment my skin brushed his, we both froze in place. "You really think Remis would hurt Teller or Lily?"

"No. But I'm not taking any chances."

"What are you going to do?"

He turned fully to me and lowered his eyes to mine. His gaze was thick with turmoil and threat, but beneath the tempest I could see his still-broken heart, begging for my forgiveness, vowing to never let me down again.

"Whatever I have to."

He hesitated, more words lurking on his parted lips, but he pressed them together into a firm line. With a caress of my hand so faint I might have imagined it, he let me go and walked away.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

Walking back into the healer's center of Mortal City was a strange enough experience, having given up my career as a healer.

But doing so as the Queen of Lumnos, with Princess Lilian on my arm while Taran and a crowd of Royal Guards hovered outside? That felt like wading through a lucid dream. The details were vivid and familiar, but nothing made any sense. Nothing quite *fit*.

Weeks ago, Lily had confessed an interest in learning the healer's trade. With my time running out, I was determined to keep my word to help her. It didn't hurt that it was also a perfect excuse to keep her out of the palace and far away from Remis.

"It's a beautiful day to save some lives," I called out as I strolled through the door. It was the same chipper greeting I'd given for years, though today, my casual lightness felt like a lie.

"Diem!" Maura yelped and jumped to her feet. "How—what are you—that is, you're always welcome here, of course, but—*why*?"

"I'd like to offer a trade." I held up a large wicker basket. "A few hours in the workroom in exchange for supplies to restock the inventory."

Maura peered in at the contents, and her face went slack. "Is this...?"

"Hawksflower, star nettle, and sweet blushroom," I chirped, a rare glimmer of genuine happiness shining through my dark fog. "I had them planted in the palace gardens."

Maura continued to gape as Lily looked between us, her brows furrowed with confusion.

"They're rare medicinal herbs," I explained. "Forbidden for mortals to plant, too expensive for mortals to buy."

"Why are they forbidden to plant?" she asked.

"Forbidden for *mortals*," I corrected. "These herbs fetch a very high price, and any crop of significant value can only be grown on farms owned by the Descended."

“That doesn’t seem fair. There should be an exception for medicinal plants.”

Maura and I exchanged a knowing look.

“Perhaps,” I agreed. “Or perhaps the rule should not exist at all. Perhaps mortal and Descended farmers should be treated equally in all things.”

Lily opened her mouth and closed it, then repeated the gesture again, looking like a fish plucked from the sea and gasping to be tossed back in.

I could see her mind turning over the same explanations we’d all been given—that these laws existed to protect mortals, to shield them from matters only the Descended could safely handle—and, to my pleasant surprise, finally rejecting them with a disapproving frown.

She sighed. “Luther said the same thing to me once. I suppose I should have paid closer attention.”

My brows rose. “He did?”

“He wanted to teach me about the laws before I joined the Crown Council, but...” Her cheeks flushed. “When he starts talking about politics, I confess that I... um, well... I...”

I nudged her arm. “At least that’s one thing mortals and Descended will always have in common—not listening to their older siblings.”

Lily gave me a relieved smile, though the tiny crease between her brows told me her mind was still chewing on a problem she wouldn’t soon dismiss.

Good.

I handed the basket off to Maura. “I gave the palace gardener instructions to have all clippings sent here. If the deliveries don’t continue after...” I swallowed. “...after next week, speak with Luther. He’ll ensure it’s taken care of.”

Maura stared at me with enough pity on her features that I had to look away. “That’s very thoughtful,” she said. “I heard about what you did for the orphanage. They’ve been able to take in twice as many children now, you know.”

I shrugged off her words, though my heart sang with satisfaction. In the weeks since my disastrous meeting with House Hanoverre, I’d realized my opportunity to help the mortals might begin and end with the Period of Challenging. There was little I could do without Remis’s consent as Regent, but I’d managed a few small acts of rebellion.

After watching mountains of food go to waste from the vast buffets offered each mealtime, I'd bribed two kitchen servants into delivering the leftovers to families I knew to be struggling. A number of forbidden books about mortal history and culture had also *mysteriously* gone missing from the palace archives, where they may or may not have reappeared on the shelves of the mortal school bearing the seal of the Crown and a note of exemption from the laws.

I'd even roped Alixe into my scheming. As Luther's second-in-command in the Royal Guard, she had authority over the Descended who patrolled Mortal City. After a long conversation, she'd agreed to take a more active role in supervising them and remove a number of guards who, unbeknownst to her, were notorious among mortals for their violent ways.

I had no idea if any of these initiatives would survive me, but amid all my screw-ups and strained relationships, these gestures were the only thing that kept the looming darkness at bay.

"Go on then," Maura huffed, shooing us toward the workroom. "Stay for as long as you need, but keep out of sight, or I'll have a line of people pretending to be ill just to get a look at you."

I ushered Lily into the back where I set about explaining each item in the inventory and their various uses. She watched eagerly, jotting down notes and offering thoughtful questions that I would have expected from a much more advanced trainee.

In fact, the longer I watched her expression light up with interest, the more I realized how well-suited Lily would have been as a healer, if she were a mortal. She was studious and responsible, she had a keen mind for plants, and she seemed to derive true joy from helping others, especially to those who were outsiders, as Teller and I had been.

I felt a pang of sadness that her royal status made it nearly impossible for her to have any trade, especially one typically relegated to mortals—only to realize with a start that I was pitying a *royal Descended* for being *unable to work*.

Months ago, I would have sneered at the thought, but lately my eyes had been opened to the two faces of the oppressive regime. The mortals were not the only ones bound by injustice—and the mortals were not the only ones who stood to gain from its destruction.

I set Lily on a task to mix a handful of simple salves that might be useful in treating the everyday scrapes of her younger cousins. After

watching and offering occasional advice, I left her to her work and began my own task rereading my mother's notes on Descended poisons and their antidotes.

Just in case.

"I'll agree to marry him, you know," Lily said after a few minutes, her voice almost too soft to hear. She kept her eyes on her work as she mashed leaves in her mortar and pestle. "If it will keep everyone from fighting, I'll marry Roderyck Byrnum. I don't mind."

I shot her a look. "Making other people happy is not the right reason to marry someone, Lily."

She gave a half-hearted shrug. "Roderyck isn't so bad. His House is small, but they're growing fast, and they have business dealings in almost every realm. An alliance with them will be good for House Corbois. And then Luther won't have to worry about me anymore, and Father won't be so angry with him or with you. And Teller..."

Her voice faded. Her chin tipped down to hide her face.

"You can help the family in other ways," I said gently. "After you finish school, you can be my advisor. You could even continue healer training here."

She shook her head. "If I decline, he might choose Eleanor to marry Roderyck. Why should she have to take my place?"

My hands clenched around my mother's journals. "No Corbois woman is getting forced into marriage while I live and breathe."

"We're not being *forced*." Her tone had grown uncharacteristically defensive. "We're simply raised to do what's best for the family. If I tell my father no, he'll respect it. This is my choice."

I couldn't help the roll of my eyes. "Are you sure? Because he—"

"Yes, I'm sure," Lily huffed. She let out a frustrated sigh. "You're so much like my brother."

I balked, unsure whether to take that as a compliment or an insult.

"You both mean well," she said, "and you both want to protect me. But have either of you asked if I *want* to be protected?"

I started to bite back a response, then stopped myself. Lily's innate sweetness made it easy to see her as a child, innocent and defenseless against the unforgiving reality of the world, but that was far from the truth. She was clever and incredibly perceptive. She understood how Descended

society worked much better than I did. And she was capable of making her own decisions—even if I didn't like them.

"Perhaps this isn't everything I want," she went on, "but you did not want to be Queen, either. You accepted your role, and I can choose to accept mine."

I set down my notes and joined her at her side, leaning against the worktop with my elbows. "I understand," I sighed. "Truly, I do. But there is another reason."

Lily's eyebrows inched upward.

I traced the chipped wood of the worktable to avoid her stare. I had hoped to not have to share these particular fears that had been haunting me of late. They revealed too much that I was not yet ready to admit.

"If I do not survive the Challenging," I said slowly, "and Luther becomes King, he will need you. He will need to keep those he trusts close, and there is no one he trusts more than you. If you have left to join House Byrnum..."

I knew from the distress written on her face that I didn't have to finish. The idea of not being there for her beloved brother when he needed her most—if there was anything that might change Lily's mind, it was that.

"I will never condemn you for anything you freely choose, Lily. I only ask that you give yourself time to discover who you're meant to be. One month ago, I was a poor, unknown mortal healer, and now I am Queen. And perhaps next month..." I gave her a sad smile. "No one can predict what the gods have in store."

Lily looked down at her hands, chewing on her lip in silence.

"Wait just a little longer, that's all I ask," I urged. "For Luther, if not for yourself."

Silence stretched out between us. I set my palm on her hand in a wordless show of support before moving to return to my work.

"You still care about him?" she asked softly.

I halted in place and winced. "Lily..."

"He's in a dark place, too, you know. Just like you. He's devastated. I've never seen him so sad. He feels like he let you down, and if he lets *you* down then he's letting *everyone* down, because he thinks you—"

"Lily, please, this is between me and Luther."

"You're so much more alike than you realize. If you only knew, if he would only—"

“*Lily.*” I slumped into my chair, then snatched another of my mother’s journals and loudly flipped it open. “Back to work.”

“Do you hate him?”

My face whipped toward hers. Her midnight blue eyes were round and glittering with unshed tears.

“No,” I whispered. “I don’t.”

“Has he lost you forever?”

This time, I didn’t answer.



WITH ALIXE GLUED to my brother’s side and Luther having vanished without explanation, my magic training was now—*gods help me*—solely in Taran’s hands.

Though weeks with no progress had left us both cranky, he had refused my begging to call off our session, so we’d compromised on sparring the mortal way—with fists and swords. It would do me no good at the Challenging, but it had become my one outlet for the grim, rotting emotions poisoning me from the inside out.

Unlike Alixe and Luther, who always softened their attacks for fear of injuring their Queen, Taran never held back, and I loved him for it. I threw my bottled-up rage and self-destruction into every swing, and he returned each one with equal force. It left both of us bruised, limping, and exhausted, but little by little, I felt the darkness beginning to give way.

“Fine, I admit it, you are a good fighter,” Taran said with a grunt after I’d clocked him across the chin. “Good thing, since you’re so shit at using magic.”

He lunged to clip me with his sword, barely missing as I spun out of reach. “You’re a good opponent,” I said. “Good thing, since you’re so shit at teaching magic.”

He feinted to the left and barked a laugh as I swerved to miss the non-existent attack, then caught me with the point of his blade right in the soft hollow of my back.

I whimpered and clutched the tender spot. “Fine. I deserved that.”

He pointed the sword accusingly. “Don’t blame my teaching for you holding back on your magic.”

“We’ve been through this,” I groaned. “I’m not holding back. I’ve tried everything, Taran. I don’t know why it won’t answer me.”

“I do.”

I arched an eyebrow. He leaned on his blade like a cane, looking smug and self-satisfied.

“Are you going to tell me?” I pushed.

“You don’t want to hear it.”

“That never stopped you before.”

He snorted, then tossed his sword to the side, letting it clatter to the ground. “Land another punch and I’ll tell you.”

I threw my blade down and cracked my knuckles with a devious smile.

We both fell into a fighting posture, fists raised to our chins as we circled each other with matching sets of narrowed eyes.

Taran was indeed a good fighter. A great fighter, in fact. He’d been trained extensively in every aspect of defense, from magic to weapons to physical combat, and unlike most men his size, he rarely relied on his brawn to gain the upper hand.

But for all his prowess, Taran also had one glaring weakness.

“Any day now,” he taunted, spinning smoothly on his heels as I bobbed around him.

I held my tongue—biding my time.

He jerked toward me a few times in an effort to provoke me to act, but I kept up my slow rotation.

Watching. Waiting.

“Are you going to just hop around like that or are you going to throw a punch?” he pushed.

Still I waited.

His grin took on a devilish slant. “Maybe you don’t want to know. Maybe you’re running fr—”

Thwack.

Taran’s head snapped to the side as my knuckle connected with his jaw. He staggered backward in surprise, then lost his balance, tumbling onto his back on the stone floor of the dungeon.

I clicked my tongue disapprovingly. “On my first attempt. How embarrassing for you.”

He winced and rubbed his face. “Fine. I deserved that, too.”

“Well?” I stood over him with my hands on my hips. “What’s the big secret, then? Why can’t I use my magic?”

He let his limbs go limp and patted the ground next to him in an invitation to sit. I rolled my eyes but gave in, curling up at his side.

“Do you remember when Alixe said the godhood is tied to our emotions?” he asked.

I nodded and pulled my knees to my chest, already apprehensive about where the conversation was headed.

“Well, in order for the godhood to feed off of our emotions, we must actually *have* emotions. And you don’t. Not anymore.”

“Taran, my mother is missing, my father is dead, my brother’s in danger, and I’m probably about to die. Believe me, I have no shortage of emotions.”

“Maybe somewhere in there, but you’re not letting yourself *feel* them.” He shook his head sadly. “When you got here, you were full of life. You laughed, you cried, you flirted, you got angry. You threatened Luther within an inch of his life. You threatened *half of Lumnos* within an inch of their lives. When’s the last time you’ve done any of that?”

I hugged my legs tighter and rested my chin on my knee, staying silent.

“I’ve been trying to pick a fight to get something out of you, but you won’t even be angry with me. The moment you start to feel anything real, you shut it down.”

“I just... I need more time,” I mumbled.

“I know.” He reached over and grabbed my hand, wrapping it up in his calloused palm. “But you don’t have time, Queenie.”

I sighed and stretched out on the cold floor beside him, closing my eyes as I laid my head back.

As I had done every day prior, I tried to conjure up some tendril of feeling, some well of anger or sadness that might provoke the godhood into action. It felt like sticking my hand into a firepit—I could sense the dangerous warmth that lay within, but the moment my mind began to register the pain of it, I was jerked back to the cold safety of numbness.

It was no longer a conscious choice, but a reflex, a raw act of survival. Because if I truly gave in and walked into that inferno, I wasn’t sure I would ever walk back out.

“Diem?”

“Yes?”

“We’re friends, aren’t we?”

I cringed at the realization I’d pushed him so far away that he doubted even that.

I squeezed his hand. “Of course we are. You mean a great deal to me, Taran.”

“Then can I ask you a serious question?”

“Sure.” I looked over and forced out a supportive smile. “Ask me anything.”

“When are you and Luther going to put all of us out of our misery and fuck each other already?”

“*Taran*,” I choked.

“Descended men are bigger than mortal men, you know. In *every* way. One night with Lu, and you’d forget that mortal’s name. Shit, you’d forget your own name.”

He roared with laughter as I yanked my hand out of his and punched him hard in the side, my entire face going cherry red. “Is this another of your attempts to piss me off?”

“Maybe,” he admitted, grinning. I tried to move away and he grabbed me around the waist, hauling me back. “I’d still like an answer, though.”

“Taran,” I warned. “I’m betrothed.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, to a man who couldn’t be bothered to attend your father’s funeral on time. Then when he finally arrived, he looked at you like you killed his favorite hound, even though *you* were the one grieving. A man who apparently only wants to marry you to be King, from what you said at the ball.”

“It’s complicated. And it’s none of your business.”

“Listen, I’m sure he’s a very nice person... well, I’m sure *he* thinks he’s a very nice person... but you can’t really believe he’s a better man than Luther.”

I worked my jaw but said nothing.

“Luther would throw himself on a sword for you. He would risk everything to protect you.”

“He would do that for you, too. Or Alixe, or Eleanor, or Lily.”

“Well, yes, he would, but we—”

“And for that matter, he would do those things for a complete stranger.”

“Yes, true, but—”

“In fact, he already has done those things for strangers. Many times.”

“If you could stop being logical for one minute—”

“You don’t have to convince me Luther is a good man, Taran. I know that already.”

“No, Diem, I don’t think you do. Not really.”

Taran’s tone had gone unusually serious. When I looked at him, there was a softness to his eyes, a profound gravity I didn’t often see.

“He’s the best man I know—the best man I’ve ever known. And for all those years, he’s never put himself first, not even once. Every single thing he does is to help someone else. I could give you enough stories to last a lifetime. People he’s helped out of bad situations, children whose lives he sav—”

Taran stopped, catching himself. His eyes filled with panic as they met mine.

“I know about the half-mortal children,” I murmured. “He told me.”

“He did?” His shoulders relaxed, and he shook his head, smirking. “Well, he wouldn’t tell *that* to a complete stranger, would he?”

I snorted softly. “No, just to a skeptical new Queen whose trust he was scrambling to earn.”

“*Stop*,” he growled. His voice, and his face, went hard as stone. “Don’t act like he’s one of those scheming court pricks. He deserves better than that.”

I didn’t know what to say. Questioning Luther’s motives had become a crutch that I leaned on every time the evidence of his good heart made me look a little too closely at my own. It was easier to deflect rather than confront the truth. And Luther *did* deserve better than that.

“I’m betrothed,” I said again, less sure than I was before.

Taran sat up beside me. He raked a hand through his dark blonde waves, then leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees, and gave me a pained look.

“He’ll wait for you, you know. It’s going to destroy him, but he’ll do it. He’ll sit back, and he’ll watch you marry that mortal. He’ll defend you to the entire realm while you put a crown on that jerk’s head and let him parade around calling himself King for however many decades he has left. And when he dies, Luther’s going to hold you while you mourn. Even if it takes you centuries to move on. And Kindred forbid, if you have children

with that man, Luther will be there for them too, as the best uncle they've ever had. And when their mortal father is gone, Luther will step up and love them as if they were his own."

A sharp burning hit my eyes. I squeezed them shut.

"Luther will stand by your side, and he will love you for every single day of it. And he won't say a word. He'll spend his entire miserable life protecting your happiness, hoping that someday you finally see him. Not Luther the Prince or the High General or the advisor, but *him*."

I tried to speak, but my throat had gone tight, fusing closed to keep my turmoil hidden as I desperately willed my heart to follow suit.

"And Kindred help me, Queenie, but if you do that to him... I adore you, I thank Blessed Lumnos you came into our lives. I'll defend you as my Queen, no matter who you marry. But if you put Luther through that..."

"I don't want to hurt him," I forced out. "I'm angry with him, but I don't want to break his heart."

"Then don't."

When I opened my eyes, Taran was scrubbing at his face and staring off into the distance. "He's done more for me than I could ever repay," he mumbled to himself, as if fighting some internal debate. "This... this is the least I could do. I have no right to ask this, but... Fortos's balls, he'll kill me if he finds out..." He blew out a deep breath. "Fuck it. He would never ask this of you, so I will. I owe him that much."

Taran swiveled to me. He leaned in close and clasped my face in his hands, forcing our eyes to meet. "Leave him. Leave that stupid mortal who does not deserve you, and be with Luther."

"Taran..."

"There is something between you two I've never seen in any couple before. When you look at each other, it's like the rest of the world ceases to exist."

"Taran—"

"At this point, I'm convinced even the Kindred want you together. And it's clear you want him, too. So stop being a damn coward, Diem, and choose Luther."

I jolted backward, snatching my chin from his hands. A thousand conflicting reactions were waging a bloody war inside me, and I wasn't entirely sure which one was going to come out victorious.

"You're right," I said finally.

Hope rose sun-bright on his face. “I am?”

“Yes.” I swallowed. “You *don’t* have any right to ask that of me.” And just like that, his hope was dead. “Who I decide to be with is my choice. Not yours, and sure as hell not the Kindred.”

“I know it’s your choice, I only—”

“And I am so *gods-damned* sick and tired of hearing the opinions of every person in the realm on who I should and shouldn’t marry.”

“Diem, that’s not what I—”

I stood up, my voice growing louder with each word. “You don’t know what I want. You don’t know me at all, Taran. So stay out of it.”

Taran shot to his feet and glowered at me from his towering height. “You know what? You’re right, too. I thought maybe I did know you, or at least knew the kind of person you are. Clearly, I was wrong.”

“Well, it’s your lucky week,” I said bitterly. “In three days, you’ll be free of me forever. You and Luther both.”

His face fell, his anger crumbling to dust. “Queenie,” he murmured. He reached for me, but I slipped out of his grip and walked away.

Chapter

Thirty-Six

The final House Reception had arrived.

Today, I would meet the last of the Twenty Houses—House Ghislaine, a small family with few members but, due to its shrewd dealings in gold, a staggering amount of wealth. I had expected the end of the meetings to bring a sense of relief, or at least some gloomy finality to my situation, but instead, I was more anxious than ever.

“Last one,” Eleanor sang, beaming at me as we walked to the meeting room. “And what a perfect House to end on. House Ghislaine never feuds with *anyone*.”

“Which means I’ll likely end this one with an actual blade in my chest,” I grumbled.

She grinned and patted my hand. “I think you truly are safe today. House Ghislaine is too vulnerable as the bottom House to stir up any trouble.”

In truth, with the Challenging two days away, it made little difference whether this meeting went exceptionally well or exceptionally awful. The Twenty Houses had laid out their demands, and I’d laid out my offers. Neither side had budged. Now I could only wait for my fate to unfold.

“Are we sure it’s safe to leave Lily and Teller unguarded while we’re all here together?” I asked.

Behind me, Taran let out a wordless grunt. I threw him a questioning glance, but he refused to meet my eyes. We hadn’t spoken since our argument the night before, which had made his assignment to shadow me particularly awkward.

“They’ll be safe in your chambers,” she assured me. “And they’re hardly unguarded. Perth is with them, and half the Royal Guard is lined up outside your suite.”

“And they all answer to Remis,” I muttered.

“Only for a few more days,” she said happily.

I didn't answer.

Taran finally spoke up, his tone curt. "Remis won't hurt them. He has nothing to gain from it, and he knows Luther would kill him if he tried."

Eleanor nodded. "They'll be fine. Luther's just being overprotective because it's Lily."

"He's being overprotective because it's *Diem*."

I looked back at Taran again, and he shot me a loaded stare.

As we walked into the meeting room for the final time, Remis, Garath, and Aemonn were huddled together in a corner and talking in hushed but animated whispers. Alixe was already seated. Something about her was *off*. Though she normally shared Luther's unflappable demeanor, today her features were strained with alarm.

She shot to her feet at the sight of me. As I started toward her, Aemonn smoothly stepped into my path.

"Your Majesty," he crooned, leaning in to press a kiss to my cheek. "Congratulations on your final House Reception. It's certainly been an *interesting* process." He winked, his azure eyes glittering with subtext.

I looked across his shoulder to where Taran and Alixe were now whispering. Aemonn shifted to block my view.

"It's been too long since we've had a chance to talk," he said. "I have so missed our conversations."

"I've been busy." A lie—I'd been anything *but* busy, spending most of my days sulking alone in my rooms, but I'd lost my patience for the flirtation that time with Aemonn always involved.

He tilted his head at the snip in my tone. "I was hoping I could steal you away for a quick—"

"Diem," Eleanor hissed. She had joined Taran and Alixe and was frantically waving me over.

"Um, please excuse me. I need to..." My voice trailed off as I tried to push past him.

His hand clamped around my upper arm and jerked me back into place.

I stared at him in shock. My muscles twitched with the urge to react, and I had to bite down to keep my training at bay and not send him face-first into the stone floor.

"I wasn't quite finished," he said with sickly sweetness.

"Get your hand off me."

“After everything I’ve done for you, I think I’m entitled to a few minutes of your time.”

A golden-skinned fist shot between us and seized his wrist.

“Hands off, asshole,” Taran growled.

He leaned his broad chest into his brother to force him back onto uneasy footing. Aemonn returned his glare, their foreheads dipping toward each other like wild rams.

Their different personalities often made it difficult to remember that these two were brothers, but in this moment, it had never been more clear. It wasn’t just their sun-kissed skin or their sandy blonde hair, but the years of hatred that simmered in their eyes—the kind of deeply personal resentment that only family could provoke.

Aemonn turned his focus back to me. “You really shouldn’t ignore me, Diem. I’m not the only one with a vested interest in keeping our relationship cordial, am I?” The corner of his lip quirked up, pleased at his own subtle threat.

Taran snarled in response. “You foul, lowlife, slimy piece of rotten garbage, you—”

“Taran,” I said calmly. “Let go of your brother.”

His eyes snapped to me. “Diem, don’t let him push you around.”

“Let Aemonn go,” I repeated. “Please.”

Taran grunted loudly and released his brother’s hand with a shove, but he didn’t move from his imposing position.

Aemonn gave him a victorious smirk. “You heard the lady. *Shoo*.”

Taran puffed his chest forward, sending his brother staggering back another step.

“*Taran*,” I warned.

His glare shifted to me, now mixed with disbelief and a touch of betrayal. He huffed and turned away.

The moment Taran was out of reach, I acted.

I spun my forearm in a circle, knocking Aemonn’s hand away with a heavy thump, then locked his elbow with my own so his arm twisted into an unnatural angle at his back. He arched backward and barked in pained surprise.

I leaned in until my mouth brushed his ear. “I don’t care what you’ve done for me or what secrets you know, Aemonn—you’re not *entitled* to any

part of me,” I hissed. “And if you ever grab me like that again, I’ll use my blades instead of my hands.”

A group of unfamiliar faces began to trail into the room, then froze at the sight of us. Remis and Garath shot me matching scowls as they crossed to greet the new arrivals, and I quickly released Aemonn from my hold.

“That was a *big* mistake,” he seethed.

“I accept your apology,” I said dryly.

Before he could sputter another veiled threat, I turned my back to him and walked away.

Taran gaped at me in delight. “I take back everything I said,” he breathed. “I’ll never be mad at you again.”

“Highly doubtful. Taran, what’s going on? Why is everyone whispering?”

His amusement vanished. “Remis is an ass.”

My breath caught. “Lily—is she alright? Did he—”

“Your Majesty,” a voice called out from behind me. I whirled to see a man striding toward me with arms extended. He was dripping with gilded finery—golden chains hanging from his neck, golden studs lining his ears and eyebrows, and golden thread embroidered into his clothing. Even his hair seemed plated in the yellow metal.

“Welcome, House Ghislaine,” I forced out as we embraced.

Remis gestured toward the assembled chairs. “Shall we get started?” he said warmly, ever the diplomat.

“We’re missing Luther,” I said. “We should wait until he arrives.”

“No need,” Remis said. “My son won’t be attending today. Everyone, please, take your seats.”

A cold chill crept along my skin. I tried to catch Remis’s gaze to push for more, but he was carefully avoiding eye contact, his focus entirely on the visiting Descended.

My attention shot to Taran, who had already stepped back to sink into his chair. All he offered was a silent shake of his head. I held my stance, debating how much of a scene I was willing to make, when he mouthed a single word: “*Later.*”

Reluctantly, I slipped into my seat. Surely Taran wouldn’t let me sit through hours of political posturing if Luther was in danger.

Or would he? Did he believe I cared so little for Luther that I would place a trivial meeting over coming to his aid?

Then again... had I given him any reason to think I *wouldn't*?



THE NEXT TWO hours were torture.

Keeping my eyes on the members of House Ghislaine—and not on the open door that I kept hoping Luther might walk through at any moment—was an effort. As I smiled and offered bland platitudes, my mind invented explanations that grew increasingly catastrophic. My fingers trembled with the need to put my arms around Teller and Lily and ensure they were unharmed.

And Luther, too.

I cursed myself for allowing my own inner circle to be seated out of my line of sight. As often as I dared, I jumped from my chair to refill my goblet for the chance of a stolen glance. That, at least, offered some comfort. Alixe's panic had faded to resignation, while Taran scowled, and Eleanor looked nearly as lost as I felt.

As she had predicted, the final House Reception was innocuous and forgettable. House Ghislaine offered the usual gushing praise, which Remis met with equal sycophantic energy. Not a word was spoken about the mortals or the half-mortals, much to my relief, and by the time House Ghislaine finally, *finally*, rose to leave, I had hardly uttered more than a handful of sentences.

Not a second passed after the last Ghislaine disappeared into the corridor before I wheeled toward Remis.

"What have you done? Where is Luther?"

Remis pulled his shoulders back. "This meeting is for the Crown Council and your advisors only. My son's presence was unnecessary."

"Luther is on the Crown Council."

"Not anymore."

"He stripped Luther of his titles," Taran muttered, joining me at my side.

I gaped at him, then at Remis. "You had no right. Those titles are mine to decide."

"Not until you're coronated," Remis said coolly. "Until then, I decide who sits on the Council." He smoothed down his doublet. "As I understand

it, you declined to appoint my son as an advisor despite his best efforts, and you've refused his counsel for weeks. You should be grateful—our positions are now aligned.”

My fingers curled, furious breaths rumbling in my throat, though my loathing was largely self-imposed. Remis was, *infuriatingly*, correct. I had little ground to object to him doing what I had effectively done myself.

“Who holds Luther’s titles now?” I scoffed. “Let me guess, *you*?”

“Me.” Aemonn stepped forward, arms crossed over his chest. “I had hoped to share the news with you myself earlier, if only you had deemed me worthy of your time.”

“Blessed fucking Kindred,” Taran spat. “*Him*? You’re going to make some sniveling courtier High General? He’s never even served a day in the Royal Guard.”

“Watch your tone, little brother,” Aemonn said. “That sniveling courtier is now in charge of where you’re assigned to serve. Both of you,” he added with a glance at Alixe. “I hear the western coast is quite dreary. Perhaps a few years in the swamps would do you both some good.”

Taran’s face flushed red with fury. My hand shot out to grab his in a silent plea to wait.

“And... Keeper of the Laws—you hold that title now, too?” I choked out.

Taran’s muscles went taut under my hand as he came to the same realization that had just turned my stomach.

Aemonn nodded, his expression tightening into something unreadable. He had once accused Luther of being a murderer for holding that title. Was it more of his scheming, or could he be trusted to stay the executions of the half-mortal children, as Luther had secretly done?

I turned my ire back to Remis. “Your vengeance is short-sighted. In two days’ time, either I’ll be coronated or Luther will be King, and now you’ve made an enemy of us both. I thought you were a smarter man than that.”

Remis’s expression tightened. He exchanged a glance with Garath, who looked nauseatingly pleased.

“My brother is simply doing what he must to keep our family safe,” Garath said. He looked me over, lips pursed. “We’ve seen what happens to those closest to you. You can hardly expect us to watch our own loved ones meet the same fate.”

His vicious words speared straight at my heart, my shoulders twitching inward as his cruelty struck with ruthless precision. “Fuck you,” I whispered.

Garath’s smile grew wider. He put an arm on his brother’s and son’s backs and ushered them toward the door.

“This is *wrong*,” Eleanor shouted, storming up to her uncles and taking everyone in the room by surprise. “Diem is one of us now, and Luther has given his whole life to House Corbois. You two don’t care about our family at all—you only care about yourselves.”

Remis stared at her darkly, uncharacteristically quiet, while Garath chuckled. “Mind yourself, niece,” he chided. “The only reason you’re not scrubbing dishes in the kitchens is because of our generosity.”

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and crossed her arms. “I’d rather scrub dishes for the rest of my life than live under your rules ever again.”

“Very well.” Garath arched a brow at his son. “Aemonn, have the guards remove Eleanor’s things from the palace at once. She can go live with the other Unhoused.”

Eleanor gasped, Aemonn stiffened, and Remis shook his head. He glared at me. “Do you see what you’ve done to our family? A thousand years of strength, and you’ve managed to tear us apart in *weeks*.”

I should have rejoiced. It was exactly what I’d set out to do—take down the Descended from within, starting with House Corbois. I’d cast a rift in the most powerful family in Lumnos that might never be sealed again.

But the only people I’d succeeded in hurting were the ones aligned with *me*.

Taran put an arm around Eleanor’s shoulders and pulled her close. “In two days, Diem will win the Challenging, and the two of you won’t ever have power again.”

Garath shrugged, unbothered by his son’s threat. “We’ll see.” He flashed me a smile. “So much can happen in two days.”

Chapter

Thirty-Seven

The others followed me in silence as I stalked through the palace to my chambers, where Teller and Lily were playing cards in the main parlor. They jumped to their feet at the sight of the four of us barreling in like a raging tornado.

Eleanor filled them in while Taran launched into a colorful tirade about the size of Aemonn's genitals and what exactly he planned to do with them after my coronation.

Alixé took a step toward me. "This changes nothing for us, Your Majesty. We swore our oath to you, not Remis."

I nodded in appreciation. "How bad is it? Can Aemonn really send you both away?"

"He can issue the orders, but we can delay leaving until the coronation."

If there is a coronation, I thought glumly.

"But," she sighed, "Aemonn might remove me as Vice General. If he does, I may not be able to keep the guards on your friends and family. They're loyal to Luther, but they can't disobey a direct order if they're told to leave. Not without risking their own execution."

"If Aemonn removes you, who would he choose as his second? Perhaps we can convince them to help us."

"Iléana," Alixé and Taran answered in unison.

I frowned. "That doesn't make sense—Aemonn hates Iléana. He told me so himself."

"Of course he did," Taran spat, looking ready to put his fist through a stone wall. "Everything he says is a lie."

"Aemonn and Iléana are very close," Alixé explained with a sympathetic wince. "It was always a source of tension with Luther that the two of them were such good friends."

I balked, instantly rethinking every conversation Aemonn and I had shared. “But... at the cousin’s dinner—”

“Aemonn invited her, did he tell you that?” Taran muttered. “He assigned the chairs so Luther had to sit beside her. They were working together to drive you two apart.”

Alixé nodded. The pity in her eyes made my cheeks burn hot for having been so gullible. Aemonn’s plotting had seemed selfish but harmless—I had never fathomed his closest ally was the woman who most wanted me dead.

And the doubt he had sown in me toward Luther... my cowering heart had needed a reason to justify running away, and I’d been all too willing to use Aemonn’s lies as an excuse.

A lump rose in my throat.

“We’ll resign from the Royal Guard, if we have to,” Taran said. “Even the Crown can’t force a Descended to serve against their will. The most Remis could do is banish us from House Corbois.”

“Like he just did to me,” Eleanor murmured, looking shellshocked and a little green. Lily took her hand and squeezed it.

“It’s only two days,” Alixé said emphatically. “Whatever their plans may be, we can survive them for that long.”

Two days.

My head began to throb.

Teller turned to me with a somber look. “Diem, you have to be coronated. If you aren’t—”

“I’m aware,” I snapped. He cocked his head, his eyes squinting in a way that I knew meant he was seeing more of me than I’d wanted to reveal. I turned back to Alixé and Taran. “Where is he?”

They shared a look, clearly knowing exactly who I meant.

“Lumnos City,” Alixé said after a long hesitation.

“Why?”

“For you,” Taran answered with a pointed stare. “To persuade the Houses not to Challenge you.”

I closed my eyes, forcing my legs to keep my body afloat as the world began to swirl around me.

“Diem,” Teller said again, his tone grave. “If you’re Challenged—”

“I *said* I’m aware,” I gritted out. “What about Eleanor?”

“I’ll have her things brought here,” Alixe said. “She can stay in your suite until the Challenging.”

“And if I lose the Challenging—that’s it? She’s really out of House Corbois?”

They all shared a heavy look.

“You can’t lose,” Teller insisted. “That’s all there is to it. You just have to win, or else—”

“I know!” I screamed. “By the Flames Teller, do you think I don’t spend *every gods-damned second* of *every gods-damned day* thinking about how many people will suffer if I fail, when failure is the only thing I seem to be capable of doing?”

Teller flinched, staggering back a step.

“Diem,” Eleanor said softly.

I rubbed my temples. “I’m sorry. I—I just... I need a moment.” I turned and fled into my bedchamber, slamming the door behind me.

I paced the length of my room, clenching my jaw as my heart thumped a frantic rhythm.

Two days left.

Two days.

For weeks, the burden on my shoulders had been growing—in size, in heft, in agony. At first, it had driven my momentum, pushing at my back to urge me forward, a reminder of everyone my success could help.

But with every interaction gone wrong, those rocks had grown into boulders, and those boulders had become mountains, steep and jagged and too deadly to scale, the sheer weight of them threatening to bury me alive.

What would happen if I failed? To Teller, to Lily—to all the people I was trying to protect? Would the mortals be kicked out of the realm? Would Henri throw his life away on a suicide Guardians mission? Would my Corbois friends be forever ruined for the crime of thirty days of loyalty to me?

Or would they all forget me? Perhaps that would be the kinder fate, for my tiny reign to be utterly meaningless in the end. Or perhaps I would become a cautionary tale, a warning to all future Crowns of the grisly end they might meet if they dared to care for mortals, too.

Had I done *any* good? Or had I just made everything so much worse?

Suddenly, the walls of my bedchamber felt too narrow, inching closer with every panicked breath.

I looked to Sorae's perch, my gryvern pacing in time with my own agitated steps, when a metallic glint caught at the edge of my vision. The gifts from the ball had been laid out on my vanity, and at the center lay a small gold disc.

I walked over and picked up the compass from Meros. A red arrow whirred beneath the glass dome, searching for the thing my heart most desired. I waited and waited for an answer, but the arrow continued its endless quest, spinning wildly without pause.

Because... what *did* I want?

Did I even want to survive the Challenging? If the weight of the Crown was too heavy now, how much worse would it be when I wielded it in full?

Or did I want to run away? I could take Teller, hop on Sorae's back and disappear to some far-flung corner of Emarion. It would be the coward's way out, but at least my brother would be safe, something I could never guarantee as Queen.

And what about my heart? I'd been chasing one man and running from another, agonizing over promises and secrets, loyalties and expectations. I knew who scared me, who excited me, who gave me dread and who gave me hope, but one question I hadn't yet answered: who did I *want*?

The compass shifted in my palm as the arrow clicked to a sudden halt.

My feet followed the red line of the compass across my chamber, outside to Sorae's perch, and to the edge of the palace walls. Whoever or whatever I desired, it apparently wasn't here.

I ran inside and threw the Montios cloak across my shoulders to guard against the biting wind, then returned to Sorae's side. Her amber eyes took in the compass clutched in my palm, then gazed out into the distance as her feathered wings spread wide.

I threw my leg across her back, and we launched skyward. I cringed, knowing Taran would be furious at me for leaving—but some innate sense told me this was something I needed to face alone.

Whatever magic allowed the compass to see into my heart with such clarity, Sorae must have shared it, because with each of her dips and turns, the compass's aim remained constant. Within moments, the glittering palace was behind us, and the drab grey mud of Mortal City loomed in the distance. My heart stuttered at the sight.

Henri, I realized. The compass must be taking me to Henri.

An unexpected panic gripped me, and I had to fight the urge to turn around and fly back. I hadn't spoken to him since he and Vance had fled from me two weeks ago.

At first, I'd been grateful for the time to focus on matters at the palace, but as the Challenging grew nearer, the silence between us had become increasingly... *noisy*.

Sorae flew closer, and I held my breath. What would I say? What truth would he see in my eyes, if he really looked?

But as we approached the center of Mortal City, where Henri's home awaited, Sorae banked, turning toward the coast.

In the distance, I could just make out the faint dark line of Coeurîle, the verdant island in the center of the Sacred Sea. I knew little about it, other than it was forbidden to all but the Crowns, but as I gazed on it, I felt a sudden tugging in my chest—a crooning siren song, demanding I cross the glittering cerulean waves and set my foot on its moss-covered banks.

Come, Daughter of the Forgotten.

I gasped aloud. I hadn't heard the *voice* since my father's death, and I'd never heard it tell me to *come* anywhere. For weeks, I'd listened for it, even begged for it. It had abandoned me—until now.

Before I could question the beckoning or give in to its summons, Sorae's path shifted again, and she dove for the ground. It took only a moment to realize where we were as her clawed feet touched the soil and brought me to a gentle stop.

Before me was a broad, blackened patch of earth—the place where my family's home had once stood.

"I don't understand," I murmured as I slid off Sorae's back. "There's no one here."

My insides twisted into knots. I peered down at the compass in my palm. Its scarlet arrow was quivering and pointing in the direction of the dark crater left by my implosion of power. As I approached the edge, two discoveries had me freezing in place.

First, the ground under the remains of my home had changed. At the funeral, the entire circle had been crusted with a hard layer of glittering onyx rock, but every last pebble of the strange stone had disappeared, leaving only the peaty soil beneath.

Second, speared into the grass just outside the crater's rim was a sword whose jeweled handle I knew by heart. Luther's sword—the Sword of

Corbois.

I ran my fingers along the edge of the gilded hilt. I had never seen Luther without it. To see it abandoned here, especially after he had pulled it on his father to defend me...

Dark, terrifying scenarios filled my head—but there was no blood on the blade, no sign of recent use. And given how possessive Remis had acted toward the heirloom, I doubted he would leave it here, even to send a message.

Some unexplainable intuition told me Luther had left it behind of his own free will. What I couldn't understand was *why*.

I looked back at the compass, whose arrow still trembled with such force I worried it might crack the glass. It pointed over the charred earth to the trees beyond.

I carefully stepped over the lip of the deep basin and made my way across, squinting through the dusky light.

My heart skipped a beat. What if the compass had led me to some evidence of my father's murderer? My spontaneous combustion had destroyed the crime scene and any clues along with it. I had spent several afternoons wandering around the area, searching for anything that might give me a hint of the killer's identity. Whoever they were, they'd hidden their tracks well.

And I had unwittingly helped.

But if there was something I'd missed... revenge was certainly high on the list of things I desired most.

My pace quickened, excitement and apprehension rising in unison. I crossed the center of the crater, and the compass grew hot in my hand. When I looked at it again, the red arrow had vanished, and the dial was lit up with a blinding glow.

I scanned the soil, then the surrounding land. What could possibly be here that was the object of my heart's greatest desire?

Then it hit me.

And it broke me.

My father.

My family, together again.

My home—the safe, joy-filled bubble of my childhood.

The one thing I desired most was the one thing I could never, *ever* have again.

A dam gave way, and weeks of pent-up sorrow unleashed on my body. All the heartbreak I had been clutching tight and fighting to restrain, the life and loves I'd lost forever—all of it tore from my soul with a gut-wrenching sob.

I crumpled to the ground as surely as if the burden I carried took physical form. I cried for myself, and all that I had lost, but mostly I cried for everyone who had, or would soon, suffer for my failure.

For my family and my Corbois friends, whose lives I'd put in danger. For the half-mortal children, who had lost their savior because of his loyalty to me. For all the mortal families who would be torn apart when the Twenty Houses got their way.

I cried for every person who had prayed for a spark of hope in this dreary, oppressive world, and the endless dark they'd found in return.

I cried until the setting sun and the rising moon passed like wind-blown ships, and when my tears had again run dry, I took a wobbling breath and pulled myself to my knees.

"I'm so sorry, Father," I said in a trembling, broken voice.

I looked at the soil, wincing at the memory of the cold stiffness of my father's body as I clutched him in my arms.

"I don't think I'm strong enough to do this. Everyone is counting on me, and I'm going to fail them, just like I failed you."

I leaned forward and dug my fingers into the damp earth, wishing I could bury myself deep and sleep for a thousand years.

"The darkness is closing in," I whispered, "and I don't have the strength to find the light."

"Then make your own."

The voice startled me upright. I twisted around to see my brother standing behind me, hands shoved into his pockets. Across the clearing, Alixe and a very angry-looking Taran stood guard at the forest's edge.

"You've got all that fancy Descended magic," Teller said. "Maybe it's time to stop looking for the light and start making it yourself."

I shook my head sadly. "I don't know how. And every time I try, I end up making things worse."

"Then keep trying. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, pick yourself back up, and try again. And don't stop until you figure it out. That's what the Diem Bellator I know would do."

He sat down beside me and leaned back on his hands, and together we stared at the site of our childhood home and the ashes of everything we once loved. I could almost hear the echo of our laughter as we cooked and cleaned, played and sparred, the sounds taunting me as much as they comforted me.

“I can’t believe he’s gone,” Teller said. “With all the battles he fought, everything he survived... it always seemed like he would find a way to evade death somehow.”

I nodded, too battered to find words.

“Do you think he can see us?” he asked. “Do you think wherever he is, he’s still watching us?”

My chin sank low. “I hope not.”

Teller let out a long sigh and moved closer, pulling me into his side. “You stopped fighting, D. You gave up.”

I tried to yank away, but he held me firm. “How can you say that?” I shot back. “All I’ve been doing for weeks is fighting.”

“You’ve certainly been swinging your fists around everywhere you go, but you haven’t been *fighting*. You’re going through the motions and biding your time until someone takes pity on you and strikes a killing blow. You’ve lost that spirit that makes you... *you*.”

He wrapped me tighter and squeezed my shoulder until I brought my eyes to his.

“What was Father’s most important lesson?” he prodded. “The one he reminded us of every time we sparred?”

“Survive,” I said hoarsely.

Teller nodded as he recited our father’s teachings. “Survive. At whatever cost, to whatever end. Survive first—”

“—mind the consequences later,” I finished.

I looked ahead at the scorched soil, remembering the last time my father and I sparred together and the words he left me with.

I cannot tell you what to do with your life, my darling Diem. But whatever you choose—be smart. And above all, survive. Your life is far too precious to me to be wasted.

“I’m scared, Teller,” I confessed, my voice finding a small measure of strength at finally admitting the truth. “I’m so fucking scared.”

“I am, too. The thought of losing you...” Teller’s voice wavered, and I leaned against his shoulder.

“Do you think Father ever felt like this before his battles?” I asked. “Do you think he ever ran away and cried in a big pile of dirt?”

Teller smirked. “He did worse than that. At the funeral, one of his friends told me he got so sick before his first battle he threw up all over his new combat uniform. His battalion made him roll around in the mud to cover up the smell.”

A real laugh burst out of me, catching me by surprise. “If he’d ever told me that story, I would have teased him about it for *weeks*.”

“That’s probably why he never told you.” Teller’s smile softened as his expression turned thoughtful. “I once asked him what was the worst battle he ever fought. He said it was his first one as a commander—not because of how it ended, but because it was the first time all the lives on the battlefield were his responsibility. He felt like every death fell on his shoulders.”

“That’s how I feel. It’s not dying I fear. It’s everything else—all the people who are counting on me. I’m scared of letting them down.”

“Then fight.”

I nodded resignedly. “I’ll try.”

“No.” Teller clamped a hand to the back of my neck, forcing my face to his. “*Fight, D. Fight with that fire I know you have in you. Fight like you’re pissed off they dared to even consider opposing you.*” He touched his forehead to mine. “Fight like a gods-damned *Bellator*.”

Somewhere, in the darkness, a flame flickered to life.

“I’ve seen you spar with men three times your size who have decades of training on you. You’ve taken on entire groups on your own. Luther is the most terrifying person I’ve ever met, and you fight with him like he’s some annoying fly.”

Another laugh bubbled up between snuffles. “I do seem to have a habit of getting myself into fights I’m vastly outmatched for.”

“A habit?” Teller snorted. “You practically survive off it.”

I playfully shoved his side, though my smile faltered. “What if I took it too far this time?”

He frowned pensively. “Did you do it for the right reasons?”

I thought of all the people I was fighting to protect, and the flame in my heart grew a little brighter.

“Yes.”

“Do the people you’re confronting deserve it?”

“*Gods*, yes.”

“Then stop second-guessing yourself. I know you can do this. We all do. You’re a Queen, and more importantly, you’re the daughter of Andrei Bellator—so go fight like it.”

I closed my eyes and let his words rush into me. Like a gentle wind blown on a glowing ember, the spirit inside me sparked and roared to life. I let it burn, cleansing away my doubt, my guilt, my fear. I would never be completely free of those things, but I could stop letting them rule me. I could give it my best and pray that was enough.

Even if it wasn’t, at least I’d go to my grave knowing I gave it my all.

Because in this world of injustice and cruelty, where innocents died every day while people in power turned a blind eye and hid in the comfort of their privilege, doing something and failing was better than doing nothing at all.

So I would try.

I would *fight*.

And Kindred be damned, I would show this realm what it meant to mess with a Bellator.

I reached down and took a fist full of soil, then tucked it into a pouch at my waist. I might never be able to go home again, but I could bring home with me. I could carry in my heart all the love, all my parents’ lessons, and everything this home represented—and nothing could ever take that away.

“Are you sure you’re ready for Queen Diem?” I teased. “I have a feeling my enemies won’t end with the Twenty Houses of Lumnos.”

Teller went full-on little brother, rolling his eyes with a dramatic huff. “Someone has to keep your ego in check. I suppose it might as well be me.”

I smiled and held out my hand. “Ready?”

“I’m ready, Your Majesty.” He smirked as our palms clasped together with a menacing clap. “Let’s fight.”



I STOOD on the perch outside my bedchamber, watching the moon’s silvery light spill across the first frost of the season, turning the palace grounds into a shimmering quilt.

Sorae was seated beside me. Her feathered wing curled around my body to tuck me close as I scratched the leathery patch of flesh at her chin.

Her eyes closed, and a happy rumble rolled from her throat. Because of the bond that connected our emotions, no one had felt the brunt of my dour mood these past weeks more than Sorae—and no one seemed more relieved that I’d finally let it go.

I looked down at the ledge in front of me, where a small golden orb sat on a pillow of pink satin. For the last hour, I’d been trying to work up the courage to ask the question that had been nagging at me for weeks. It was an answer I both desperately wanted to know and deeply feared receiving.

Sorae nipped at the corner of the pillow, causing the gilded sphere to jostle free and roll across the balustrade. I lunged to grab it before it tumbled over the edge, but when I went to set it back in place, Sorae tugged the cushion fully out of my reach.

“Sorae!” I protested. She snorted in response, the pillow still dangling from her teeth. I reached to snatch it from her, and she whipped it away and tossed it clear across the balcony.

“It’s the middle of the night Sorae, I’m not playing fetch with you. Wait—are *you* trying to play fetch with *me*?”

She blew a puff of smoke through her nostrils that sounded eerily like a laugh. Before I could retrieve the pillow like a good little trained pet, she leaned her head down and nudged my hand with her snout.

I held out my palm, frowning down at the orb. “You think I should ask?”

Two amber eyes blinked slowly in response.

“What if it says no?” I said, my voice growing weak.

To that, Sorae didn’t respond, but the pulse of affection across our bond told me what I needed to know. That she would be here with me, by my side, whatever the answer.

I blew out a breath and closed my eyes. Just as it had been on the night of the ball, the strange object felt unnervingly *alive*, hot to the touch and vibrating with energy. A force beneath my skin stirred, as if whatever magic lived inside the sphere was whispering a secret to whatever magic lived inside of me.

“Orb of Answering, here is my first question.” I hesitated and swallowed the lump in my throat. “Is my mother still alive?”

There was a tickling against my skin as the rough etchings on the ball’s surface began to move. The intricate patterns shifted and wove into symbols

I didn't recognize, then words in languages I didn't know, until finally one clear word appeared on the orb's smooth golden face.

Yes.

A joyful sob broke from my lips, followed by uncontrollable laughter that sang of relief and hope.

Alive—my mother was *alive*!

I clasped the orb to my chest, grinning and laughing, happy tears pooling at the corners of my eyes. After all this time, all this uncertainty—Auralie Bellator was *alive*.

And I would see her again.

All I had to do was survive the Challenging. Then, in a few weeks' time, Luther would go to her. I would make him take me along—maybe Teller, too. We would find her and bring her home, and we would grieve my father's loss all over again, but at least we would do it together.

I threw my arms around Sorae's scale-covered neck and hugged her tightly, drawing another of her pleased trills. I wanted to run inside and do the same to Teller, but he was fast asleep, and that would provoke a much deeper conversation about Luther and our mother that now was not the time to begin.

Soon, though. I'd been a hypocrite in keeping secrets to protect him after I had been so angry when the same was done to me. Teller deserved the truth, and he would get it... after the Challenging. From me—or, worst case, from Luther.

I gave another happy sigh and laid a kiss on Sorae's snout, then turned back to my bedchamber. Just as I passed through the archway leading to my rooms, an idea pierced my thoughts.

I paused, holding the golden sphere up to my face, the moon's reflection gleaming bright along its surface.

"Orb of Answering," I said slowly, "here is my second question. The man who sired me... my birth father... is he still alive?"

Again, the etchings set into motion, scribbling and scrawling all manner of ancient symbols. It seemed to take longer this time, the answer more buried in its infinite and impossible knowledge.

And then, as before, a single word took shape.

And my heart stopped in my chest.

Yes.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

“Don’t you think this is a little bit... much?”

I eyed my reflection in the mirror, desperately clamping my lips together to keep from laughing.

“You’re a Queen,” Eleanor said, draping another heavy collar of jewels around my neck. “There’s no such thing as too much.”

Lily nodded in aggressive agreement and fussed with the diamond-encrusted sash at my waist. “You need to embrace the Crown, and if you want to feel the part, you have to look the part.”

“But I don’t even have anywhere special to go,” I protested.

“*You’re a Queen*,” Eleanor said again. “Everywhere you go is special.”

“Found it,” Taran shouted, striding in with a colossal heap of fabric in his hands.

Lily squealed and ran over to help him unfurl his discovery: deep marine blue velvet, covered with silver embroidery from end to end, its edges trimmed in snow-white fur with flecks of black.

I groaned. “Is that...?”

“A cape!” Lily and Taran said together. They walked toward me holding the monstrosity. It was outrageously long, stretching halfway across the room, with two oversized bejeweled clasps at the lapels.

“A cape? *Really?*”

They ignored my protests and settled the thick fabric over my shoulders. I shot a pleading look at my brother and Alixe, who sat together on my bed, arms crossed and grinning as they watched the spectacle play out.

I sighed and ran my palm over the soft fur. A rainbow of gemstones glittered on the rings that adorned every finger and the stack of gaudy necklaces that lay at my throat.

“At least if it’s my last full day alive, I’m going out with pizzazz,” I joked.

“Diem,” my brother warned, his expression turning solemn. “No more talking like that. You promised.”

I shot him an apologetic smile. “Bad habit.”

“You look beautiful,” Eleanor gushed. She had chosen the most elaborate dress in my wardrobe, a flowing strapless gown of black chiffon covered in a mosaic of tiny glass beads that shimmered with every movement. “I wish the whole realm could see you like this.”

She gave me a hopeful look and I couldn’t help but grin. Eleanor had set her heart on me showing up to the Challenging tomorrow in the kind of jaw-dropping outfit I *should* have worn to the funeral.

“In time,” I assured her. “Today, we dress up and celebrate, but tomorrow...” I caught my brother’s eye in the mirror’s reflection. “Tomorrow, we fight.”

He smiled in response.

I took a final look at the Crown over my head, the glowing circlet of star-flecked vines. Such a beautiful, ethereal object—one that many had died to wear, and so many more had died to defend.

I turned to face the room, where the others had gathered in a group to watch me. Taran had his arm around my brother’s shoulder. Perthe stood guard at the door, dipping his chin in respect when I caught his eyes. Eleanor and Lily were clutching each other and beaming, while Alixe gave me a slow, approving nod.

Family.

This small but powerful cadre had become my family. I would lay down my life for any one of them, and I knew without doubt they would do the same for me.

My eyes met my brother’s, and I could see an echo of the same thought on his mind. I was determined to keep my word to him tomorrow and fight with everything I had—but if my best wasn’t enough, I was now certain he would be loved and cared for after I was gone. I suspected the mortals of Lumnos might have found themselves a few new Descended allies, as well.

Suddenly the weight on my shoulders didn’t feel quite so heavy.

“I’m all dressed up with nowhere to go,” I laughed as I swallowed away the burning in my throat. “What now?”

“We organized a lunch with all the cousins in the formal dining room,” Lily announced eagerly.

“With better seating arrangements this time,” Taran said, winking.

“But first you have your final training session,” Alixe cut in.

“Training? Like this?” Baubles tinkled like bells as I lifted my arms. “I can barely move.”

She shrugged. “You don’t have to move. No physical fighting this time. Just magic.”

“And we’re all coming,” Teller added. “You promised to show me your magic. Time to pay up.”

I clenched my jaw into a false smile. “Wonderful. Can’t wait.”

Teller and Taran shared a look and grinned. Eleanor and Lily flocked to my side to help me maneuver the cartload of material draped around me. As we headed for the corridor, I grabbed an object I’d tucked behind my bedchamber door and secured it to my waist with a simple leather band.

We made our way through the palace as a group, the laughter and chatter reverberating off the walls as we walked. My chest warmed at the sound and the cautious optimism that cocooned me. For the first time in a long time, I felt... lucky.

Hopeful.

As we noisily paraded into the dungeon, the cacophony fell to a dull hum when we realized we weren’t alone.

Leaning against a pillar in the center of the expansive stone chamber, his arms folded over his chest and one leg propped against the wall, was a raven-haired man with a jagged scar and a piercing stare that locked instantly with mine.

“Luther,” I said softly.

I hadn’t seen him since the fight with Remis. The first morning that he hadn’t shown up for our daily breakfast, my heart had sunk, and I’d realized how deeply I had come to rely on his constant, steady presence, even when I had gone out of my way to ignore it.

The others tensed and looked between us. I nudged my way to the front and down the stairs with as much grace as I could manage, given the yards of fabric dragging behind me.

Luther straightened as I approached, his hands dropping to his side. He bent at the waist in a deferential bow. Though I knew he meant it as a show of respect, the stiff formality of the gesture, and the distance between us that it implied, sent a pang of regret through my chest.

“You’re back,” I said.

He nodded. His eyes traveled over my jewels, my cape, my dress. “You’re... a sight to behold.”

A blush rose to my cheeks. “Eleanor and Lily thought it would be good for me to feel like a true Queen today.”

“And do you?”

The corner of my lips twitched up. “I’m getting there.”

His intense gaze burned with words unsaid. I knew from the flare of hope I saw within them that my own expression was giving me away.

“You dropped something.” I pulled my cape back and unclasped the Sword of Corbois from the leather band at my waist. I held it out in offering, the gilded hilt and gleaming blade resting on my outstretched palms.

He stared down at the sword and started to reach for it, then paused. “You should keep it. It’s meant to be worn by a person sworn to protect House Corbois. My loyalty is now...” His eyes returned to mine. “...elsewhere.”

My stomach fluttered. “I’m a bit preoccupied trying to keep several thousand mortals alive at the moment. Maybe you could do me a favor and take House Corbois off my hands?” I fought, and failed, to keep my smile away. “Besides, I know better than to take a man’s jewelry away. They do get so fussy about such things.”

His smirk won out, as well. “As you wish, my Queen.” He took the sword, his hands brushing not-quite-accidentally over mine. “My father is going to want it back.”

“Then give it to him,” I said sweetly. “Pointy end first.”

His meaningful look said he was strongly considering it. He slipped the sword into the empty sheath at his back, and something about seeing the jeweled handle rising once again over his shoulder set my soul at ease.

“I heard what Remis did with your titles. Luther, I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t,” he said. “That was not your fault.”

“It was. I shouldn’t have put you between me and your family.”

“This goes much deeper than your arrival here. That confrontation has been a long time coming.”

I hesitated, then took a few steps closer. I set my hand on his chest and dropped my voice to a whisper. “He did this, didn’t he? It was an attack from your father that gave you this scar?”

He nodded, a muscle feathering along his jaw.

“Why?” I breathed. “You were just a child—how could he do that to his own son?”

For a moment, it looked like he might respond, but just as he had done so many times before, his steely mask settled in place, and his mouth pressed closed. All my hurt and anger began to resurface. I moved to pull away.

“Wait.” His hand shot to mine. “I want to tell you...”

“But?”

“But... that story is long and difficult, and not one I wish for many to know. And if you haven’t noticed, we have a rather eager audience.”

I glanced to the dungeon stairs. There was a flurry of shuffling and sudden chatter as the others scrambled to pretend they hadn’t been scrutinizing our every move.

I stifled a laugh. “Fair enough. Another time, then.”

He let out a long exhale, the tension relaxing from his posture. “I’m sick of keeping things from you. I want you to know everything. Every secret I have is yours.”

I struggled to hold his gaze as I thought of the Guardians and the role I’d played in helping them. “I’ve kept things from you, too. Things that might make you look at me differently.”

Luther crooked a finger under my chin and gently nudged it up until my eyes returned to his. “There’s nothing you could reveal that would change how I feel about you.”

My heart thundered.

“No more secrets, then. After the Challenging, we come clean about everything. Brutal honesty.”

“Brutal honesty,” he agreed.

Slowly, so slowly, as if he dreaded letting me go, he took his hand off mine and reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a letter.

“This arrived for you this morning.”

My brows drew together as I pulled a folded note from the envelope and instantly recognized the simple, blocky lettering. My frown deepened as I read.

D,

Good luck tomorrow. I'll see you soon.
Remember, whatever it may look like, we are
on the same side.

-H

"Is something wrong?" Luther asked, craning his head to peer down at me.

I sighed. "It's from Henri." I winced before continuing. "He came to the palace again. Just after my father's funeral."

"I know."

I looked up in surprise.

"A guard saw you fleeing the canal leading to the royal dock."

My eyes went wide. "Did he see Henri?"

"No, only you, but I had my suspicions as to why." Luther smiled, though it was tainted with sadness. "The canal is how all the Corbois sneak their lovers in without being spotted. The bloodlocks shifting to your family line has put a significant dent in all the cousins' love lives."

Not all of them, I thought with a secret smile as I remembered my brother's earlier visits to Lily.

"Why didn't you say anything?" I asked.

It was a pointless question. I already knew a thousand explanations he could provide.

Because you weren't speaking to me.

Because I was trying to win your forgiveness, and you would only have yelled at me.

Because you were meeting with the man you've chosen over me.

"Because it wasn't my place," he answered.

I read the letter again, my mind tumbling over the lines, then folded it up and tucked it away. I had let the situation with Henri spiral too far out of control. He deserved honesty from me, too—and soon, I intended to give it to him.

"I heard you were meeting with the Houses," I said.

Weariness settled over his features. "I've done all I can. I made every promise I can keep and offered everything that's mine to give. I pray it will be enough."

“What did you promise them?”

He worked his jaw and looked away. The ominous cloud that hung over us seemed to thicken, darkening his expression.

“Luther, I told you, I don’t want to sell off preferential treatment just to —”

“It’s nothing like that.”

He still wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Tell me.” I stepped closer, his body so close that his woodsy musk filled my nose. “Brutal honesty, remember?”

He closed his eyes, and I watched as his features slowly hardened. His armor of indomitable resolve took hold, and when he finally returned my gaze, it was not Luther who stood before me but the cold, brutal Prince. He glanced briefly to the others, then his voice dropped low, meant only for my ears.

“House Hanoverre agreed not to come after you if I make a bonded bargain to marry Iléana.”

My hands flew out on reflex, latching to his forearms to steady my spinning head. “Luther. *No*.”

“House Hanoverre is your greatest threat. If I have a chance to keep you safe from them, I have to take it.”

I shook my head frantically and grappled for words. My vision blurred at the corners, the world sharpening in on him and him alone. “Luther—please—*please*, tell me you didn’t enter that bargain.”

He fixed me with his penetrating stare, and I thought my fractured heart might explode and level the world to ashes all over again.

“Luther, *no*,” I choked out.

“I told them I would give them an answer by sundown—”

“Thank the gods,” I groaned, slumping against him.

“—but I’ve already made up my mind to accept.”

I blinked up at him. “You can’t be serious.”

“I promised you I would not let you die at the Challenging.” His expression turned pained. “I know you no longer have faith in my promises —”

“I do,” I insisted. “I shouldn’t have said what I did. I was angry and grieving, and I took it out on you. I’m so sorry, Luther. I know you did everything you could. You don’t have to sign your life away to that witch to earn my faith—you have it already. You never truly lost it.”

His mask flickered, and a blinding ray of brilliant, soul-warming happiness shone through, then quickly disappeared. “If I deny them, they may Challenge you out of spite alone.”

“Then let them Challenge me.”

“If you had more time to master your magic, I would have no doubt you could defeat anyone, but—”

“The godhood came to me when I needed it in the past.” I shrugged. “Maybe it will do so again.”

“And if it doesn’t?” His voice began to rise, his tone growing hot as the air rippled with his aura. “You expect me to watch Jean Hanoverre take your life? I would marry every person in that entire wretched House before I’d let that happen. You cannot ask me to stand back and do nothing.” His hands gripped at my waist. “I will not let you die.”

“I’m not asking you to do nothing. I’m asking you not to do *this*.”

He glared at me, gaze swirling with the stars and shadows of his mighty power. His fury was a fearsome sight, the kind that could make even the bravest of warriors weak-kneed and wary, but I did not wither. This deadly, uncompromising rage was not *at* me, but *for* me.

“Marry her if you love her,” I said, the words almost too painful to speak aloud.

“I don’t,” he growled. “I l—”

I gently placed a finger on his lips to silence him. His features tensed at the gesture, then softened.

“Marry her if you care for her,” I went on, still keeping my voice low, “or if you want to raise a family with her and grow old with her. Marry her if she is who your heart desires. But don’t marry her for me. I could not bear it.” I gave him a rueful smile. “I would rather die in the Challenging than live knowing I was to blame for that.”

He watched me, saying nothing. I could see the words forming in his throat—the protests, the promises, the guilt, the weight of my life on his shoulders.

Finally, his hand rose to mine, curling around my fingers and pulling them from his lips. “Show me you can use your magic. Prove to me you can defend yourself, and I’ll reject the bargain.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Is this another one of your attempts to bribe me into surviving?”

He leaned in closer. “If that’s what it takes.”

I looked over at the others. Alixe and Teller talked quietly between the occasional glance, while Eleanor and Lily were cuddled into Taran's hips, the three of them no longer bothering to pretend they weren't watching. The ladies were all but swooning, eyes practically glowing with hope, but Taran's expression was more reserved. His hard stare simmered with the confrontation we'd had at my last training. A request, and a warning, not to be careless with his best friend's heart.

"Let's get started then," I said. "Can't be late for my fancy Corbois lunch." I backed away from Luther and swore as I nearly toppled over the pool of fabric at my feet. I fumbled with the cape fastenings at my chest. "What am I learning today?"

"Shielding." Luther took the clasps from my struggling hands, unsnapping them with ease. I shivered at the graze of his rough hands over my bare shoulders as he slid the cape off me and set it aside. "If you can't shield, you'll be dead in minutes. If you can, you can wear them down and buy yourself time to plan."

"Survive first," Teller called out. "Father would approve."

I nodded. "I think I might have accidentally shielded once before. A Descended man attacked me in Mortal City, and he—"

"What?" Luther's face darkened. His magic pulsed across the dungeon like a shockwave, sending our friends staggering back a few steps and coaxing my own godhood to lift its head. "When did this happen?"

"It's nothing." I shrugged it off, though the memory of the gruesome murder provoked a wave of fresh regret. If only I had known then what I was, what I was capable of, I could have saved the mortal woman and her half-mortal son from their brutal deaths. "It happened before the Crown, when I was a mortal."

"You were never a mortal," Taran shouted.

"I'm as much mortal as I am Descended," I shot back. "And unlike the rest of Lumnos City, I have no intention of ignoring the mortal blood that runs in my veins."

Taran grinned. "There's the spitfire I've been missing."

"Who was he?" Luther snapped, still looking furious. "Why did he attack you?"

"I don't know his name. He discovered a child he had fathered with a mortal woman there. He came to..." I trailed off, and Luther's face fell as he pieced together the rest. "I was too late."

I knew Luther would blame himself for it as surely as I did. He had made himself the champion of the half-mortal children, and every death he could not prevent sat heavy on his shoulders.

Perhaps Lily was right—perhaps Luther and I did have more in common than I realized.

“And you were able to shield yourself from his magic?” Alixe asked.

“I think so. He was only a few feet away when he attacked, but somehow I wasn’t hurt. I must have shielded myself without realizing.”

Taran barked a loud laugh. “And *that* didn’t tip you off that you were Descended? How deeply in denial were you?”

“You have no idea,” Luther muttered.

Alixé strode forward, focusing her attention on me. “Normally, when we use our magic to attack, we shape it into weapons, like taking a lump of ore and crafting it into a blade. When we use it to shield, we simply rely on the raw magic itself. We pull it around us in its purest form.”

I thought back to when my magic first manifested years ago, when I believed it to be a wild hallucination. Whenever I was scared or sad, I would curl up into a blanket of shadow. My family would spend hours searching for me, calling my name from inches away where I appeared to be nothing more than a dark, empty corner.

How strange that it was in the darkness I had felt the safest. Perhaps the dark had not loomed quite so ominously when I believed the light was mine to wield, never more than a thought away.

“Try it,” Alixe urged. “Imagine drawing your magic out without trying to shape it. Allow it to simply *exist* outside of your body.”

I closed my eyes and took a few centering breaths. I willed my mind to turn inward in search of my elusive godhood. *Come out to play*, I begged it. *Show me what you can do*.

Something within me stirred, a tingling sensation deep in my chest, but each time I reached for it, I swiped through empty air. It seemed to be stalling, lying in wait for me to say or do something more.

I huffed out a frustrated breath. “It’s still not answering me. I can feel it in there, but it won’t *do* anything.”

“Keep trying,” Alixe pushed.

I looked over at Luther, rattled by the disquiet on his face as he watched. If I failed now, my life would be at risk—but his would be ruined.

A life bound to a woman who wanted to use him for his titles and his power, a woman who believed his scars made him weak.

Anger boiled in my veins. If I failed, I would condemn him to a lifetime with a Queen Consort who, even after years at his side, did not really see him.

And you will lose him forever, my mind whispered.

“Help me,” I said to him. “At the King’s funeral, you drew the magic out. *You* made it react.”

He shook his head. “I did nothing. You did it then, and you can do it again now.”

I held my hand out. “Help me, Luther.”

He stared at it for a long beat. His muscles bunched, but he held himself back.

I cleared my throat. “Do you want to marry Iléana or not?” I asked loudly.

“Wait—what?” Taran barked.

Eleanor blinked. “Did she say—”

“Oh, no,” Lily gasped.

Alixé looked amused.

Teller said nothing, though he studied me curiously.

Luther’s eyes narrowed at me, and I bit my lip to mask my smile. “I know how to find ways to motivate you, too, Prince.”

He leaned in close. “Truly devious, Your Majesty.”

I grinned, and he grinned back, and for a heartbeat, the sun seemed to swoop down from the sky and fill the dungeon with its fiery, jubilant glow.

“Help me,” I said again.

His back straightened, his smile falling away as his broad jaw slowly rose. A new expression settled over his face—dominant, steadfast, dark with threat in a way that sent heat rushing to my skin. It wasn’t the Prince—but it wasn’t quite the Luther I was used to, either. In fact, I’d only ever seen this look on him once before...

He took my extended arm by the wrist and prowled to my side, pressing his thumb against my pulse. “If I try to help you, are you going to fight me?” His grip tightened as he leaned down to my ear, his gravelly voice dropping low. “Or will you be a good girl for me again and obey?”

My breath hitched. Suddenly, I could feel every piece of clothing on my body, all at once too tight and too loose, its friction maddening against

my tingling skin.

“Depends,” I said, a little huskily. “I seem to recall you enjoying yourself the last time I had a knife to your throat.” My eyes drifted to his. “So which do you really prefer?”

A rumbling tempest of *want* brewed in his gaze, and just like that, Luther and I were back to our dangerous game. Only this time, I was no longer afraid to play.

“Close your eyes,” he growled—an order, not a request. I let my stare linger defiantly for a moment before giving in.

He continued to circle his thumb across the sensitive skin of my wrist as a warm sensation grew at my chest, and I realized his other hand was hovering just over my skin.

“May I touch you?” he murmured with a featherlight brush just above the low neckline of my dress. “Here?”

I squeezed my thighs together and nodded my consent. A moment later, his large, warm hand pressed firmly against my heart—the mirror to the smooth patch of skin on his own chest that had been spared from his scar’s path. “This is where you’re strongest. Imagine your magic gathering here first.”

It was a struggle to think beyond his touch—the skim of his fingertips over the scar on my collarbone, the curve of my breast swelling into his palm as I breathed, and that thumb, that *cursed thumb*, still taunting me at my wrist—but, in a way, it seemed to help. All my burdens and fears dimmed and disappeared behind a heady, sinful haze that left my mind thinking only of his grip, his mouth, his body. His smile, his heart, his devotion. Everything he had come to mean to me.

And what I stood to lose if I let him walk away.

Please, I begged my godhood. Abandon me if you must, but not him. We have to save him.

A tingling sensation formed under Luther’s hand, and power buzzed beneath my skin as my magic moved to meet it. It crawled at first, then circled and swarmed, its pace growing increasingly intense.

“Do you feel it?” he asked, his breath tickling my neck, and I nodded again. “Good. Now imagine it expanding beyond your body. Let it surround you completely.”

The godhood pulsed eagerly at his words, a hunger to escape that reminded me of the first night I’d unleashed—how it had nearly consumed

him. "What if I lose control and hurt someone?"

"You won't."

"You were worried I might at the ball."

"The ball was different. There were strangers there, people there you had no fondness for. You care about everyone here, and your magic will not hurt those you love." A long beat of silence passed. When he spoke again, his voice was rough. "It's why I was able to come to your side after your father died. Even when you'd lost control, at your power's most destructive, I dropped my shield, and it did me no harm."

My eyes flew open. "Luther, you could have *died*."

"A small price."

"Your life is not a small price," I hissed. "Not to me."

His gaze seared into mine with equal passion. "I would have walked into the flaming heart of the sun itself," he shot back. "If you are suffering, nothing will keep me from coming to your aid. Least of all something as trivial as death."

I clenched my teeth. "Don't you ever r—"

The hand on my chest slid up my throat and cupped beneath my jaw. "Look," he demanded, turning my face forward.

My eyes finally broke from his and grew large at what I saw. A shimmering dome had formed around us, nearly invisible save for the translucent swirls that danced along its edge like silvery rainbows on a bubble of soap.

"Test it," Luther commanded to Taran and Alixe.

They both flicked a hand toward us, conjuring a volley of barbs that crashed against the shield's border and dissolved harmlessly into mist.

A quiet, pestering thought in the back of my mind noted that this looked and felt nothing like when I'd survived the Descended man's attack in the alley, though it was quickly drowned out by my excitement.

"You're not doing this?" I said incredulously.

Luther shook his head, his face shining with pride. "You and you alone, my Queen."

To prove his point, he dropped his hands from me and took a step back, and to my surprise, the shield held firm.

He continued to retreat until he reached its edge. As he tried to move through it, the dome thickened and turned opaque where it connected with

his body, halting him in place. His muscles pulled taut as he fought, and he failed, to break through.

“Having some trouble, cousin?” Taran teased.

I smirked. “Is this enough to convince you not to do anything rash, like marrying an awful person who doesn’t deserve you?”

Luther lowered his chin, his smoldering stare firing back the response I knew he wanted to say aloud. He let it go, his features smoothing instead into amusement. “I knew all it would take is the right incentive.”

“Hold on, you can’t take all the credit,” Taran interjected. “I’m the one who told her what was holding her back.”

“Technically, that was Teller.” I winked at my brother, who grinned back. “You know, I asked Teller and Lily to be my advisors when they’re done with school.” I eyed Luther and Taran with a disapproving shake of my head. “You two really need to work harder if you want to make the cut.”

Taran pouted. “What about Alixe?”

“Good point.” I cocked my head at Alixe. “You’ve been a *de facto* advisor for some time, but I suppose we should formalize it.”

“Oh, *come on*,” Taran moaned.

Alixé gave a low, respectful nod. “I’m here to serve however you need me, Your Majesty.”

I dropped my shield and walked to stand in front of her. “Alixé Corbois, do you agree to serve as a loyal advisor to me on all matters related to the defense of this realm and its people—*all* its people?”

She beat a fist to her chest and bowed. “It would be my honor.”

“Fantastic! Welcome to my Council.”

“I can advise,” Taran muttered. “I know things.”

“You’ll get there,” Lily soothed, giving Taran an encouraging pat on the arm. “I believe in you.”

“Thanks, Lil.” She squeaked as Taran hauled her into his side for a hug.

“Well?” I asked, turning to Luther. “Have you seen enough?”

He crossed his arms and looked me over. “I’d be happier if I could see you attack. Your shield is strong, but shielding drains your power quickly.”

Lily groaned. “We’re hungry, brother. Let the Queen and her subjects eat.” She gave a savage, entirely un-Lily-like grin. “You can let Diem overpower you again later, if you really insist.”

Taran threw his head back and roared a laugh, and even Luther cracked an affectionate smile in his sister's direction. "Fine," he agreed. "That's enough."

"You'll decline the Hanoverres' bargain?" I asked.

"I'll decline the bargain."

I narrowed my eyes. "You promise?"

He nodded, and I swore I saw relief wash over his features and strip away some small measure of the burden he carried. Whether it was relief to no longer be bound to Iléana, or at the knowledge that I still valued his promises, I couldn't tell, but both were a balm for my soul.

"Lunch!" Eleanor cheered. She looped her arm in mine and yanked me toward the stairs.

I snagged Alixe in my other arm, pulling both women in close at my hips. The rest of the group fell in step behind us, marching in a boisterous parade up the steps.

"I hope this good mood you're all in means none of you are planning to Challenge me tomorrow," I joked.

"If any Corbois tries to raise a Challenge, I suspect they'll have a sword in their side before they can get the words out," Alixe said.

Luther growled in agreement.

I laughed. "At least if I do get betrayed, Remis goes down, too. He and I sealed our arrangement with a bonded bargain, so if any Corbois Challenges me, he loses his magic."

Luther stopped still. "You did?"

"Diem," Eleanor interrupted, "would you like me to arrange a dinner this evening? Something simple, just for the seven of us?"

My heart felt suddenly heavy. Tonight very well could be my final night alive, and if it was, spending it with my newfound family was exactly where I wanted to be.

But there was something else I needed to do. Something I could not rightly go to my grave without seeing through.

"Thank you, but I have some unfinished business I need to take care of this evening."

Eleanor forced a smile, though shades of disappointment marred her lovely features.

I gently nudged her side. "Will you plan a victory dinner for tomorrow night instead?"

“That’s the spirit!” Taran yelled.

Eleanor lit up. “Nothing would make me happier.”

We paraded through the palace to the glass-walled dining room, where my entourage abandoned me the moment they laid eyes on the mouth-watering buffet.

Only Luther remained at my side, taking a private moment to settle my cape back onto my shoulders and secure the clasps over my chest. “This unfinished business you spoke of... do you need any help?”

I pulled out the letter he had delivered to me and studied it, running my fingers over the creases, thinking of the words scrawled inside and the man who had written them. When I met Luther’s eyes again, I saw a gleam of understanding—and of hope.

“No,” I said softly. “This is something I need to do alone.”

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Chapter

Thirty-Nine

Maura's wails filled the night air, reverberating off the stone walls of the healer's center and the leafless winter branches of the surrounding forest.

"This is not a very strong vote of confidence for my chances tomorrow," I teased as I swiped away another round of tears from her ruddy cheeks.

"I'm s-sorry," she sobbed, burying her head against my chest and squeezing her arms around me. "This whole thing is awful. Awful. So *awful!* You're already the Queen, what's the point?"

"Politics," I sighed. "Posturing. Bribes and deal-making. Trying to scare me into bending my will to them."

She shook her head and sniffled. "If they thought that would ever work, they haven't spent much time with you."

A loud snort rang out behind me, and I shot a glare over my shoulder. Taran grinned back from where he and Alixe leaned against the trunk of a nearby tree.

It turned out coming to Mortal City *alone* was a non-negotiable for Luther. I had strongly considered another solo escape on Sorae, but I compromised, allowing Alixe to escort me so she could veil me from sight with her magic. Taran, being Taran, invited himself along, swearing himself to total silence—a promise he'd already broken at least a dozen times.

"Don't forget, if the deliveries of herbs stop arriving, or if you need anything else, speak to Luther." I gently pulled out of Maura's arms and laid my hands on her shoulders. "With any luck, the next time I see you, I'll be coronated. Then we can make some real changes around here."

Her lip quivered as she pressed her palms to my face. "I wish your parents could see you now—the incredible woman they raised."

My throat went tight. "Thank you," was all I could manage to get out.

"I will pray to the gods to watch over you." Her caramel-brown eyes darted to the Descended behind me, and her voice slipped to a whisper.

“The Kindred and the Old Gods alike.”

I fought a smile at her frightened stare as she gawked at my Descended friends. It wasn't so long ago that I would have had a similar reaction. With their tall, muscular bodies and flawless beauty, Taran and Alixe made an intimidating pair even without their powerful magic.

“Is Lana here?” I asked.

“No, she's off visiting friends in Arboros. I've got her refilling our inventory while she's there.”

I smiled wistfully, remembering how my mother and I used to make trips together to the lush southern realm to visit their well-stocked healers.

“Do you want me to pass along a message when she's back?” Maura asked.

“No, I... I'll see her when she returns.”

Maura returned my sad smile, an unspoken hope passing between us that I lived long enough to fulfill that claim. We shared a final hug, her eyes again welling with tears, before I shooed her back into the center to return to her work.

“One more stop,” I announced as I strolled back toward Taran and Alixe and they fell in step beside me. “I'll need some privacy for the next one.”

I kept my gaze fixed on the road, though I caught the probing look Taran shot me from the corner of my eye.

“I'll keep us out of sight,” Alixe said, inclining her head to Taran. “And I'll keep *him* out of earshot.”

Taran huffed, and I gave her a grateful smile.

“I've never been to this area of Mortal City,” she admitted. “I escorted King Ulther once or twice to dedicate a statue, but we stayed on horseback and never strayed from the main roads.”

“Really?” I raised my eyebrows, then looked to Taran. “And you?”

He shook his head. “Your family's home is the closest I've ever come.”

“Neither of you ever served on the Mortal City patrols?” I asked.

“Corbois guards don't get assigned to conduct mortal patrols. Except —” She cringed. “—as punishment.”

“Working with mortals is a punishment?” I gave a harsh laugh. “That explains quite a bit.”

At least they both had the decency to look ashamed.

I struggled against my mounting resentment. I didn't know their exact ages—an introduction-gone-wrong to an elder Corbois had taught me the hard way that asking a Descended's age was *extremely* taboo—but I had to guess they'd been serving in the Guard for many years, if not decades. For neither of them to have set foot in the streets of Mortal City...

No wonder the Descended cared so little for mortals when they were entirely isolated from how we—*they*—lived.

No, I corrected myself. *'We' is right. These are your people, and you will always be one of them.*

"Change of plans," I declared. I linked my arms with theirs and headed for a small side road. "Alixé, keep us hidden. It's time for the two of you to learn what it's like to live like a mortal."

So I showed them.

For the next two hours, I took them on a tour of Mortal City, sparing them nothing.

I showed them the ramshackle buildings that lacked hearths or clean water, where families crammed in ten to a room, and the grimy streets that were never clean—and never would be, given how many mortals huddled in every corner to escape the snow and rain.

I guided them past the brothels of the Garden and the drug dens of Paradise Row, telling stories of my patients and the impossible choices that had forced many into these back alleys. I reminded them how many half-mortals like me were likely imprisoned in the dimly lit buildings, condemned to a life in hiding for fear of the progeny laws.

I took them to the seediest bars where women did not stray alone after sunset, and to all the makeshift graves I'd made over the years for those who had died from starvation or exposure or a violent attack in the streets—including a few who had died at the hands of the Royal Guard.

I showed them the bright spots, too—the school and its burgeoning library, an art studio that offered free classes to those without means, and the night market, with its impressive array of food and goods. I showed them the orphanage the community had come together to run, where every need was met by donations from those who had little to spare themselves.

And I told them about my life. In hushed voices, I explained what it had been like to grow up here—the friends I'd made, the future I'd been headed toward before the Crown repaved my path. I didn't tell them about the Guardians, of course, but I shared what I could, explaining how

resentment toward the Descended had driven friends, families, and even lovers apart.

Though I couldn't see their faces, I could sense their reactions in their quiet comments and questions, and in the way they resisted leaving certain areas, needing more time to let the reality settle in.

I could sense it in the way their arms held me a little tighter, as if they realized how easily my young life might have been cut short, even with all the protections of my Descended blood.

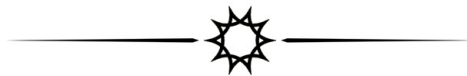
"This is my home," I said finally, when I'd shown them what I prayed was enough. "Whether the gods give me one more day to live or thousands, this will always be my home. These are my people." I came to a stop, giving myself a moment to let my eyes sweep over the familiar streets and buildings. "This is what I'm fighting for. And I'll risk everything to protect it."

"So will we," Alixe said. Taran murmured his agreement. "No matter what happens."

Had they not been holding me up between them, I might have collapsed at the relief that flooded my heart.

If I died tomorrow, my death—my *father's* death—would not be for nothing.

And that meant everything to me.



WE ARRIVED at the simple wooden building that marked my last destination. Movement caught my eye in the warm, candlelit glow of the windows, and my stomach twisted into a tangled mess of knots.

"Wait here," I ordered.

I trudged up to the building, my body reappearing beneath me as Alixe pulled her magic away, and knocked lightly on the door.

As I waited, I fidgeted with my hands, toying with my hair, my clothes, my weapons. My posture felt too casual, then too formal. My expression rotated through a bright smile, then a casual smirk, then a very serious frown. My mind knew this place so well, but my body felt like a stranger—a Descended traitor in an unwelcome land.

The door cracked open. “Diem? By the Undying Fire, what are you doing here?”

“Hello Mr. Albanon,” I said with a strained smile. “Sorry to bother you so late. Is Henri home?”

Henri’s father blinked at me.

His frozen silence was a dagger to my heart. My showing up at his door should have been a normal occurrence, barely worth noting.

But things were different now.

I was different now.

“No dear, I’m so sorry. Henri’s out of town. He’s not due to return until next week.”

“Wh-what?” I stammered, falling a step back. “He left?”

“He had a large delivery to make in Arboros. I told him I could arrange for someone else to handle it...” He suddenly looked deeply uncomfortable. “He said he had to deliver it personally.”

My mouth hung open. I searched for words, but none came.

He’d left. *He’d left.* It might be my last week alive, and Henri, my best friend, my betrothed, my supposed King-to-be, had just... *left.*

“He did leave a note. I delivered it to the palace this morning myself. Did you receive it?”

I gave a jerky nod. “I did. Thank you.”

“I, um, that is... I thought he would have explained in his letter.”

I shook my head, and Henri’s father swore under his breath.

“I told him to stay,” he confessed quietly. “I think, maybe... maybe it was too hard for him to face the possibility that you might...” He grimaced. “Well... you know.”

“Yes.” I swallowed hard. “That must be it.”

“It’s a barbaric thing, that Challenging. Disgusting. Should have stopped long ago.”

I stared at him in a daze.

It *was* barbaric. It *was* disgusting. But still I had to face it—and I would have to do it without Henri.

Numbly, I backed away. “Thank you, Mr. Albanon. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“Diem, wait.” His features twisted, his expression lined with an old, inescapable grief. “Losing his mother the way he did... Henri’s never been

good with death or goodbyes. It doesn't mean he doesn't care. This has all been a lot for him to handle."

I smiled tightly. "It's been a lot for me to handle, too."

He sighed and lowered his head, and I turned to leave, my heart splintering in my chest.

"We're all praying for you," he called out. "Some people thought you might forget us once you got to the palace. Then word started spreading about what you've been doing—for the orphanage and the healers. A friend who works for one of the big Descended Houses says he heard they wanted to kick us all out of the realm, and you refused."

I glanced back at him. "If I fail tomorrow, life for the mortals could get much harsher. You should prepare for the worst."

"We know." He gave me a deep, slow bow. "We believe in you, Your Majesty. Go give 'em hell."

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Chapter
Forty

“You’re going to stay here at the palace, right?”

Silence.

“You’re not going to take off and follow me as soon as I leave?”

More silence.

“No matter what trouble you sense, you’re going to *stay here*. Right?”

Still silence.

“*Right?*”

Two reptilian eyes blinked at me.

“Sorae!”

The gryvern snorted loudly, the sound coming out sharp and indignant. The dark tip of her tail smacked loudly against the stone floor as it whipped around her.

I grazed my hand down the length of her snout. “I don’t like it either, but you know the rules. If you come crashing in to save me, the Challenging won’t count. I have to do this alone... even if it kills me.”

Sorae let out a low growl, her breath growing blisteringly hot as azure fire glowed in her throat.

Because the Challenging was a modern creation, not part of the Forging spell that governed all of Emarion’s magic, it worked in direct conflict to Sorae’s obligation to protect my life at all costs. Past Lumnos Crowns had gone so far as to chain her to the ground to keep her from interfering.

I was relying on a stern talking-to.

“You know better than anyone how hard this past month has been for me, Sorae. I can’t go through all of this again. It has to end, one way or another.”

She whined and nuzzled against my shoulder, her wings slumping to her side in defeat. My arms slid around her neck as I pulled her close and laid my cheek against her dark iridescent scales.

“If I don’t come back—oh, *stop growling* already—I’ve treasured every second with you. Be good to the next Crown. Unless it’s a Hanoverre—then chomp off their feet.”

She snapped her jaws in agreement, but we both knew her promise was hollow. Even if the vilest, most evil heart in Emarion took the Crown, Sorae would be helplessly bound to their will.

I touched the golden chain at her neck. “I wish I could have found a way to free you from this. If I survive...” My eyes rose to hers, and a silent vow passed between us.

A warm flood of affection pulsed across the bond, and I knew it was not borne of obligation, but true feeling. Sorae had little free will in this world, but she had chosen to care for me. I prayed that I could do enough to deserve it.

I pressed a kiss to her forehead and gave one last stroke over the soft grey down of her wings, then turned away before she could see the emotion pooling in my eyes.

“Stay,” I commanded for perhaps the final time.

I took a few steadying breaths and waited for the trembling in my hands to fade away, then strode out of my bedchamber into the main salon and flashed a dazzling, confident smile.

The others jumped to their feet at my arrival, each of them giving off varying levels of nerves. Alixe, as usual, was the picture of self-control. Her calm demeanor showed no sign that today was different from any other day. Taran and Eleanor followed next with their usual bubbly humor, though each laugh was a little too short, each smile a little too strained.

Lily was firmly camped at the other end of the spectrum. She paced the room while wringing her hands, tears ever-present on her lashes. Though I felt guilty at her suffering, I was quietly grateful to see how Teller’s doting attempts to soothe her distracted him from his own anxiety.

On the surface, Luther was playing his role as the unflappable Prince to perfection. His posture was stiff and formal, his words clipped, when he even spoke at all. His features might as well have been engraved in marble for all they revealed.

It was his eyes, as usual, that gave him away. They flickered like a candle caught in a breeze, the pale blue light in them fighting to stay ablaze. His focus, usually deliberate and lingering, darted madly around the room, between the others, over my body, across my face. Even his aura seemed

restless, curling protectively around my limbs, then seizing back, only to creep forward again and again.

I held out my arms and looked at Alixe and Eleanor. “I have to admit, you two outdid yourselves.”

“It’s perfect,” Alixe said with a rare grin.

Eleanor rushed to my side to run her hand along my arm. “Blessed Kindred, you look like a warrior goddess.”

The two women had collaborated to design a one-of-a-kind full-body suit of fighting leathers. Though the rules of the Challenging forbid any hard armor or weapons, the suit had flexible material and soft padding that would let me move quickly and dodge attacks with ease.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror, and my cheeks turned bright pink. The skintight outfit, sleek black and intimidating as hell, revealed every dip and curve of my body—which, Alixe had assured me, was its own kind of defense. I had braided my hair in a circle atop my head to show off the sprawling depiction of Sorae embroidered across my back. Her wings curved around my arms while a plume of flame encircled my neck, all in a shimmering smoke-grey thread that matched my eyes.

“I love it,” Taran declared. “Very sexy, Queenie. When Remis asks who wants to come for you, he better clarify he means fighting or you’ll have half the realm lined up.” Luther let out a low grunt, and Taran grinned, smacking his cousin in the chest. “See? Lu loves it, too.”

I caught Luther’s intense gaze, and the flush on my cheeks deepened.

“Well, Prince?” I teased. “Do you like it?”

His eyes roamed downward, but didn’t quite make it past my lips. “Beautiful,” he said quietly.

Heat flooded through me. I cleared my throat and bounded for the door. “Let’s get on with it, then. I have very important dinner plans I don’t want to miss.”

My entourage dutifully followed, though yesterday’s cheery spirit had been replaced by a hushed anticipation, a whisper of hope that did not dare grow too loud for fear of rousing fate.

My steps faltered once I reached the grand foyer. In two long parallel lines leading down the curved staircase and along the path to the front gate, the members of the Royal Guard stood at attention, each holding a flaming torch in one hand, the other pressed in a fist to their chests.

“A reminder,” Luther murmured in my ear from behind me. “That, Challenged or Unchallenged, you are our Queen.”

The calm indifference I’d been fighting so hard all morning to maintain threatened to crumble and give way.

“Aemonn allowed this?” I asked.

“We’ll find out when he shows up and sees it happening,” Taran answered.

The others held back as I descended the steps. I rolled my shoulders back and set my jaw, determined not to let my growing firestorm of emotions burn through my fierce exterior.

The rest of House Corbois had gathered outside in a swarm of horses and fanfare. Today, the House would join me on the long trek to the arena in a symbolic show of support—and a warning, that a Challenge against me was a Challenge against all of House Corbois.

It was that threat I now clung to against all odds. However poorly the House Receptions had gone, however far the rumors of my lack of magic had spread, House Corbois remained a formidable influence. Risking its wrath was a gamble, especially with Luther, who remained the heir presumptive, standing by my side. If the other Houses feared that killing me would only bring the fury of the next King down on their heads—then perhaps, just perhaps, I might make it through today unscathed.

“Your horse is this way, Your Majesty,” Luther said. His hand found its home on my back as he led me to a stunning dark grey mare with a dappled coat and a glossy white mane pulled into a thick plait. A ring of shouting guards struggled to keep her still, but the harder they fought to restrain her, the more she demanded her liberation, pawing at the ground and rearing her head in protest.

“She reminded me of you,” Luther said dryly.

I raised a brow. “Her coloring or her temperament?”

He didn’t answer, but he smiled.

I walked to the front of the horse, lowering my chin as her glassy eyes fixed on me. She looked me over cagily, her apprehension so intense I could almost *feel* it in the same way I could *feel* Sorae’s emotions across our bond.

I extended my hand, inching closer to her in small steps. On instinct, I sent calming energy toward her in an unspoken promise that I meant her no

harm. Her posture went unnaturally still, though her eyes followed my every movement.

“Hello there,” I murmured. “I hate to admit it, but I think the Prince was right. I think you and I might be kindred spirits.”

Her ears flicked toward me, her milky tail swishing once, then falling still. I took another step closer, then another, until my hand hovered just above her muzzle.

“Will you do me the honor of escorting me today?” I asked. “I won’t force you. The choice is up to you.”

I waited in silence, not daring to move. Finally, with a quiet huff, she pressed her nose against my palm, and I grinned wide. I rubbed the soft fuzz around her mouth, stroking my other hand along her neck. She nickered happily in response.

Luther joined me as I moved to her side to mount. I raised my foot to the stirrup and sucked in a breath as his hands curved low on my hips, hoisting me into the air and onto the saddle. His palm dragged slowly down my thigh as his hands fell away.

A stableman walked up, leading an outrageously large stallion with an equally large ego, its regal head arched elegantly toward the sky. Luther mounted the horse with ease, murmuring to the beast as he ran a hand along its silky night-black coat.

I frowned. “What happened to your other horse—the big white one you rode to the lodge?”

He gestured across the front lawn. “That one?”

There it was.

White as snow, with a patch of black between its eyes, and as tall as a house. Gold ribbon in its mane.

The horse Henri saw months ago when he witnessed its rider trample a mortal child to death. The same horse Luther rode the night he brought me to the palace for the first time as Queen.

And seated on its elaborate jeweled saddle was Aemonn Corbois.

“My horse threw a shoe that night,” Luther explained. “I was in a rush to get to you, so I took Aemonn’s instead.”

He barely even stopped, Henri had said. *Gods, he was swearing at the boy for getting mud on his pretty bejeweled saddle.*

Of course, *of course* it wasn’t Luther—it was Aemonn who killed that child in cold blood and rode away without a care.

Aemonn, who was now Keeper of the Laws.

Aemonn, who was now responsible for the fate of the half-mortal children.

Terror rose in my stomach, and I gripped the saddle to hold myself steady.

“What’s wrong?” Luther demanded, his voice turning sharp. “What happened?”

I kept my focus on Aemonn, watching as he smirked and laughed with his cousins, undisturbed by the possibility of my death. I had once believed there was some goodness in him, buried under his lies and plots. Had he been a monster all along, and I’d refused to see it?

Aemonn scanned the bustling front lawn and paused as his gaze met with mine. I made no effort to hide the horror that surely warped my features.

At first, his face filled with contempt, but as I continued to watch him, searching his bright blue eyes for some glimpse of the soul beneath, his expression wavered, then turned guarded—almost as if he knew what I was doing and feared what I might find.

“Is there a problem?” Luther asked. “Did Aemonn—”

“It’s nothing.” I scrambled to rebuild my composure. “I have to win today, Luther. I *have* to.”

“You will,” he insisted. There was such steadfast certainty in his voice, I almost began to believe it.

Luther nudged my horse toward the front of the procession. “It’s time. She knows the way.” He placed a fist across his chest and dipped his head. “Lead us, Your Majesty.”

I directed my mare to the front gate, refusing to make eye contact with Remis and Garath as I passed them to take the point position. They would ride at my flank, followed by Aemonn, then the rest of the Crown Council, with Teller and Lily just behind.

With no more titles to speak of and no formal connection to me, Luther should have been relegated to the back with the rest of the Corbois, but I knew better. I didn’t have to see him to know he would never be too far from my side, rules be damned.

As if he’d heard my thoughts, his familiar aura swirled around me and brushed against my skin. Despite the deadly odds I marched to meet, a smile spread across my face.

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Chapter

Forty-One

The ride to the arena was long.

Torturously, excruciatingly long.

Envision-every-worst-case-scenario long.

Consider-grabbing-my-brother-and-making-a-break-for-it long.

Plummet-into-a-can't-think-can't-breathe-hands-trembling-state-of-overwhelming-panic long.

All my best efforts to clear my thoughts failed disastrously as my mind put me through a self-constructed gauntlet and forced me to revisit every move I'd made since becoming Queen. I thought of all the ways I could have avoided making enemies. All the ways I could have fluttered my lashes and sweet-talked my way out of a Challenge.

All the ways I could have saved my father.

And though I tried, with every shred of my being, to remember there was no point in regrets, and to focus on the only thing that mattered today—*surviving*, by the time the forest opened up to the towering stone walls, my storm of emotions had become downright cataclysmic.

The arena was nearly unrecognizable from what I remembered at the funeral. The thin bed of sand on the central floor had been covered with scattered obstacles—large boulders, fallen logs, pits of mud, and the like.

When I'd asked why obstacles were needed for a duel of pure magic, one of the cousins had explained that it was "*for the amusement of the spectators—no one wants to come all this way just to watch a quick, simple death.*"

At least my demise would be entertaining.

A covered tent had been set up to offer me a small reprieve from the eyes of the crowd—"for weepy goodbyes," the same cousin had so helpfully clarified.

I entered first from the royal box, surrounded by House Corbois. They leapt into action around me, mingling and jostling for the seats with the best

view of the carnage with a nauseatingly casual ease.

I walked to the balcony at the front and closed my eyes as a soft breeze kissed my face. Murmurs rippled through the crowd at the sight of me, their gossip pelting me like arrows—commentary on everything from my appearance to my magic to my dead father to which Corbois cousin was allegedly sharing my bed.

It was all a game to them—my life, my suffering. Just something to pass the decades during their long, boring lives of privilege.

The mortals, at least, saw this for the bloodthirsty spectacle it was, perhaps because a mortal life felt so delicate and fleeting in comparison to a Descended's near-immortal existence. Somewhere along the way, the Descended had lost sight of that truth—that every life was precious, and every day a gift.

"I'm going to tell you a secret, but you have to swear to me you won't react."

I opened my eyes to see Luther standing at my side, shoulder-to-shoulder, his eyes gazing onto the arena floor.

"Tell me."

"Swear it first."

"Fine, I swear. *Tell me.*"

He let out an unhappy growl. "Apparently, your little brother kissed my little sister."

A loud gasp shot from my lips. I whipped around to find them, and Luther grabbed me around my waist and forced me back into place.

"Liar," he hissed, though amusement hid in his tone.

I clutched his arm. "When did this happen? Where? How do you know?"

"Last night. Lily told him she declined the proposal from House Byrnum, and then—"

"*She did?*" I squealed. Again I tried to spin back to the gallery, and again Luther's arms clamped around me to hold me still.

"You swore," he protested, now fully laughing as he pressed me close. "If you make a scene, she'll never tell me anything again."

"She told you?" I breathed, relaxing against him. Though his grip on me eased, his arms stayed wrapped at my waist. "She must really trust you."

“I have your advice to thank for that. I was right to stay out of it.” His smile faded a little. “I’d rather know, so I can help them if they face any... obstacles.”

“And you’re truly alright with this? Even with the difference in their lifespans?”

He let out a resigned sigh. “It’s not what I would choose for her. Even in the best of outcomes, Lily’s heart will be broken. But perhaps...” He paused, his gaze heavy on mine. “Perhaps, for the right person, we endure the pain, because the torture of never having them at all is the more unbearable fate.”

My breathing went shallow.

“Luther,” I whispered.

Lily’s laughter cut through the din of the crowd, and my gaze drifted in search of her.

“Eyes up here, Bellator,” he teased, squeezing my hip.

“I’m a Corbois now, remember?”

“About that...” He reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a small black box, and handed it to me.

My brow wrinkled as I cracked it open. On a bed of grey satin lay a golden medallion engraved with the Corbois crest—a near-identical twin to the one Aemonn had gifted me at the ball before I’d melted it away in my explosion of power after my father’s death.

“Consider it an early coronation gift.” There was an eager, boyish excitement to his tone. “I took the liberty of making a few adjustments.”

I squinted closer at the necklace. Whereas the phoenix on Aemonn’s pendant had been inlaid with sapphires to represent the blue eyes of the Lumnos Descended, this version had two dark grey diamonds in their place.

A smile danced at the corners of his mouth. “Like yours,” he murmured proudly.

I ran my thumb over the gilded disc and straightened in surprise when the tiny ruby set into the phoenix’s heart glowed bright scarlet at my touch. “How?”

“I infused it with a spark of my light magic.”

“You can do that?”

“Any Descended can. But what we put in, we can never get back. It reduces our power forever.” He peered up from beneath his dark brows. “So do me a favor and try not to destroy this one.”

I laughed, the sound coming out choked as emotion squeezed at my throat. “You’re really taking this vow of yours to never leave my side seriously.”

He didn’t smile, didn’t laugh—he only held my stare in his quiet, earnest way, his answer carved across his face as fiercely as the scar that marked his skin.

I lifted the necklace to put it on. As the disc spun on the delicate chain, something else grabbed my eye. I caught the medallion between my fingers. On the other side, instead of a smooth circle, this version contained a beautifully scripted B pierced by a pair of crossed twin daggers.

“Because you may claim House Corbois,” Luther said gruffly, “but you’ll always be Diem Bellator to me.”

My hand closed into a fist around the pendant, tears pricking at my eyes. I tried in vain to scrape some words together to explain what this gesture meant to me—what it meant that he had always honored my mortal family. That he had never expected me to abandon who I *had been* for who I *had to become*.

Without a word, Luther took my hand and tenderly pried my fingers open to pluck the necklace out of my grasp. He stepped closer and snaked the ends of the chain around my neck to secure the clasp.

As his hands pulled away, they paused, hovering just above my collarbone. “I promised to do whatever it takes to keep you alive today.”

“You have. You’ve done everything you could.”

“No,” he rumbled. “Not yet.”

His eyes followed his touch as his fingers pressed to my skin and dragged up the column of my throat. With the whole of Lumnos watching, the gesture felt as possessive as it was intimate.

My head warned me to pull away—instead, my neck arched toward him, heat pulsing through my blood.

He traced the edge of my jaw. “Forgive me. They all need to see it.”

“See what?” I rasped, barely able to speak.

“Who will come for them if they dare to come for you.”

Then his lips were on mine.

And nothing else existed.

There was no Crown, no Challenging.

No arena of spectators exploding in a gossipy uproar.

No Taran pumping his fist and yelling “*finally!*” at the top of his lungs.

No imminent death. No doubts or secrets or fears.
No Henri.

There was only the two of us—the loyal Prince and his cherished Queen. Luther's lips, soft and adoringly gentle as they moved against my own. His hands, cradling my face like I was the most precious thing he'd ever touched. His body, flush against mine, a living shield against everything, and everyone, that threatened to tear us apart.

His mighty aura cascaded around me and within me, tasting me as deeply as his tongue. It spilled into my soul and branded me with his power, claiming me inside and out. The kiss was a warning to the crowd, but this was a threat to the gods themselves: *If you take her from me, I will come for you, too.*

It was nothing like the kiss we'd shared before. That had been all anger and lust, a battle of tempers bathed in blood.

That was an inferno.

This was a hearth.

Carefully tended over weeks of friendship, the traumas we'd endured, and the secrets we shared. A smaller flame, perhaps, but steadier. Strong. A fire that didn't burn to consume, but to endure—to keep us warm through the perils of the dark, cold night.

Wrapped in his arms, for a fleeting instant, I started to believe everything might turn out alright. That somewhere at the end of this, true happiness might be waiting, after all.

But as quickly and unexpectedly as the moment had come, it was snatched away.

Remis clamped a hand on our shoulders and shoved us apart. "If the two of you are done putting on a show, it's time to begin."

Luther snarled and ripped out of his father's grasp. Without another look, he turned his back and disappeared into the gallery of gawking Corbois, leaving me stunned and panting.

Remis pushed me toward the steps. "You can take one person to help you prepare." He arched a brow over his shoulder. "It seems my son has removed himself from consideration."

I stared blankly at him while the world shifted, spinning an entirely different direction than it had before. "Teller," I finally managed to get out. I held a hand out to my brother, and he rushed to my side as we began to descend the steep staircase to the arena floor.

"You kissed Luther," he hissed in my ear.

"You kissed Lily," I shot back.

"Wait—who told you?"

"Why didn't *you* tell me?"

"You've been a little busy today, if you haven't noticed."

"That's no excuse. You kissed *Lily*!"

"You kissed *Luther*!"

"Luther kissed *me*."

"You sure didn't push him away."

"Stop changing the subject. You kissed Lily!"

"Does this mean you're finally going to wake up and end things with Henri?"

My mouth popped open. "I thought you supported me and Henri."

"Before everything changed, *maybe*, but now..." He wrinkled his nose.

"By the Flames, are you really giving me a hard time about a mortal-Descended relationship? May I remind you that *you* kissed *Lil*—"

"It's not about that." Teller yanked me to a stop and pointed to a large section of spectators in the upper level. "Look."

As I studied the group, familiar faces began to appear. Maura first, along with the other healers. Then friends of my parents. Neighbors, old classmates, patients—so many of my patients.

Strangers, too. Faces I'd never seen, names I didn't know—scores of them, filling row after row, a mass of brown eyes huddled together for warmth against the chilly winter air.

There must have been hundreds of them. Thousands, perhaps.

"Where is he?" Teller prodded.

"He... he had to make a delivery. He—"

"Where has he been since you took the Crown? Since Father died?"

"I told him to stay away from the palace for his own safety."

"If it was the other way around, *you* would be there."

I silently clenched my jaw.

"If anyone you loved was going through this, you would be there for every step of it, no matter how dangerous it was. You deserve someone who's willing to do the same for you."

I sighed and tugged his arm. "Come on. I'd rather lose the Challenging and die than hear the rest of this lecture."

We reached the final step and emerged onto the sandy arena floor. Suddenly the walls loomed higher, the crowd so much larger. I felt minuscule. Insignificant.

“You’re going to be fine,” Teller said, sounding more like a question than a statement. “The last five Corbois Crowns weren’t Challenged.”

I nodded silently.

“Maybe no one will step forward, and we can all just go back to the palace.”

“Maybe,” I murmured.

“Even if they do, you can use your shield to wear them down, and then when they’re tired...”

He trailed off. It was the one wrinkle in our plans that no one could solve.

I had never used my magic to harm another person. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

Though I had walked away from my career, some part of me would always be a healer. Behind all my swagger and threats, it was the drive to repair harm, not create it, that filled my heart with purpose.

But this was a fight to the death. If I could not find it in myself to cross that line...

“Diem Corbois.”

Remis’s voice reverberated across the arena, magnified by the Sophos invention he’d used at the funeral.

Teller’s hand tightened on mine. I squeezed his back, then dropped it and strode several paces forward until I stood alone.

I turned to face the royal box, my posture going rigid. I steeled my face into the mask of a warrior, letting all trace of emotion boil away under the unforgiving sun. The time had come to show all of Lumnos that I was not afraid to *fight*.

Remis spoke again.

“The traditions of our great realm demand you be judged by your peers before you take the throne. The rules are simple: Each of the Houses will have an opportunity to raise a Challenge. If one or more Challengers steps forward, you must fight the strongest among them using only your magic until one of you is dead. If you are truly worthy to wear the Crown, may Blessed Mother Lumnos make her will known to us all.”

Taran’s snort carried to my ears. I bit my cheek to hold back my smile.

“And if you are tested and found wanting... may she have mercy on your soul.”

A thunderous rumble rolled through the stands as thousands of Descended beat their fists against their chests in a slowly building cadence.

But this gesture was no salute.

This was a Descended battle cry.

This was a call for blood.

The beat grew louder and faster, carrying my pulse along with it. When the roar reached its crescendo and faded, my heart stayed pounding in my ears.

“Houses of Lumnos,” Remis boomed, “the time has come. I call on each of you to make your decision. Will you Challenge your Queen—or will you kneel to her?”

The murmur ceased. Lips pressed closed, bodies went still—even the wind seemed to hold its breath. Absolute silence seized the arena as my life teetered on the cliff.

I did not dare look at the Houses and risk provoking them to act, nor did I look at Remis, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of seeing my fear. And I could not bear to see the fragile hope in my brother’s eyes.

Instead, I looked up.

I had never prayed to the Kindred before—at least not by name. In my lowest moments, I had thrown desperate pleas out to any divine being that might be listening, but not once had I sought out the patron goddess who had plucked me from mortal obscurity and tossed me straight into the boiling cauldron.

I squinted at the radiance of the sun’s rays, then closed my eyes and faced the darkness of my mind.

Light and dark. The two sides of Lumnos’s magic.

Both misunderstood, for although we often ran from the shadowy unknown toward the clarity of day, the light could blister and burn just as the dark could shield and soothe. It was in the meeting of the two, the dusk and the dawn, where peace was truly at its height.

Lumnos, I said without speaking, let’s be honest, we’ve never been great friends, you and I. I’m pretty sure you and your siblings are sitting up there laughing your heads off at my expense.

But I do believe in Luther, and he believes in you. He thinks you want me to bring peace between the mortals and the Descended. I don’t know if

you've got the right girl, but I'm willing to give it my best shot. If that's truly your will, then give me a sign. Let me leave here without a Ch—

"I will Challenge her."

Shit.

I opened my eyes and turned toward the voice.

"On behalf of House Ghislaine, I, Rhon Ghislaine, wish to Challenge Diem Corbois as unworthy to wear the Crown."

For a long beat, I couldn't process anything but the group clustered around him, the comparatively tiny family that sat behind their golden emblem.

House Ghislaine?

The weakest of the Twenty Houses—the House for whom a Challenge meant gaining nothing and risking everything, the one House everyone had been certain I didn't need to fear?

My eyes focused on the man who had spoken, and my racing heart skidded to a halt.

Tall and lanky, his slender frame was topped with shimmering blonde hair, his attractive face ruined by the vitriol carved into his fair-skinned features.

But there was more than hatred behind his eyes—there was doubt.

Fear.

Because he recognized me just as surely as I recognized him.

And the last time we'd met—in a dark alley in Paradise Row, where I'd watched him murder his own son and his mortal lover in cold blood despite my pleas for mercy—he had walked away bleeding, and I had walked away alive, an ending neither of us could have predicted.

"You," I growled, narrowing my eyes. "I will happily fight you, you murderous piece of sh—"

"I will Challenge her."

I whipped around to the new voice, this time from a face I didn't recognize, though one look at the simpering green-haired twins beside him told me everything I needed to know.

"On behalf of House Byrnum, I, Roderyck Byrnum, wish to Challenge Diem Corbois as unworthy to wear the Crown."

My stomach lurched. This was not good, at least if I believed his parents' claims that he was one of the most powerful Descended in the realm.

But also not entirely unexpected. I had known that by encouraging Lily to reject the betrothal, a Challenge might come from House Byrnum. Even knowing this result, I wouldn't have changed a thing.

I took a deep breath.

You can do this, I told myself. *You can—*

“I will Challenge her.”

This time, I recognized neither the voice nor the House, one of the nameless few I'd met with at the height of my grief, when I'd been little more than a sentient ball of dark, vengeful despair.

“I will Challenge her,” another called out.

“I will Challenge her.”

One at a time, they stood.

One at a time, they declared me *unworthy*.

Five Houses became ten, then fifteen, then eighteen. When only one House remained, their members all clad in matching glittering red, I turned to face what I knew was coming with my head held high.

“On behalf of House Hanoverre, I, Jean Hanoverre, wish to Challenge Diem Corbois as unworthy to wear the Crown.”

Every last one of the Twenty Houses, save my own, had raised a Challenge. The Lumnos nobility stood unified against me.

And then the bad somehow got worse.

The Challenges kept coming, this time from the smaller Houses that did not make up the elite Twenty. Then, just to add insult to injury, there came Challenges from Unhoused Descended, who spoke for no clan at all.

This wasn't just a Challenging—this was a *Humiliating*. Though I would only have to fight one of them, the message would linger. This was an outright rejection of me and everything I stood for. A vote of no confidence.

A declaration of war.

It was that realization that finally pierced my armor and sliced straight through to my heart.

After meeting the Corbois and finding people I cared about enough to now call family, I had allowed a tenuous hope to grow inside me that I could find some way to end this war not in bloodshed, but in reconciliation and common ground.

But these people did not want unity, they wanted power—and every last one of them was willing to kill me to keep it. Even if I survived today,

what peace could I possibly achieve with a people so unified in their hatred?

My hope withered away, a flower wilting beside a flame. Whether I died today, or at the hands of one of the assassins they would surely send my way, the Descended of Lumnos had marked me for death.

My blood went cold. What if they couldn't get to me, and they came after Teller instead? What if they came for Luther and every Corbois who had ever shown me kindness? I couldn't protect all of them forever.

Maybe the only good I could really accomplish was to accept death today and spare the people I loved from meeting the same fate I'd brought down upon my father.

I turned my eyes to the royal box. Luther's face was pale, his expression conflicted. "I'm sorry," I mouthed, wishing I had more to offer him for all he had done. He shook his head and stepped forward as if he might come to me. I closed my eyes and turned away.

I could not bear to see any more. My heart would not survive seeing my brother's reaction, and if I had to look at the smug satisfaction that surely illuminated Remis's face, I might commit a murder before the match even began.

My shoulders slumped, my chin dipping low. I took a deep breath and awaited the decision on which Challenger would seal my fate.

"I will Challenge her."

The crowd gasped.

A young girl screamed in protest.

I would have joined them in their shock, had I not been recoiling in pain at the sharp flare of magic against my wrist.

The sign of a bonded bargain breaking.

"On behalf of House Corbois, I, Luther Corbois, wish to Challenge the Queen."

Chapter

Forty-Two

The royal box was in chaos.

Lily was screaming, weeping. Luther knelt in front of her with her hands in his, whispering something in her ear that was only making her sob even harder.

Eleanor and Alixe stared at each other in wordless shock. Remis was holding his wrist and gaping, eyes wide with panic, Garath gesturing wildly at his side.

Taran was the only one who did not look surprised. He watched Luther and slowly hung his head in what looked like sadness—or perhaps disappointment.

Around me, the arena exploded in frenzied excitement. No Crown had *ever* received a Challenge from their own House. For it to happen to me now, after being Challenged by every House—and by the man who had just kissed me to claim me as his...

If they had come here for entertainment, they were certainly receiving it.

I was so frozen in disbelief that I didn't notice Teller running to my side until he shook me to get my attention.

"D—what's going on? Did you two plan this?"

I shook my head numbly, eyes still fixed on the royal box. Lily clutched Luther, weeping against his overcoat, while he and Taran had a heated conversation. Taran's expression had shifted to red-faced fury, and he jabbed a finger in my direction while shouting words at his cousin I couldn't make out.

"Diem," Teller hissed again. My gaze sluggishly dragged to his, the world moving too slowly around me.

He looked terrified. Lost.

Some still-functioning part of my brain told me to comfort him, but what could I say? What words could possibly ease this horror?

“I’ll have to fight him,” I mumbled in a daze. “Remis has to choose the most powerful Challenger. That’s Luther. I... I have to fight Luther.”

And one of us has to die.

“You can’t. Talk to Remis, there has to be another way.”

My attention shifted back to House Corbois. Luther stood preternaturally still as Remis screamed at him while his wife struggled to hold him back. A cold, cruel smile rose to Luther’s lips at his father’s rage.

“He betrayed me,” I breathed. “Luther wanted revenge on his father. He’s using me to get it.”

I didn’t quite believe the words, even as they came out of my own mouth.

I glanced down at my wrist, still aching with the phantom pain of the bonded bargain snapping apart. “My agreement with Remis is broken. His magic is gone.”

Teller swore under his breath.

Remis commanded the Challengers to line up across the arena floor, then shoved past his son to storm down the staircase, his eyes murky with ire.

A wet-cheeked Eleanor stepped forward to hold Lily back as Luther pried her arms from his waist. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head, then turned toward the stairs. He refused to look at me and face the choice he had made, this ultimate betrayal. His clouded eyes stared vaguely ahead, focused on some destination only he could see.

“Did you tell him?” Remis demanded, stomping up to me. “Did he know I would lose my magic if he Challenged you?”

The stupefied look on my face gave me away.

“You *idiot*,” he shouted. “You foolish, stupid brat! Did I not warn you this would happen?”

I blinked and shook my head. “I never thought... h-he...”

“This is your fault. I upheld my part of the bargain. Why should I be held accountable when you were the imbecile who told him?”

“Stop insulting her,” Teller snapped. “You’re the one who made a bargain you couldn’t keep.”

My heart would have filled with pride if it hadn’t been busy doing other things, like pounding hard enough to rattle the arena or smashing into a fine cloud of dust.

“What if you convince him to take it back?” Teller offered, looking at me. “If he rescinds his Challenge, maybe it will restore the bargain.”

“A Challenge can’t be withdrawn once given,” Remis argued, though the calculating look on his face said he was considering it. “The other Houses will never accept it. They’ll say I broke the rules to help you.”

“So you would choose your pride over your magic?” Teller asked with brows raised, showing no hint of intimidation as Remis glowered in response.

My brother had always been the most reserved member of our family, cool-headed and cautious to a fault, but it was moments like these that reminded me he was still a fearless Bellator at heart.

While Remis and Teller continued to argue, my focus shifted. Luther had stepped onto the arena floor to take his place in the long line of Challengers.

My feet carried me toward him before I even knew what I planned to say. Though his eyes stayed fixed beyond me, he stiffened as I approached.

I shoved him, forcing him to stagger back and slam into the stone barrier. “You fucking betrayed me!”

His shoulders drew back, his jaw clamping tight. Still refusing to meet my glare, he set off to my left to divert around me.

So I sucker-punched him.

The crowd went wild. Luther froze as his head jerked sideways. Almost instantly, his face snapped back to mine, his expression dark and enraged.

“How could you?” I hissed.

“Lovers’ quarrel?” Jean Hanoverre mocked, sauntering past us. “Better save it for the match. I hope your magic is a lot stronger than that right hook.”

So I sucker-punched him, too.

I clocked him right in his smug, smirking, pretentious little face, sending his obnoxiously coiffed hair flying as he tumbled onto his ass in the sand.

I spat at his feet. “Now when I fight you, you can compare them for yourself.”

The audience was a cacophony of gasps, laughter, and mutters of disapproval. It was the latter I loathed the most—the ones who bestowed

haughty judgment from their lives of irrelevancy as I clawed for my own survival.

At least I was trying. At least I was *fighting*.

I turned back to Luther, only to see him stalking off to join my other would-be executioners.

“Don’t you dare walk away from me,” I shouted at him. “Did your promises mean nothing after all?”

He stilled, then whipped back around to face me, fury blazing in his eyes.

Before he could speak, Remis darted between us and seized his arm. “Son, listen to me. You have to take your Challenge back.”

“I will not,” Luther ground out.

“I’ll restore all your titles. I’ll never oppose you again. All the things you’ve asked me for over the years, whatever you want—name it, and it’s yours.”

“Save your breath, Father. There is nothing I desire more than this.”

“Luther, be reasonable. I can help you protect her. There must be something I can do—”

“Can you give me a Crown?” Luther snarled. “I’m meant to be King, and *she* is standing in my way. I’ve been waiting for this moment for thirty days. I will not risk another Challenger failing and keeping me from my throne now.” His eyes sharpened on his father. “Taking your magic in the process is just a happy surprise.”

What little was left of my heart plummeted through me, scattering in pieces on the sandy ground. Beneath my fury, I had held on to a thread of hope my accusations were wrong. I knew Luther had spent a lifetime honing his skills at hiding his true feelings away, and I’d prayed this was all another mask, another lie—but as I scoured that face I had once read as easily as an old favorite book, the only emotion I found was ruthless resolve.

Remis fell back a step, looking equally stunned. “But... I—I thought you were...” He stared at me, then back at his son. “You’re not doing this for her?”

Luther tensed, then ripped his arm free. “I’m doing this for the realm. I’m giving them the Crown they need.” Muscles feathered on his jaw. “Me.”

He walked away, leaving me shattered and Remis speechless. We exchanged a bleak look, each of us devastated for very different reasons.

“They’re going to kill me,” Remis choked out. “All the people I’ve angered over the years—when they discover I’ve lost my magic...” He swallowed hard. “I’m as good as dead.”

I had no sympathy to spare, at least not for him, not when my own death was so crushingly imminent, but as I stared at this man who looked as if he had nothing left to lose, an idea began to grow.

“I propose we make another deal,” I said slowly.

He scowled. “I can’t make a bonded bargain without magic.”

“Not a bonded bargain—just an agreement. You trust me, and I’ll trust you.”

His upper lip curled like I’d just asked him to sprout a tail and slither away. But he didn’t say no.

“Let Eleanor back in the family, and promise me you’ll take care of my brother. Use the guards, your connections, whatever it takes to keep him safe. Promise me that, and if I survive, I won’t say a word about our bargain. If anyone asks, I’ll deny it. No one will have to know your magic is gone.”

His expression turned guarded as he looked me over. “You’re going to try to kill my son?”

“No.” My eyes briefly closed. I let out a shaky breath. “You’re going to let me choose my Challenger.”

Remis didn’t answer at first. He studied me, brows furrowed, lips tightly pressed. “If you don’t fight Luther, they’ll declare the Challenging void. Even if you win, they’ll say it doesn’t count.”

“Then I’ll have to make my victory *extremely* convincing.”

“If Luther wants the Crown, he’ll kill you the moment the Challenging ends.” His tone was oddly light, almost curious. “You’re sure you don’t want to fight him now and eliminate that risk?”

I clenched my jaw. “Do we have a deal or not?”

He gave me another slow, assessing once-over, then fished a small device from his pocket and raised it to his lips. As he spoke, his voice echoed throughout the stands.

“Citizens of Lumnos, as you have seen, this is a historic Challenging unlike any before.” I shot him an irritated look. He ignored me and continued. “As Regent, it falls to me to determine the strongest from among

the Challengers. Well, an unprecedented event calls for an unequally unprecedented response.” He swept his hand in a broad arc across the line of Challengers, then to me. “I defer my selection to the Unchallenged Queen. Let her prove her worthiness as much by her choice of opponent as by her victory.”

Shouts of protest immediately erupted, but none more vehemently than from the Challengers themselves. A few bolted forward to argue with Remis, but more curiously, a number of them gathered around Jean Hanoverre.

“This is not what we agreed to,” one of them shouted at him.

“You said *you* would be fighting her, not us,” another said. “You need to fix this.”

“If we had known she could choose us, we never would have—”

“What’s going on?” I cut in.

Several faces turned to me with mixed levels of panic. Even Jean seemed to have a shadow of uncertainty over his cocky demeanor.

“Your Majesty,” one of them began, “forgive us, we were tricked. House Hanoverre, they said—”

“Silence,” Jean snarled at the sniveling man.

“No, I’d like to hear this,” I said.

“House Hanoverre told us all the Houses had to act as one,” the man blurted out. “They said if everyone raised a Challenge, House Corbois wouldn’t punish any of us.”

“It was his idea,” another Challenger insisted. “Punish him, not us!”

Several of the others shouted their agreement.

I focused my glare on Jean. “House Hanoverre isn’t brave enough to stand on its own?”

He glowered. “I’m no coward. Choose me to fight. Unless *you* aren’t brave enough.”

“You aren’t the most powerful, Jean,” a low voice cut in from behind me. “It’s my right to fight her.”

I didn’t need to look to know who *that* voice belonged to.

A firm hand clamped on my shoulder and forced me to turn. “You *will* choose me.”

Luther’s menacing expression was unlike any I’d ever seen. His eyes were their own kind of weapons, tipped with poison and aimed to kill. His

features were honed to a brutal razor's edge, radiating a malice that had my breath catching.

There was no trace of the loyal man I thought I'd known. There was not even the frosty indifference of the Prince.

This was Luther the warrior. Luther the *executioner*.

"The most powerful Challenger must be chosen. Those are the rules."

I smiled icily. "Following rules never was my strong suit."

He yanked me closer, his voice dropping to a hush. "If you don't fight me, they'll never accept you as Queen."

"If you hadn't noticed, they already don't accept me."

He didn't react, his face revealing nothing.

An explosive silence fell between us, the air thick with violent threat.

"Was *any* of it real?"

I had intended it to be an accusation—a bitter condemnation of every lie and faked emotion.

Instead, it came out heartbroken.

His brows drew in, low and tight. "War is coming. Thousands of lives are at risk, and the realm needs a strong ruler. If you can't use your magic —"

"Then I deserve to die?" I whispered.

Veins rose on his throat as he let me go and looked away. "You *will* choose me," he rumbled. "End of discussion."

I forced myself to scrounge my composure back together, falling back on old habits as I channeled all my hurt into a molten, destructive fury. These people didn't deserve my weakness—they deserved my wrath.

"I'll choose whoever I want," I bit back. "I don't answer to you, Prince. I'm the fucking *Queen*."

For a heartbeat, something familiar flashed in his eyes—something that looked a hell of a lot like pride—smothered in an instant by a callous glare. I spun on my heel before he could get in any more jabs and returned to Remis's side, quickly joined by Teller. My gaze traveled back and forth across the Challengers.

"Choose the weakest one," Teller said firmly. "Get through this alive. We can figure the rest out another day."

Survive. At whatever cost, to whatever end.

Our father's keystone lesson.

Remis began to fire off a list of the weakest Challengers including, notably, several of the people who had been arguing with Jean Hanoverre. He offered insight into their power and their vulnerabilities, giving a step-by-step guide for exactly how to defeat them.

Teller nodded emphatically and offered his own shrewd perspective—which of the Houses were the least influential, which ones I could most afford to make enemies of. Even Remis seemed impressed as he gave my brother a wary side-eye.

All the while, I could not tear my gaze from Luther. Searching his face. Looking for the truth.

“Which ones are the strongest?” I asked.

“Diem,” Teller warned slowly.

“Other than Luther?” Remis said.

I briefly closed my eyes, then nodded. “Other than Luther.”

“Jean Hanoverre, or perhaps Roderyck Byrnum, or—”

“Please don’t do this,” Teller begged.

“What about Rhon Ghislaine?” I asked.

Remis frowned. “His magic is quite strong, but defeating him would impress no one. They would say you targeted House Ghislaine because it’s the lowest ranked. It would be the worst possible choice—all the consequences of someone weak without the benefit of an easy win.”

I looked up to the sky, squinting against the bright sun. “If this is how you Kindred show your sense of humor, your jokes could seriously use some work.”

“No,” Teller pleaded. “Choose *anyone* else.”

I scrubbed a hand down my face and sighed. “He killed a mother and child in Mortal City, Tel. I witnessed it myself.”

Teller hung his head. His shoulders sagged.

He knew me too well—my path was set.

If my worthiness was to be judged by my choice of opponent, then let this decision be a reflection of my soul. I would not kill the weak merely because it was easy, nor kill the cruel because it was gratifying.

I would kill only the guilty—and only when justice allowed for nothing less.

The Descended might never know my true reasoning, but so be it. They had already deemed me unworthy. I would hold myself to a higher standard.

I raised my voice to the crowd. “I, Diem Corbois, Queen of Lumnos, choose Rhon Ghislaine as my Challenger.”

I took Teller’s hand and dragged him toward the tent that had been set up for my preparation. Remis’s voice thundered around us, repeating my decision to the arena, followed quickly by a fresh wave of booing and indignant protests.

I nearly slammed into Luther’s chest as he stepped into my path.

“Go back. Tell my father you choose me.” He was panting for breath, his face haunted and wild. “The crowd will accept it—they’ll prefer it. They *want* to see us fight.”

“My decision is made.”

“Diem, please—”

“Don’t call me that,” I clipped and moved to route around him.

He stepped in front of my brother, his tone turning frantic. “Convince her, Teller. You have to make her change her mind.”

Teller squinted at Luther, studying him with a puzzled look. Suddenly his eyes went wide, some inner light clicking to life, and Luther nodded silently.

“I don’t have time for this,” I muttered. I yanked my brother toward the tent, ignoring the shouts that followed. Once we’d ducked beneath the canvas flap, momentarily shielded from prying eyes, I spun on my heel.

“Why didn’t you choose him?” Teller said before I could speak.

“It doesn’t matter. I need to tell you some things, and I don’t have long.”

“Diem, I think Luther is trying to—”

“There’s a box in my nightstand drawer containing a letter. If I die, read that letter and guard it with your life. Don’t share its contents with anyone else, not even Lily.”

“D, listen, I really think Luth—”

“*No one*, Teller. Understood?”

He frowned but nodded, and I let out a small sigh of relief. Last night, in a hastily scrawled note, I had laid out everything—all the secrets about our mother and Luther, even my birth father. What I’d seen at the site of our father’s murder. The Guardians’ plans. A warning about Sophos. Where I’d hidden a secret stash of gold for him to start a new life abroad.

“Maura will take you in,” I continued. “If it’s not safe in Lumnos—”

“Stop talking like you’re going to die. You swore to fight, D.”

“I will fight, but I need you to hear this.” I clutched his face, wincing at the emotion that thickened my throat. “Don’t give up on Lily, Tel. This world is full of reasons to quit or run away. If you find something that brings you joy, hold on to it with everything you’ve got.”

He nodded, silvery tears beginning to line his eyes.

“And if you two are together, and she becomes pregnant...” I managed a faint smile at the blush on his cheeks. “Go to Luther first. Don’t run, don’t do anything irreversible. He’ll know what to do. I know he turned on me today—”

“Actually, I don’t think—”

“Just do it, alright? I still trust him on this.”

His eyebrows knit together with a host of unspoken questions.

“Promise me, Teller.”

“I promise.”

I threw my arms around him, burying my face in his shoulder and cherishing this final, precious moment with the one person who had been by my side through everything. The person whose loyalty I would never doubt, whose love for me was always pure.

“I love you,” I whispered. “I am so proud of the man that you are.”

He gripped me hard, his shoulders quietly shaking.

“My brilliant little brother, you are going to do such great things...” I fell silent as my voice broke and tears slipped in rivers down my cheeks.

“So are you, Diem. This can’t be the end.”

I nodded and gently pushed him away. “Go.” He hesitated, and I forced out a sniffling laugh. “Go. I can’t very well intimidate anyone if I walk out there looking weepy.”

With one last look, he closed his eyes, dipped his head, and walked away.

I stood in the tent alone, swiping at my face in a losing fight against my emotions. My hands began to tremble with the reality of what I was about to face.

If it were any other kind of fight—if I could use weapons, or even just my fists. I could be fast, I could be scrappy. I could even be clever, when it came to warfare. I could endure. Why was this the one thing I couldn’t do?

I scowled at the pitched ceiling of the tent, imagining the goddess Lumnos looking down in delight at the chaos she’d created.

“You couldn’t have given me *one* break?” I shouted.

The sound of rustling fabric announced someone's entry into the tent. Remis, I suspected, ready to start the match. I took a deep, slow breath.

But when I turned, it wasn't the Regent who stood before me with jeweled sword in hand and a glare that promised murder.

My heart stopped.

I lunged for the tent's entrance. Luther moved fast, catching me by the waist. He hauled my back against his chest and raised the Sword of Corbois to my throat.

I thrashed against him, clawing uselessly at his steel-strong skin and jamming my elbows into his ribs. He gave a few muffled grunts, but his grip refused to loosen.

His voice rumbled in my ear like a coming storm. "Change your decision, or I'll kill you now."

"Then kill me," I gritted through my teeth. "If it's so important to you, go on and get it over with."

I flinched as the blade pressed deeper.

"I'm giving you the chance to fight for your life."

"Why does it matter?" I shot back. "I'll be dead either way."

He spun me around and slammed my back against the tent's large center pole, one hand gripping me hard by the throat while the point of his sword wedged beneath my jaw. With his broad form curling around me to pin me in and his pale eyes besieged with a torrent of thrashing shadows, he looked like a mighty angel of death, come to lay judgment on my soul.

His teeth bared in a snarl. "Change your decision."

"No."

"Do it."

"No."

"Why do you refuse to fight me?"

My defiance slipped, and my eyes broke away.

"Tell me," he roared, fingers squeezing around my throat.

"Because it wasn't a lie for me!"

Hot tears sprang up anew. I let my head drop back against the pole, shutting my eyes in shame.

"I can't fight you, Luther. The thought of killing you..." I let out a shaky, defeated sigh. "I care about you too much. Even if you don't feel the same."

His grip on my neck loosened. I heard the sound of a sword clattering on the floor, then felt a soft forehead press against my own. His warm breath heated my lips as his body slumped against mine.

“Choose me anyway.”

When I looked at him again, his fury had vanished. His shoulders sagged, his sharp features melting into anguish. He looked exhausted and utterly, desperately broken.

“You won’t have to do anything. I’ll handle it myself. I can make the magic look like it came from you.”

Then I understood. Luther never wanted to fight me.

He wanted to *lose* to me.

He sank to his knees. His head drooped, his hands wrapping around the backs of my thighs.

“Let me do this for you,” he begged. “I could hope for no greater death than this.”

Splinter by splinter, my broken heart began to rebuild.

I knelt in front of him and cupped his jaw in my hands. Tenderly, I ran my fingers across the lines of his face, tracing his furrowed brow and the rippled skin of his beautiful scar.

His hands slid to my ribs and pulled me against him. “Your face...” His haunted gaze traveled across my features, lost in the memory. “You looked at me like you were saying goodbye.”

I *had* been giving up. It was only his Challenge that had refueled my anger and rekindled my fighting spirit. I almost laughed at the irony. He had indeed saved me—just not in the way he planned.

“I should have known,” I said, wincing. So many times I had doubted him, and each time, he had proven me wrong in spectacular fashion.

Never again.

Perhaps it was a vow I wouldn’t live long enough to keep, but if I did, I would never again doubt his loyalty. Though I would never feel worthy of it, of *him*, I could at least honor him by accepting it, once and for all.

“Luther,” I said slowly, placing my hand over his heart. “If I don’t survive—”

“No,” he growled.

“You will make a fine King. These people trust you. If you urge them toward peace, perhaps they will listen.”

“*You* are meant to lead us. I’ve seen it, the Blessed Mother showed me —”

“I don’t put my faith in gods and goddesses.” I smiled sadly. “But I do put it in you. You were born to be King.”

“Not without you. You are my Queen. The realm needs you. The mortals need you. Teller, Lily, Eleanor—they all need you.” His arms locked around me like he was bracing to stop fate from snatching me out of his grasp. “*I* need you, Diem.”

Deep within my heart, a long-overdue decision was finally put to rest. One door opened—the other locked forever.

“You have me, Luther,” I vowed. “All of me.”

I leaned back to let him see the full depth of that truth in my eyes. No more masks, no more armor—just brutal, bleeding honesty. My heart had been battered by grief and self-doubt, more mistakes than I could count, and regrets that might haunt me forever. It was an imperfect, wounded thing, covered in flaws, but it was strong. And it beat for him—the man who had walked beside me in the hopeless dark and burned for me in the fiery light.

I took his hand and set it over the scar on my collarbone, then laid my palm on the jagged line that slashed his cheek. I leaned in until my lips brushed his.

“I am yours, Luther Corbois. Scars and all.”

This time, there was no mistaking that *I* kissed *him*. It wasn’t the bloody lust of our first kiss, nor the sweet tenderness of our second. This was the crash of the surf upon the rocks, the crack of a lightning bolt down the trunk of a redwood, ripping me open to ignite me from within.

We were two ravenous souls, yearning to be lonely no more, and after months of denying ourselves this precious thing that we craved most, this was the breaking of our fast—and he *devoured* me. His mouth crushed against mine, his tongue seeking me out like a taste he could never get enough of.

The thin material of my suit made me feel all but naked in his arms as our hands roamed each other’s bodies. While Luther caressed each curve with a slow, deliberate focus, as if we had all the time in the world, my touch was urgent, desperate, needing to consume every bit of him while I still had the chance.

Remis’s amplified voice carried through the tent to announce that the fight was about to begin, shattering our hard-won happiness.

“It’s rude to kiss a man like that and then die, Your Majesty,” Luther panted, his breath hot against my swollen lips.

I hummed. “I guess that means I’ll have to live.”

He flashed me that brilliant, unguarded smile that was only for me. My heart squeezed at the idea that I might never see it again.

He laid a brief, adoring kiss on my lips, then another on my forehead. He sheathed his sword and took my hand, and we walked together out of the tent.

The second we were once again under the scrutiny of the crowd, his demeanor changed. His expression cooled, his posture straightened. He scanned the makeshift battlefield in assessment. “You can do this,” he said matter-of-factly. “Your power vastly exceeds his. One good hit is all you need.”

I nodded silently, shaking my limbs to warm up my muscles. I let my father’s lessons run at speed through my mind—how to dodge, how to hide, how to distract, how to survive.

He had spent years preparing me for this. I may not have been the Queen he expected, but I sure as hell could be the warrior he raised.

“Rhon is a prick, and he fights dirty. Don’t let him out of your sight.” Luther glanced at me. “You can still summon your shield?”

I focused on the strong grip of Luther’s hand in mine as I pulled my magic to my chest, just as he had taught me. With a good deal of effort and more time than I’d like, I managed to push it outward into a shimmering arc.

Luther studied it and gave a sharp, approving nod. “Don’t be afraid of your godhood. The magic doesn’t just answer to you, it’s part of you. Be proud of who you are, and embrace it.”

Remis’s voice rang out across the arena. “Your Majesty, Challenger, please take your places at opposite ends of the arena.”

Luther turned to me and took my chin, the slight tremor in his hand revealing what the fierce confidence of his voice didn’t. “You are fearless. You are strong. You do not cower in the faces of gods nor kings. You are fated for greater battles than this, so you do whatever it takes, and you fight like hell.”

“I will,” I vowed.

“Remember who you are, Diem Bellator.” He clasped the medallion at my neck. “But remember you are a phoenix, too. We do not fear the flames,

for the hotter we burn, the higher we fly.”

He gave me a final, smoldering kiss, then whispered against my lips.

“Burn, my Queen. Glow so bright, the darkness trembles.”

Luther kept his eyes on me as he backed toward the stairs to the royal box. Just before he stepped off the arena floor, he threw out a whip of shadow toward the crowd. The dark rope instantly dissolved to mist—a reminder of the arena’s barrier and proof that no misfire of magic would escape and hurt an innocent.

My chest warmed at how deeply he understood my heart. With that simple act, he freed me from my fears and empowered me to let go completely.

Once he was safely outside the barrier, I strode to the end of the arena and pulled a small pouch from my belt. I reached inside and took a clump of the dark soil I had gathered from my family home, then sprinkled it across the ground as my father’s voice surfaced in my thoughts.

It’s just another battle. I’ve taught you everything you need to know.

“I can do this,” I said quietly. “I am Diem Bellator. Daughter of my mother Auralie. Chosen of my father Andrei. Protector of my brother Teller. Healer, warrior, and Queen.” My chin rose, my voice growing louder. “*I can do this.*”

At the opposite end, Rhon Ghislaine bounced on his toes in anticipation, the arc of his shield already glimmering around him. Two circles of ink-black spikes ringed his palms, sending visceral memories of the murder in the alley crashing into my mind.

“You have two deaths to answer for,” I yelled loudly.

He raised his arm, and his spikes doubled in size. “In a few minutes, I’ll make it three.”

I tucked the pouch away, then kneeled to run my hands through the sand, cupping a pinch of it into my palm. Rhon watched me with a suspicious frown.

“Rhon Ghislaine, are you ready?” Remis bellowed.

He cracked his knuckles and lowered his chin, his eyes fixed on me. “I’m ready.”

“Diem Corbois, are you ready?”

I cast one final glance to the royal box. My newfound family had huddled together, their arms all draped on Teller in a show of support for

him and a symbolic promise to me. My heart swelled with gratitude. I placed a fist against my chest, and as one, they returned the gesture.

I looked to Remis and nodded. "I'm ready."

"Then let the Challenging begin."

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Chapter Forty-Three

The echo of Remis's voice still hung in the air when the first volley of bolts came hurtling toward me.

I fought against my instinct to run and held my ground.

The attack vaporized in a flash of light as it crashed against my shield. He was strong—a lot stronger than I remembered from our encounter in Paradise Row. I hadn't felt a thing when his magic had struck me then, but now, the force of its impact sent me staggering back a step.

A cheer rose from the crowd as they came to the same realization I did: this would be no quick one-shot duel. This was a true war for survival.

Rhon launched another series of dark arrows and began to advance. I tried to meet him step for step, but the pounding of his magic against my shield had me feeling like I was wading through mud.

"You can't shield forever," he taunted. "You'll run dry soon enough."

"Got a lot of problems with women going dry when you're around, Rhon?" I shot back.

The crowd roared with laughter. Rhon's eyes flared in rage.

He shoved out a palm and a swarm of spikes the size of my head raced toward me. I dug my heels into the ground in anticipation of the impact. At the last second, they split into three smaller groups and diverted around me.

I gasped and extended my shield into a dome just in time to keep my back from being turned into a pincushion. The jolt threw me off balance, sending me flying face-first into the sand.

The crowd erupted with more laughter. Rhon threw his hands up and spun around with a gloating smile, encouraging them to cheer him on, and they happily complied.

I was stunned—and more than a little relieved—at how my shield had responded with near-instinctual speed. Encouraged, I held out my hand and tried to conjure a magic-made blade.

My heart sank when nothing happened. My godhood was clearly paying attention, and at least *somewhat* invested in keeping me alive, but it still refused to fight.

My eyes scanned the arena floor. I had to get out of the open. Though I had a deeper well of power than Rhon, shielding took far more magic than attacking, and I wasn't ready to gamble on which of us would run out first.

I took advantage of his crowing to pull myself to my feet and dart for the nearest obstacle, a giant boulder nearly as tall as I was. I crouched behind it and peered around the side.

Rhon turned and stilled, realizing I'd disappeared. I felt a thrill of satisfaction as his smug smile dropped away and his shield closed fully around him.

"It seems our new Queen is afraid," he shouted, and the audience shouted their agreement.

I rolled my eyes and fought the urge to remind him they already thought me a coward for choosing to fight him instead of a more worthy opponent. My focus locked on some small rocks mixed into the sand, and I hurriedly collected a handful.

He turned my direction, and I lunged back to the boulder and out of his line of sight. I held my breath and listened for any sign of him, adrenaline burning like liquid fire in my veins.

His taunts continued, but instead of growing louder, his voice fell softer and more muffled. I took a risk and leaned out—just as expected, he had his back to me as he searched around other obstacles.

I reared my arm back and launched one of the pebbles at the back of his neck. Though I fell back into hiding before I could see it land, I knew I'd hit my mark when a cloud of black barbs scattered across the arena to my left.

The move had won me a crucial observation. The rock had gone through his shield, proving he was only warding against magic-based attacks. A smart choice for someone trying to ration their magic—but an easy opening for an opponent like me.

Rhon's angry growl moved to my left, so I threw another pebble to a wooden crate on my right. Seconds later, sand and splinters exploded into the air with another round of spikes. I hurled my last rock to the far wall of the arena, and he once again unloaded a barrage of magic in the direction of the noise.

Rhon let out a low chuckle. “Trying to run my magic down? It won’t work. I can keep going all night.”

“That’s not what I heard from your lovers,” I called out.

Laughter rippled through the audience. I used the noise to camouflage my footsteps as I darted from my hiding place to a nearby pile of sandbags and flattened my body against the ground.

Rhon shouted angrily at the crowd’s amusement. Good—*good*. My plan was working.

An emotional fighter is a sloppy fighter, my father whispered in my ear. *Let him focus on seeing you beg at his feet rather than die at his hand.*

I grinned at my success, badly wishing I could see the royal box and look into Teller’s eyes. This had always been his favorite strategy when we sparred. I was faster and stronger, but he was smarter. He knew how to use my own temper as a weapon against me, skillfully pushing my buttons until I was blinded by rage.

I channeled my clever little brother as I peeked over the heap of burlap sacks. Rhon wandered a few feet away, hands extended and poised to attack.

He walked toward an overturned cart, putting his back to me. I slowly crawled out from behind my log and crept behind him on silent feet.

A hushed gasp sounded from the spectators. Rhon paused, then chuckled as he mistook it for a clue that he had found my hiding place.

“If you want that Crown, you’re going to have to fight me eventually,” he taunted.

I stopped behind him, then unfolded my palm and held it to my lips.

“I already have the Crown.”

Rhon whipped to face me, and with one strong puff of air, I sent a cloud of the sand I’d been hiding flying into his bulging eyes.

He screamed and doubled over, clutching at his face. “You’ll pay for that! I’ll make you suffer before I let you die.”

Somewhere, my father nodded and smiled.

I froze as Rhon’s shield flickered, then vanished around him. He was too distracted with the painful grit of sand under his eyelids to keep it intact.

This was it. He was completely vulnerable—I could kill him now, walk away with my throne, and live to fight another day.

The audience was riotous, screaming for me to finish him, despite having egged him on to do the same to me mere moments ago.

I looked over at Luther and saw the hope in his eyes. He pointed at Rhon and mouthed, “*Now! Do it now!*”

The thunder of my pulse in my ears drowned out the crowd as I thrust my hands out toward Rhon.

And still, nothing happened.

“Come on,” I whispered, shaking my hands as if the magic might come tumbling out. “Do something.”

Rhon cracked an eye open and saw me towering above him. He launched into me before I could run, tackling me to the ground. I rolled with his momentum and managed to pin him beneath me, but when shadows began to leak from his palms, I let him go and scrambled backward.

Panic took form like a weight in my chest. All the tricks and strategy in the world wouldn’t win this fight if I couldn’t summon an attack to kill him.

I threw my shield up and took off sprinting. Tiny explosions of sand burst into the air at my feet. I ducked behind barrier after barrier, but Rhon’s onslaught never relented. One at a time, each of them shattered into pieces.

I dove behind a pile of thick branches, knowing it would only win me a few seconds’ reprieve.

Answer me, I begged the voice. I need you.

No answer came.

A pool of hazy shadows crept beneath the logs and launched them into the air, leaving me fully exposed with no other barricade nearby. I darted to one side, then another, penned in by dark tendrils that whipped around me until I was completely surrounded.

Rhon’s thin lips twisted into a sinister grin. The fog of his magic coated my shield and beat against it with a horde of swinging fists. Though my barrier held strong, I felt every punch pummeling me deeper into the ground.

I was trapped. If I didn’t move, my only hope was that he would run out his magic before I did—and I would pay with my life if I was wrong.

His dark magic grew so thick that it blotted out the sky around me, and soon I was in a dome of pitch black. I sank to my knees, my mind racing for a solution.

I reached inside myself and fumbled for some scrap of power that would answer my call. I could *feel* it waiting, listening, watching, like it had still not yet seen enough to warrant its presence.

Every other time I had been in true distress, it had come to me like a guardian angel—or perhaps a vengeful demon.

It had risen, on its own, to call me to the fight, demanding that I surrender myself to its power. And now, here I was, ready to wave a white flag and give myself over to it completely—but this time, it would not come.

“You’re supposed to protect me,” I hissed. “Why won’t you answer me?”

The shadows dissipated from the top of my shield until I was once more visible to the crowd, though still ensnared within a ring of inky, walloping fists.

Rhon watched me with narrowed eyes and a creased brow. “Why aren’t you attacking?”

He strode toward me, his head angling to the side as he tried to work me out. With a swipe of his hand, his magic disappeared, and even his own shield vanished to nothing.

He spread his arms wide to expose his chest. “Go ahead. I’ll give you one free shot.”

I stood slowly and curled my hands into fists to hide their trembling, pleading for the *voice* to respond. It swirled inside me in a glittering vortex of light and dark, the pressure of it building until my chest felt ready to explode with a need for release.

But still, it would not act.

“You can’t, can you?” Rhon laughed incredulously. “The rumors are true—you can’t use your magic.”

The noise from the spectators grew from a hum to a roar as word began to spread.

“A Queen who cannot even use her magic.” He walked in a wide circle, yelling the phrase again and again to the crowd. Their gossip turned to jeers, then boos, a deafening rumble of rejection.

There was bad, and then there was worse. Either of those would have been preferable to this.

Even if I found some way to kill him—my secret was out. The entire realm knew my weakness. Coronated or not, no Descended would accept a Queen without magic.

“Fellow citizens of Lumnos,” Rhon bellowed, “the Houses have judged our new Queen and have spoken unanimously to find her unworthy.

And now we know—” He turned and pointed a finger at me. “—Blessed Mother Lumnos has found her unworthy, too.”

Thousands of bitter faces jeered in my direction. My eyes turned upward, glaring at the heavens and the cruel, capricious gods within. “This?” I yelled. “*This* is why you put me here?”

When I looked back down, Rhon’s back was to me. I took the opportunity to bolt across the arena floor to where another scattering of obstacles still lay intact, but my steps grew sluggish as defeat dampened my spirit.

Rhon caught a glimpse of me just before I reached a row of wine barrels. I dove for cover as he flung an arc of onyx barbs in my direction.

“It’s only a matter of time now,” he taunted. “You can’t win. Die and let us all go home.”

The barrels rattled violently as his magic battered into them. There was another tall boulder nearby—perhaps if I could distract him long enough to sneak behind it, I could buy myself time to think.

I stood up straight and stared him dead in the eye, letting him see my not-entirely-genuine lack of fear. “I don’t need magic to kill you, Rhon. I’ve got something even better.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “And what’s that?”

I gave him my sweetest smile and flicked a finger toward the sky. “A gryvern.”

Terror blanched his face. His eyes shot upward as he spun in circles and searched in vain for Sorae’s arrival. “You can’t,” he sputtered, “the rules—magic only—this isn’t allowed!”

I held back a laugh and darted for the boulder.

Too easy.

I had almost made it to safety when the toe of my boot hit a patch of mud. My foot slipped out from under me, and the momentum of my running carried me stumbling forward. My temple slammed against the boulder with a sickening *crack*.

The world went hazy. Stars danced in my eyes, ringing sounded in my ears. I tried to sit, but I couldn’t tell which direction was up.

Luther yelled my name. His voice sounded distant and muffled, like he was calling out from under water. I blinked furiously, trying hard to refocus.

A wave of sudden nausea set alarm bells blaring in my mind as my healer training kicked in, cataloguing the signs of a concussion. In a mortal,

the symptoms could last for days, even weeks—how long would recovery take for a Descended like me?

I struggled to focus my blurry vision on the person-shaped blob advancing toward me. Slowly, he sharpened and took form, but there was something different about him.

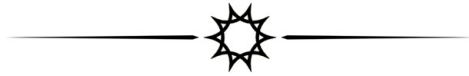
He looked... clearer. Unobstructed.

“Your shield!” Luther roared, terror edging his voice.

I realized a second too late that my shield had dropped. With a cruel slash of a smile, Rhon thrust his palm out and razor-sharp spikes plunged down at my chest.

“*Diem!*” Luther shouted.

Everything slowed, and the arena fell away.



I'D BEEN HERE BEFORE.

It was nighttime, and I was in the midst of war. I wore the same suit of dark, glittering armor, carrying the same blade of black and gold, still surrounded on all sides by rings of corpses extending as far as the eye could see.

Luther stood across from me, the blood-soaked Sword of Corbois in his hand. His dark hair lashed at his face in the breeze, his blue-grey eyes watching me with reverence. Just like before, his palm lay against the left side of his chest, and again, I echoed the movement.

But this time, something in the vision was different. Across the battlefield, the form of a man glowed as bright as the moon. Everything about him was grey and colorless—his skin, his eyes, his hair.

The man stared at me and extended his hand. “Join me, Daughter of the Forgotten,” he purred in a voice like liquid darkness. “Together we will destroy this world and build it anew. We will end the Descended and their rule forever.”

He was almost too beautiful to look upon, and when I turned my gaze to him, I felt an overwhelming urge to kneel at his feet and surrender.

But something in me told me to resist. To *fight*.

Slowly, I shook my head.

The man's eyes sharpened on me. "After all the Descended have done, you would still defend them? You would spare their lives, when they would so happily take your own?"

I hesitated. Some part of me did still despise the Descended for all the evil they had wrought over the centuries—evil they would gladly return to if left unchecked.

But they were still my people. The blood of the Kindred ran in my veins as surely as my mortal blood. If I wanted to be truly worthy of my Crown, I had to stop denying that truth. I was mortal. *And* I was Descended. And I would fight with everything I had to protect them both.

From each other—and from him.

I straightened and lifted my sword. All around me, a wall of silver flames began to rise.

"I do not rule for you," I shouted. "I rule for them."

The man's face froze over with vicious wrath. "Then you will die like the rest."

A blinding explosion of light lit the world aglow until there was nothing but endless white.

Now, Daughter of the Forgotten, the voice whispered. *Now, you are ready.*



I WAS ONCE AGAIN in the arena.

Once again standing helpless as dark, spiked death speared for my heart.

There was no time to shield. No time to dodge.

Not even time to scream.

I could only watch in horror as the shadowy bolts made direct contact all across my body.

A gasp burst from the audience, and the realm of Lumnos collectively held their breath.

But I felt... nothing.

There was no pain of torn flesh, nor any crimson bloom of fresh blood. I didn't fall backward from the force of any impact. The only reaction at all

was a soft glow and a deep prickling over my skin, a sensation that was at once ice and fire, frost and flame.

I ran my palm across my chest to feel for any puncture wounds or signs of injury and found none. My eyes lifted to Rhon's, my own gobsmacked confusion matched on his expression.

I rose to my feet, still wobbly from my head injury but healing fast, and began to walk toward him. He fumbled to throw out another attack, then another, each one colliding against me with no effect. Wild murmurs skittered through the audience.

"How?" Rhon sputtered, stumbling to get away.

I shook my head. I had no answers to give. I knew very little about Descended magic as it was, but I could guess from the thousands of faces gaping at me that this was as new to them as it was to me.

My hands began to tingle. From one palm, swirling tendrils of darkness spilled out and puddled at my feet in a rolling fog. From the other, scores of tiny orbs shimmered in the air like glitter in the sunlight. I wiggled my fingers and the orbs swelled and shrunk, then clumped together to take the form of a fluttering phoenix.

It struck me then—what I had been missing all this time.

I had been begging my godhood like a needy toddler, asking it to save me whenever I was scared or angry or in need of comfort. And, like a parent coddles a babe, at first it had watched over me, holding my hand protectively as I took my first tottering steps as a Descended.

But I wasn't a child, and this world could spare no time for me to learn to walk. My mother and her flameroot powder had taken that chance away.

I was a Queen, with a realm in peril and a populace who needed me, and I would have to do far more than *walk*. Whoever it was that watched over me—the *voice*, the godhood, maybe even Lumnos herself—had forced me to learn a painful but necessary lesson.

Even Luther had told me, but I didn't fully understand until now. *The magic doesn't just answer to you, it's part of you. Be proud of who you are, and embrace it.*

I did not need to surrender to my power in helpless submission, nor did I need to beg it to come save me. All this time, I had been waiting for the godhood to embrace me, when what I really needed to do was embrace *myself*.

Just as I cherished the humanity and love that my mortal family had instilled in me, so too could I wield my immortality, my magic, and my Crown with pride. Both halves were necessary to make me whole, and I would not succeed in this war without accepting them both.

I turned my focus back to Rhon. With barely a thought, the light and shadows in my hands took the shape of two arrows, each one pointed at his chest.

His eyes bulged. He shoved his hands toward me and unleashed the full brunt of his magic. An armory's worth of dark weaponry assailed me from every side.

I didn't bother to raise a shield, and as more and more of his magic connected with my flesh, I had the curious feeling that it was refilling my energy—making me stronger, rather than weaker.

I stood in perfect stillness within his torrent of power. Eventually the forms of his attacks became blurry and misshapen, then hazy, until finally the darkness that trickled from his palms was no more than smoke.

He stumbled over his feet and crashed, quivering, to the sandy ground.

My light magic flared at his ankles and bound them together in a glowing chain, then did the same with his wrists. My shadows twined around his limbs, writhing against him, encircling his neck and tightening like a noose.

The magic seemed so simple now, so blissfully effortless. As easy as flexing a fist, as natural as smiling.

"I didn't even want to Challenge you," he bleated. "No one in my House did. The Hanoverres forced us—they said we would be voted out of the Twenty Houses if we didn't. Even the Warden was with them."

I shook my head and stalked toward him. "It's not your Challenge that has condemned you. I gave you the chance to walk away and let that child live."

"Please," he whimpered, "don't kill me."

"I begged you then, like you're begging me now. You should have listened."

"It's the law!" He looked around in a wild frenzy, as if someone might come running to save him. "I didn't have a choice!"

"I gave you a choice." With a twitch of my finger, the dark rope squeezed his neck. "You chose murder over compassion. Why should I not sentence you to the same fate?"

“Mercy,” he wailed. “My Queen, please have mercy!” He clasped his bound hands together, his head bowed low as he sobbed for clemency.

The crowd’s thirst for violence reached a fever pitch. There was no longer any doubt who was the victor. Rhon had no magic left, and even if he did, it had no effect on me. I had shown that I could wield my magic—and kill with it, if I so desired.

The Challenging was over. I had won.

All that was left now was to take a life.

But as the clamor rose louder, the spectators screaming their demands for death, I found my own bloodlust washing away.

Rhon deserved to die. He had taken two innocent lives in a cruel and unnecessary killing, and he had done it purely to spare himself the embarrassment of being caught.

But he had also done it to protect his House. And while it would never, *ever* be a good enough excuse for the murder of an innocent, these past weeks had shown me how the Descended’s power-crazed society could push people to the darkest corners of themselves.

If I had any hope of leading this realm to peace, I would have to show them there was a better way. I would have to create the better world I wanted to live in, one act of compassion at a time.

I rolled my wrist and let my magic fall away.

“Yield,” I commanded. “Kneel to me and submit.”

“I yield!” he blurted out. He scrambled forward to kneel at my feet. “I am your loyal servant.”

“Swear to me that if I let you walk away from this arena, you will never take an innocent life ever again.”

He took my hands and kissed them. “Never, Your Majesty, I swear it.”

I wrinkled my nose and tugged my hands away. Rhon collapsed to the ground with a moan of relief. I stepped back and raised my voice so the audience could hear my words.

“The true measure of strength is not in the lives we take, but in the lives we save. Rhon Ghislaine, I spare your life today. Take your second chance and use it wisely—do not make me regret my mercy.”

Boos and unhappy mutters rose from the crowd as I denied them the murder they had come here to see. I turned my back to Rhon, then set off toward the stairs, where Luther was waiting for me at the base.

When my eyes met his, I expected to see relief, or amusement, or perhaps a smug *I-told-you-so*.

What I saw was so much more.

Luther gazed at me like I was the embodiment of hope fulfilled. Like I was the answer to every question he had ever asked, the harmony to every song he'd ever sung. He looked at me like I was the sun and the moon and the stars, all the light in the world, shining a path for him out of the lonely dark.

He had believed in me from the very start. Not only because of my magic, but because of my heart—who I was, my courage and my compassion, and my willingness to fight.

If Luther was right about what I was meant to do, then today was only the beginning of the challenges we would face. But today we had won. And if we ever hoped to survive this with our souls intact, we would have to celebrate every victory we could get.

I beamed back at him and let my shoulders relax as weeks of tension washed away. Pride, so much pride, emanated from his features. Just as he had in the vision, he pressed his palm to his chest.

I raised my hand to do the same, but Luther's expression shifted as his eyes darted over my shoulder. His nostrils flared, his muscles pulling tight.

"One last thing, Your Majesty," Rhon's voice called out from behind me.

I spun on my heel to see him barely three feet away, hands clasped behind his back in submission. He nodded his head low and looked up at me through his long, golden lashes.

"Yes?" I asked.

He cocked his head. "The Challenging isn't over until one of us dies."

Rhon pushed off his heel and launched into the air, one arm coming around his back clutching a slim, glittering black knife and thrusting straight for the center of my chest.

I had no time to react. Before I even realized what was happening, the point of his blade had already pierced the fabric of my suit and scraped my skin.

But I didn't need time.

I needed only the whisper of a thought—and then, with a flash of silver light, he was gone. Where a man once stood, there was now a cloud of ash and the faint smell of burnt flesh.

The crowd sat in shocked silence as they—and I—made sense of what had just occurred. Then, slowly, the applause began, then whoops and hollers of approval, growing to a deafening, jubilant roar.

Finally, they had their pound of flesh, and they celebrated it with delight.

The sound of it ignited my fury.

I had tried to show mercy. I had offered them *peace*, something beautiful and human, a chance at a better world, and they had turned up their noses.

Fine.

If I could not persuade them with peace, then I would do it with fear.

I spread my arms in an arc at my sides. A deluge of shadows surged around me, coating the sandy floor with a sea of midnight ink that churned in a raging whirlpool at my feet. Thorny black vines crept up the walls of the arena, then moved higher, their spiked ends tapping ominously against the protective barrier.

An orb of shimmering light formed around me and lifted me on a cushion of air until I hovered high above the ground. Glowing stars swarmed like fireflies, and from my outstretched fingers, jagged bolts of lightning sparked and formed a blinding web of sizzling pale blue.

The audience cowered as my magic thrashed against the invisible wall that protected them from me. Then their terrified faces turned up to something even more alarming.

High above the amphitheater, the sunlit sky began to fade away. There were no clouds in sight, but the sky darkened nevertheless, fading in seconds to pitch-black night.

My skin illuminated with a radiant, moonlight sheen, my hair floating weightlessly around me as I scanned the crowd. Some were frozen in their seats, while others panicked and scrambled for the exits.

I closed my eyes and reached out for the Forging magic that flowed through the soil of the realm. I felt it thrumming all around me, running from border to border and buzzing brightly with all the life that it touched. I allowed my own magic to pour into it until the two energies merged and became one. There was no longer a realm and her Queen, but one single devastating force of nature.

With a snap of my fingers, the protective barrier fell. The invisible wall shattered into a cloud of glowing slivers that swirled and scattered on a

sudden updraft of wind.

In the stands, the spectators fought each other to get away, some going so far as to turn their weapons on members of their own House to beat a path to safety.

That simply would not do.

I jerked my wrists, and the vines coating the arena walls multiplied. Thousands of tendrils whipped out and wrapped around the throats of every Descended in the amphitheater, forcing them to still.

“Your Queen has not dismissed you,” I scolded. My voice sounded different to my own ears. It was cold and ancient, deeply powerful, the timbre of some far more fearsome creature.

“The Challenging is not over until you have judged me and found me *worthy*,” I continued, spitting out the last word with disgust. “If there are any who believe my choice of Challenger was insufficient, or who doubt whether I am strong enough to rule... speak now. I will not give you a second chance.”

My eyes roved over the crowd until they paused on Jean Hanoverre. I crooked a finger, and the vine at his neck pulled taut, nearly yanking him from his seat.

“Well, Jean?” I purred. “Tell me, has my magic *satisfied* you?”

He clawed at the dark cord at his throat. I squeezed it tighter until he was gasping for breath. He quickly nodded.

I hummed in mock consideration. “Perhaps I should kill every Challenger to ensure there is no doubt I could have outmatched any of them. Do you think that’s necessary, Jean?”

“No,” he choked out.

“No, *what*?”

“No, *Your Majesty*.”

My gaze trailed to his grandmother, Marthe. “Will House Hanoverre kneel to its Queen?”

She eyed me with cold consideration, a gleam of defiance still burning in her gaze. I had to respect her tenacity.

“House Hanoverre will kneel, Your Majesty,” she said finally.

“House Benette?” I called out with a glare toward Evrim.

Wisely, he wasted no time in dipping his chin. “House Benette will kneel, Your Majesty.”

I glanced over my shoulder to House Byrnum. I didn't have to do more than lift an eyebrow before Ryx and Ravyn were on their knees and swearing their undying fealty.

I lowered myself to the arena floor. With a sweep of my hands, the dark, choppy sea of magic parted, opening up a path to the stairs. I strode toward them until I stood in front of Luther.

The joyful grin on his face nearly broke me, but I managed to preserve my menacing facade. I wrapped my fingers around the vine that led to his neck, gently tugging him down until his lips hovered over mine.

"And what of House Corbois?" I murmured softly.

His hand slid around the back of my neck and pulled me in for a deep, reverent kiss. "House Corbois will kneel, my Queen," he breathed when we parted.

I released him from my magic and took his hand, and together we climbed the long staircase to the royal box.

When we arrived on the final step, I turned to Remis and Garath. "Uncles," I chirped. "Are we going to have any more problems?"

They shared an unhappy look but held their tongues and shook their heads. I took the amplification device from Remis and turned to face the arena, dissolving the vines that held the crowd at my whim.

"Citizens of Lumnos," I announced, "I am no longer Unchallenged. My reign begins today."

In the distance, the cry of an approaching gryvern, newly freed of her order to stay away, pierced through the air. My smile finally cracked at the sound of Sorae's triumphant roar.

"Kneel before your Queen," I commanded.

And, one by one, they did.

Chapter

Forty-Four

“Does this mean I finally get to call you by your name?”

My lips hooked up at Luther’s question, but I kept my eyes shut, basking in the warmth of the sun on my face and the breeze combing through my unbound hair. The boat rocked softly against the waves as we crossed the Sacred Sea to the island of Coeurîle where the Rite of Coronation would take place.

“I make you my advisor and you’re already asking me for more?” I teased. “How greedy of you, Prince.”

His knuckles grazed the bare skin along my spine, exposed by the low back of my dress. “I did say I wanted all of you.”

“If you insist,” I said with a pretend sigh. “Though I have grown rather fond of hearing you call me ‘my Queen.’”

The heat of his body pressed to my back. One hand curled around my waist and splayed scandalously low on my stomach to pull me against him. The scratch of his stubble tickled my neck as he leaned down to my ear, his tone dark.

“As you wish, my Queen.”

My smile grew wider.

After yesterday’s successful Challenging, my newly forged family had celebrated late into the night. The seven of us laughed and drank and recited the story of my victory again and again, each retelling growing more exaggerated than the last.

There was much about what happened at the Challenging that I still did not understand—things I shouldn’t have been able to do, powers no Lumnos Descended had ever been gifted—and I was well aware that the submission shown by the Houses had been a desperate, insincere act. My fight with them was far from over.

But I was alive.

My brother was safe, and soon, we would be reunited with my mother, thanks to Luther's promise.

The threat of an attack against my loved ones was vastly reduced, with all of Lumnos now terrified of me and my power.

In a few hours, I would be coronated, with the authority to strike down unjust laws and appoint a new generation of leaders.

And I had Luther.

Late the previous evening, after endless rounds of Descended wine had left me drowsy and stumbling, he had swept me into his arms, carried me to bed, and tucked me in with a tender kiss. I'd drunkenly refused to let him leave, and when I'd opened my eyes this morning, he was still there, dozing beside me with my hand clasped in his.

Though the grief of my father's death would be with me always, for the first time in a very long time, the clouds had parted, and I was happy.

Truly, finally, buoyantly *happy*.

There was only one other burden still weighing on my heart: Henri.

Our breakup was long overdue. We'd been drifting apart for months, even before I was revealed as Descended. We'd clung to each other in a desperate need for familiarity in a changing world, but we were no longer the naive girl and carefree boy we'd been when our feelings first took root.

I did care for him, and a part of me always would, but my path, and my heart, led elsewhere.

In truth, when I'd gone to Henri's home the night before the Challenging, I had planned to end our betrothal once and for all. I did not wish to face death leaving either of us bound in an engagement that never should have been.

Though that conversation would have to wait until he returned to Lumnos, I prayed we might find a way to preserve our friendship and work together—for the mortals' sakes, if not our own.

A shadow passed over my face as Sorae circled high above.

"It's a shame I can't ride her to the coronation. I was hoping to see the other Crowns' gryverns." I frowned at Luther. "Sorae really can't set foot on Coeurîle at all?"

"She would die the second she touched the soil," he said gravely. "That's how the Fortos gryvern was killed during the Blood War. The rebels shot a bolt into its wing while it flew above the island. Other than a beheading, or godstone to the heart, it's the only way to kill a gryvern."

I shuddered at the prospect of any of the ancient creatures losing their lives, but especially the majestic one flying overhead, who had become like an extension of my own soul.

Go home, I commanded her. *I'll return soon*.

Her shrill howl of protest echoed the discontent that pulsed across the bond, but she was bound to obey. She reluctantly changed course for Lumnos, the silhouette of her massive winged body fading into the horizon.

"I enjoyed your speech to House Corbois this morning," Luther said as he moved to my side at the bow of the boat. "I'm not sure my father can say the same."

"At least I offered him a second chance."

He waved a hand and conjured a faux circlet of light and shadow above his head. "*It's a new world, Remis*," he mimicked in a haughty voice, "*Get on board, or get out of my realm*."

I turned to tease him for his terrible impression of me, but the sight of Luther in a crown to match mine left me unexpectedly flushed and more than a little breathless.

I looked back out over the water to hide my burning cheeks. "We'll know soon who our allies are. I gave Remis, Garath, and Aemonn until the end of the day to decide if they can support our vision."

"Our vision," he repeated softly. "My entire life, I've worked against the Crown in secret to protect the mortals and half-mortals. I always knew one day I would serve a Queen who shared that goal, but..." His gaze slid to me, bright and gleaming with feeling. "The reality is better than I ever could have imagined."

My blood went hot. I wondered if I would ever, in the centuries that I prayed lay ahead of us, get used to the way it felt to be looked at by him.

I hoped not.

My fingers twitched out in reflex to brush his hand, our bodies always seeming to seek each other out. "How did you know you would serve a Queen with the same goals?"

He took a deep breath. "I think it's time I told you my final secret."

A thrill of anticipation rippled through me, though it cooled at the apprehension lining his features. "I know we agreed on brutal honesty, but if you're not ready..."

"I am ready. I've been ready. I've wanted to tell you this since the day I met you."

I frowned. “Then why haven’t you?”

“Because, while I was ready... you were not.”

I started to argue, but the pain—and relief—on his face kept me quiet. I could sense that guarding this truth, whatever it was, had worn rough on his soul, and he was ready to let it go. I had sworn to trust him, and now it was time to keep my word.

I nodded and wove my fingers through his with a light squeeze to show my support. For a moment, he stared at our joined hands in silence.

“My father’s wife, Avana,” he began, “is not my mother. Not by blood nor any other measure. After their marriage, Blessed Mother Lumnos sent my father a vision that his firstborn son would be the most powerful of the Lumnos Descended and the unquestioned heir to the Crown. However, he was having an affair with a woman named Florille, and she, not Avana, became pregnant first. But Florille...” His gaze lifted to mine. “Florille was a mortal.”

My eyes went wide with sudden understanding. Luther—the beloved, feared, universally respected Prince Luther, the late King’s favored and the hero of the realm—was a forbidden half-mortal, just like me.

No wonder he had been so guarded. And no wonder he had been willing to take such risks to help my mother. This could destroy not only him, but his entire family. If this was the secret my mother was holding over his head, Luther would have been willing to do anything to keep it quiet—even betray his King.

“My father took both women to spend a year at a house in the countryside so that when Florille gave birth, he could pass me off as Avana’s full-blooded Descended child in order to avoid my execution under the progeny laws.” He paused, his features hardening. “It’s not uncommon in the large Houses for parents to be cold to their children, but Avana openly despised me. She wanted nothing to do with me, and for years, I did not know why.”

His eyes turned stormy. “After my birth, my father sent Florille to an institution for the mentally unstable in Sophos to discredit her in case she told anyone about the pregnancy. But she never stopped thinking of me. She never stopped trying to escape and get to me...”

Roughness colored his voice and gripped my heart as it ached for him and the boy he had been. I lifted one of his hands to my lips and pressed a kiss to his knuckles as his fingers tightened around mine.

“Years later, Florille somehow made it back to Lumnos. She waited outside the Descended school with a bouquet of flowers. Even though she hadn’t seen me since I was an infant, she looked at me and somehow knew instantly I was her son, and I knew she was my mother. Meeting her was like coming home for the very first time.” He grimaced, the agonizing effort of reliving these moments evident on his face. “She told me the truth about everything. So much about my life finally made sense—why Avana hated me, why my father had been so insistent that I prepare to be King, even though my magic hadn’t yet come in. Florille wanted to take me out of Lumnos and away from him, but she had no money, and she was too weak and wounded from her escape. For months, I kept her hidden in unused rooms in the palace so she could heal while I saved up gold for a new life.”

His expression darkened. “But I was young and inexperienced with keeping secrets. I had not yet learned to hide my emotions. My father noticed that I suddenly loathed him and Avana. He suspected I’d learned the truth, so one day, he followed me, and he found Florille.

“They began to argue. She threatened to tell everyone the truth if he didn’t let her take me away. So...” He swallowed thickly, face twisting as if the words were an agony to speak aloud. “So he killed her. Or he tried to—until I stepped in front of his attack.”

“Your scar,” I breathed. My hand flew to his chest, and he nodded, covering it with his own.

“His magic ripped my body apart. He thought I’d been killed instantly, but my mother realized I was alive. She threw herself over my body to protect me. He hit her with another bolt of his magic and left us both there to die.”

“Oh, Luther,” I whispered. I snaked my other arm around his waist and pulled him close, laying my head against his chest. His heart was pounding, a tremble in his hands as he clutched me tight.

“That’s when the Blessed Mother appeared. She healed me and told me it was not yet my time. She said her people needed help, and I could bring it to them, if I was brave enough. Then she showed me a vision of myself as a man, kneeling to a powerful grey-eyed Queen.”

I took a sharp breath and pulled back to look at him. “She showed you... me?”

He stared into my eyes like he was looking beyond them and into the past, seeing the vision all over again. “She never showed me a face, only

the eyes. I knew the Kindred had grey eyes, so I believed Lumnos herself was planning to return to Emarion to reclaim her Crown. But when I saw you with Lily that day in the palace, I couldn't help but wonder..."

"That's why you helped me, isn't it? That's why you protected me all those times at the palace and covered for me when you knew I was lying."

He nodded. "I could feel your power, I could sense how strong it was. But you swore you were a mortal, and Maura said she saw your brown eyes as a child. And you said your father was from Fortos, not Lumnos. None of it made sense, but I couldn't stop thinking about you. I felt in my soul that I was meant to help you."

"When we shared that vision the night of the rebel attack, I saw a crown over your head, but it wasn't the Crown of Lumnos. It was something else, something I've never seen before or since. I thought perhaps it was the Blessed Mother's way of telling me you were one of her disciples, like me. Then the King died, and Lily told me the magic had chosen you..." His eyes lingered on my glowing Crown. "I finally understood. *You* are the Queen I was always meant to serve."

"But you came to the lodge that night to kill me," I protested.

"No—I came to swear fealty to you. I had my sword out to offer it in your service. Then I saw you standing there half-naked and spitting fire, the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, and I became..." He smiled guiltily. "...distracted."

My cheeks warmed. "Why didn't you say something? If I had known —"

"Would you have believed me? You hated the Descended, you had no faith in the Kindred, you thought I murdered your mother. To you, I was the enemy."

He was right, I realized. I wouldn't have believed him. I would have accused him of concocting a ridiculous story to win over a new Queen, and it would have pushed me even further away.

He nodded, seeming to read my thoughts. "I decided to prove myself through my actions instead. I wanted to show you that I would serve you, whatever you demanded of me. Even though I failed you at times, I hope you see now there is nothing I would not do for you."

"I do." I cupped his cheek, and he leaned into my touch. "And you never failed me, Luther. Far from it."

I knew nothing would ever erase his guilt over my father's death. I recognized it, because it was the same burden I carried, too. I suspected that even finding and killing the murderer would never truly free either of us from our self-appointed blame.

But we could try. We could learn to forgive ourselves, and begin to heal—together.

"I saw the vision of us again during the Challenging," he said.

"I saw it, too." I frowned, remembering the strange, glowing figure. "The man that spoke to me—did you recognize him?"

Luther shook his head. "He called you '*Daughter of the Forgotten*.' Does that mean anything to you?"

"No, but I've heard it before. My godhood said it just before I got the Crown. So did this woman with black eyes who stopped me in Mortal City the day my mother disappeared. I think it might have been the Umbros Queen, actually. And King Ul—"

"The Umbros Queen was in Lumnos?" he said sharply. "In Mortal City?"

"I think so. She took over my mind, and she knew things about me I didn't even know. And she told me to stop taking the flameroot my mother had been giving me."

"*Flameroot*?" Luther's eyes flew open, his voice heating with anger. "Your mother was giving you flameroot?"

"She gave me a dose of it every day. I think that's how she was able to hide me from the Descended and convince me I was a mortal. I stopped taking it after she went missing."

He recoiled harshly out of reach. His focus darted around while he muttered clipped words under his breath. "That's why you never... and why she wanted to go to... *fuck*." He growled so fiercely the air seemed to vibrate with his wrath. "Blessed Kindred, this explains everything."

"Explains what?"

"Your mother has been manipulating us all with her secrets for too long. She has *much* to answer for, and I'm done protecting her." He snarled and turned to the front of the boat, staring forward with narrowed eyes. "The moment you're coronated, we're going to get her."

His body was quivering, a rope ready to snap, so I didn't push him any further. I was too excited to speak anyway—finally, my mother would be

coming *home*. At long last, I would have answers to all the questions her disappearance had left behind.

We made the rest of the trip to Coeurîle in silence, Luther distant, me eager. Even when our boat slowed to a stop at a wooden pier marked with the sun-and-moon emblem of Lumnos, his attention seemed far away.

He took my hand and led me to the end of the pier, stopping just before our feet hit the lush emerald grass, still verdant despite the winter season. “I wish I had counsel to offer, but King Ulther never revealed what went on within the Kindred’s Temple. That knowledge is only for the Crowns to know. The others will guide you.”

I nodded. A letter had arrived by messenger hawk this morning from the Sophos Crown with the time of the ritual and the rules of visiting Coeurîle—no weapons, no escorts, no gryverns. No other details were provided, save for one cryptic note: *Be prepared to bleed*.

An ominous message, especially considering I—and all the other Crowns—would have no access to our magic while on the island.

“I should have stashed a dagger somewhere,” I grumbled, staring down at my dress. In a nod to my realm, I had opted for a silk gown of pale blue-grey edged with dark embroidered vines and glittering gemstone stars. “Why did I pick *today* to start following rules?”

I took a hesitant step forward. The second my foot touched the soil, a horrible emptiness engulfed my body, as if my very soul had been siphoned out. I tried to conjure some shadows, or reach out to Sorae, or feel the Forging magic of my realm—all of it was simply *gone*.

I rubbed at my chest, the absence already causing a dull ache. Luther cracked a small smile. “Now you see why Descended rarely leave their realm. Being stripped of our magic is disconcerting, to say the least.”

My eyes darted nervously toward the boat. I had every intention of telling Luther about my relationship with the Guardians just as soon as the Rite of Coronation was done and we had a moment to breathe. In the meantime, I’d insisted he thoroughly examine the boat for any suspicious changes this morning, making an excuse about security being so lax that even Lily and Teller could thwart it. Though he’d found no sign of tampering, a nagging worry had me wishing I’d made the time to tell him the full story.

“Be careful out here,” I urged.

He tugged me back toward him onto the pier and slipped a hand into my hair, holding me at his mercy for a rough, passionate kiss that left his woodsy musk in my nose and his taste on my tongue.

“Go get coronated, my Queen,” he murmured against my lips. “We’ve got a realm to save.”

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Chapter Forty-Five

The briny smell of salt and sea followed me as I walked down the gravel path leading away from the pier. The heat of Luther's stare burned into my back until a bend in the trail took me out of his line of sight.

Coeurîle was far larger than I expected. The Emarion Army kept it heavily guarded, as only the nine Crowns were permitted access, so it had never been more to me than a green dot on the horizon.

All we'd been taught in school was that Coeurîle housed the Kindred's Temple, where the sibling gods had conducted the Forging spell that divided Emarion into its realms. However, I knew from the illicit books on mortal history my mother collected that this island had been sacred long before the Kindred arrived.

Many believed the Everflame had once existed here. In the ancient mortal religions, the Everflame was the source of all life and death, an eternally burning tree with branches that scraped the clouds and roots that spread all the way to the Sacred Sea.

According to lore, once the Kindred arrived and decided to anoint themselves as divine rulers, they chopped the Everflame down to make room for their black godstone Temple.

During the Blood War centuries ago, Coeurîle had been a fiercely sought-after prize. Not only was the island symbolically cherished by both sides, it was the only battleground in Emarion where the Descended had to fight the mortals without the benefit of their magic or their gryverns, placing them on near-equal footing.

Some even whispered that the Temple was the source of all Descended magic, and that destroying it would end their reign over mortals for good. With how viciously the Descended fought to keep it out of mortal hands, one could almost believe there was some truth to the rumor.

As I strolled down the trail that wound in and out of grassy hills and through endless fields of bright red wildflowers, it was hard to fathom the

rivers of blood that had been shed over such a sleepy pocket of untamed land.

“You must be our new Lumnos.”

To my right, a woman approached on a separate path. She wore a short, fitted dress made up of a patchwork of different animal hides, and a tall feather collar ringed the back of her neck. Chains that dangled with small bones and sharpened fangs clinked on her wrists as she walked.

I paused where our paths merged. “Faunos?”

Her hips swayed seductively as she spread her arms wide. “Was it that obvious?”

“Lucky guess,” I joked, giving her a shallow nod. “My name is Diem.”

“Not anymore, kitten. On this island, you’re just Lumnos.”

She halted in front of me and propped a hand at the crook of her waist as she looked me over.

“You’re an unexpected surprise. We all thought it would be that angry-looking Prince. You know, the handsome one who looks like he’s never laughed in his life? The old Lumnos said no one else’s power even came close.”

I smiled sadly at her description of Luther. It was exactly how I might have described him myself months ago. Now, the thought of him living joyless and cold for so long plucked painfully at my heart. “I promise you, no one was more surprised than me.”

She inclined her head toward the path and we continued walking. “My representatives said your Ascension Ball was a hell of a show. I hear Umbros was up to its usual beastly behavior.”

I tensed. I knew nothing of the relationships between the Crowns except that the Umbros Queen was distrusted by all. Any sign of alliance with her—say, for example, releasing her representatives from their magical binds—would quickly mark me for suspicion.

“I was glad to see them leave my realm,” I answered honestly.

“Did Sorae like the two treats I sent? I would have sent more, but my Rosha goes through them like candy.” She gave a happy sigh. “I do adore Sorae. She’s got such a sense of humor. Consider yourself lucky, you could have been stuck with that horribly crabby Ignios gryvern.”

I frowned. “You can speak to Sorae?”

“I can speak to all creatures.” She pointed to her Crown, a glowing circle of intertwined fauna that slithered and fluttered and clawed in endless

motion. “Realm of Beast and Brute. It quite literally goes with the territory.”

Scarlet spread over my cheeks. “Right, of course. To be honest, I haven’t given them to Sorae. They were a little... um...”

“Cute and fuzzy? Damn, I knew I should have skinned them first.” She spotted the queasy look on my face and laughed. “The strong feed from the weak, cub. It’s a part of nature.”

“It doesn’t bother you to kill them even though you can speak to them?”

“Humans can speak, it doesn’t stop them from killing each other.” She shrugged. “If I didn’t have magic to control them, the beasts in my realm would eat me, too. Guilt and compassion have no place in the food chain. Only survival.”

Survival at all costs. That goal, my father’s foremost lesson, had guided me through these recent dark obstacles, but to hear the same words spoken now with such callous nonchalance, they felt strangely hollow.

“Speaking of beasts,” she said. Her eyes cast toward another intersecting pathway where a hulking giant of a man lumbered toward us. He was a sentient mountain of muscle, with thighs like redwoods and a brick wall of a chest. His fearsome glare would have made even a mean bastard like Garath cower in fear.

His blood-red irises gave him away, though I would have known the Fortos King from the Emarion Army uniform he wore—albeit a far more embellished version than I’d ever seen. His Crown reminded me of a tangled cluster of veins, rhythmically pulsing like it had a heartbeat of its own.

He grunted as he approached, his eyes dragging over us in cold evaluation.

“You’re looking chipper today, Fortos,” the Faunos Queen purred in greeting. “Aren’t you going to welcome our newest member?”

He leveled me with a stare. “I hear you’re the Bellator child.”

My spine straightened. “Both my parents served in the army. Andrei and—”

“Auralie. I’m aware.”

“You knew them?” I couldn’t help the awe in my voice. Some part of me was still that young, naive girl who glowed with pride that a mighty Descended King had taken notice of her mortal parents.

He made another guttural noise. “You cost me two of my most valuable assets.”

I stared, not knowing what to say—*I’m sorry my existence inconvenienced you?*—until it occurred to me that if he had known about my birth, he might also have known my birth father.

“Do you happen to have any idea who—”

Before I could finish, he pivoted sharply on his heel, striding onward and leaving me blinking in his trail.

The Faunos Queen shot me a sympathetic look. “Don’t take it personally. If you’re not giving him someone to kill, he’s not interested.”

We walked in silence as the path wound on, bordered on both sides by thick brush and tall grass, all of it dotted with the same vibrant crimson blooms.

“What are those flowers?” I asked. “I’ve never seen anything like them on the continent.”

“Kindred willing, let’s hope you never do, or we’d all be doomed.”

“It won’t happen,” the Fortos King cut in from up ahead. “My soldiers have it under control.”

“*Arboros!*” the Faunos Queen suddenly shouted. She pointed accusingly at a blonde woman to our left wearing a halo of interwoven greenery dotted with continuously blooming flowers. “I have a bone to pick with you about our border!”

“Keep your bones to yourself, Faunos.” The Arboros Queen’s voice was sweet, her demeanor demure, but the sparkle in her bright emerald eyes suggested she was anything but meek. “If this is about the mortals again—”

“You know they aren’t allowed in my realm. If they aren’t going to keep to the Ring Road, they have to stay in Arboros.”

“Life is meant to propagate and spread. *You* may insist on defying nature’s course, but I shall not. If your borders need securing, take it up with him.” She gestured to the Fortos King, who seemed to perk up at the prospect of a new battle.

The Faunos Queen practically snarled. “You keep those mongrels out of my jungles, or I’ll make sure no bee or butterfly ever *propagates* in your realm ever again.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she hissed, flinging back her moss-edged cape. “We need those pollinators, Faunos.”

The two women stormed toward each other in a huff, continuing to quarrel. The Fortos King's eyes gleamed eagerly as the exchange grew increasingly laden with threats.

"I'll handle this," he said, stalking off to join them. "You go on ahead."

I looked around at the wide open land. "Go where?"

"Just keep walking. All roads on the island lead to the Temple." He paused and shot me a condescending look. "And don't wander. Until you're coronated, you're not allowed off the path."

I debated staying to watch the spectacle, grinning to myself as I imagined telling the story to Luther later. However, if the King of Fortos did have information on my birth father, provoking his temper was not an ideal way to win his trust.

I walked on and soon lost sight of the others. Over the top of the wild overgrowth, the dark form of the Kindred's Temple came into view. The circular platform rose high above the ground and was edged nearly all the way around by a series of ornate archways topped with tall, thin obelisks. The entire structure was made of a night-black stone that glittered under the rays of the midday sun.

Godstone. A substance stronger than metal and imbued with a deadly toxin that could kill a Descended. No one was certain whether the Kindred brought the godstone from their home world or created it with their divine power, but it was as difficult to find as it was sought-after.

In addition to building their Temple with the mysterious material, the Kindred left behind a cache of weapons crafted of godstone to each of the first Descended Crowns, but after several fell into the hands of mortal rebels during the Blood War, the Crowns agreed to confiscate and destroy them. Though illicit pieces could still be found for outrageous prices on the black market, sightings of it were rare, even for the Descended.

It felt surreal to gaze upon such a large expanse of it now. As my eyes roved over the elaborate architecture, its black stone twinkling like the surface of a sunlit sea, something hovered at the edge of my memory. Something familiar. Something important, but just out of reach.

Nearby whispers reached my ear. I spun around, expecting to see the three Crowns I'd left behind, but there wasn't a soul in sight.

"Hello?" I called out.

My gaze hooked on a flutter of movement in the grass. I crept closer, my focus fixed on the swaying blades as they rippled back to stillness.

“Is someone there?” I shouted.

I stepped off the gravel path and onto the springy soil. A few more steps took me into the tall brush. I nudged at the roots with my toe, hoping to stir up some wild creature to blame for the disturbance.

“Hello?” I said again, softer this time, and took another step. I fell still, the way I’d learned during years of hunting in the forest, honing my eyes and ears for the faintest rustle.

After a long, silent minute, embarrassment rushed through me. Coeurîle was the most well-guarded place in Emarion—what was I expecting to find?

As I turned back, rolling my eyes at my own foolishness, I reached down to snap a handful of the red wildflowers from their spindly stalks. I raised the blooms to my nose and closed my eyes as I slowly breathed in.

My back instantly went stiff.

The smell was crisp and vaguely smoky, the scent of a distant fireplace on a brisk winter night, with a hint of bright citrus. It was an aroma I knew intimately—far too intimately.

My mind was transported back to so many mornings, sitting at the kitchen table, teasing my brother as my mother poured me a cup of tea. I could almost feel the hot steam rising to my lips, the bitter taste on my tongue. And in my mind’s eye, I could spy it there on the counter—a crescent-shaped jar, filled with a powder of vivid scarlet. The very same color as the petals wilting in my fist.

Flameroot.

These flowers had to be the origin of the powder my mother had used to suppress my Descended abilities.

Of course—if the island’s soil could nullify magic, then the flowers must be imbued with that same trait. That would explain why the Fortos King kept it so guarded, and why the other Crowns had been alarmed at the idea of it growing on the mainland.

But if it only grew here, how had my mother obtained so much of it? And why had that knowledge upset Luther so deeply?

A glint of light sparkled deep within the brush, like sunlight reflecting off metal. I strained to peer through the tall foliage. “Hello?” I called out again.

“What the hell are you doing?”

I whipped around at the harsh snap of a masculine voice. The Crowns of Fortos, Arboros, and Faunos were standing behind me.

“I told you to stay on the path.” The Fortos King stormed over and grabbed my arm, swatting the crushed red petals from my hand and dragging me back to the trail. “Those flowers can’t be harvested without the permission of all nine Crowns.”

“I wasn’t *harvesting* anything,” I said archly. “I thought I heard voices, so I was investigating.”

“And you thought the flowers were speaking to you?” the Faunos Queen said with a laugh. “Perhaps you belong in Arboros rather than Lumnos.”

The Arboros Queen’s face turned thoughtful. She walked forward to kneel at a clump of wildflowers and graze her fingertips along their fluffy petals. “I would love to talk to these pretties. I imagine they’ve seen such fascinating things.”

“The plants speak to you?” I asked.

“Not in the way a human speaks. But every living thing has a story to tell, for those with the power to listen.”

The Faunos Queen murmured an agreement, and despite their earlier arguing, the two women shared a knowing look.

“Do the shadows not speak to you, Lumnos?” the Arboros Queen asked. “Does the light not have its own truth?”

The Fortos King pushed me forward. “I don’t have time for this. Let’s get to the Temple so I can return to my realm.”

I reluctantly obeyed. His ire radiated from him for the rest of the walk, leaving me stewing in its heat at his side.

I chewed on my lip. I needed to fix this and restart our interaction on the right foot. His army would be critical in defusing the war.

“Thank you for the gift you sent for my ball,” I chirped with forced enthusiasm. “It was a very fine blade.”

He grunted, his attention never leaving the Temple that loomed nearby.

“The craftsmanship was quite impressive. Was it made by Brecke Holdern, by any chance?”

His gaze cut sharply to me. “How do you know him?”

“He’s a good family friend. He worked with my mother in the army.”

He swiveled to block my path. “Impossible. Brecke didn’t enlist until after your mother left.”

A sinking feeling pooled in my gut. Brecke had lied. But if he hadn't met my mother in the army...

"My mistake," I mumbled. "I... I must be misremembering."

"Brecke disappeared from Fortos earlier this week, along with a very important stash of weapons." His gaze narrowed as he leaned close. "I don't suppose *you* know anything about that."

"Obviously not." I forced a haughty tone into my voice to mask my panic. There was only one reason for a mortal soldier to vanish with an arsenal of Descended weapons.

So much for restarting on the right foot.

The Arboros Queen slid a shoulder between the two of us, placing a delicate hand on the King's chest. "Fortos, making accusations is not how we welcome a new Crown. The poor woman hasn't even been coronated yet."

His garnet eyes sparked with malice. "If she's fraternizing with Guardians..."

"It sounds like you've been *fraternizing* with him, too. Shall we condemn you both?" He shot her a glare that would have decimated a lesser person. She pressed harder, forcing him to yield a step. "Let's finish the Rite. Then we can discuss the matter with cooler heads."

He held his fighting stance a moment longer, his eyes drilling into me in warning, then turned and stalked away.

"Thank you," I breathed. "I had really hoped to get through this without any dramatics or fighting."

The other two Queens shared a look and burst into laughter. "It's a meeting of the Crowns, lamb. Dramatics and fighting are what we do best."



IF THE KINDRED'S Temple had looked imposing from afar, at its base it was outright ominous. The towering obelisks stretched into the sky like the bars of a cage, each topped with a flame-lit cauldron. The distant sound of waves crashing on the shore mixed with the crackling of the nine fires.

No, not nine—one cauldron remained unlit.

I followed the others up the staircase that curved around the platform. The enormous scale of the Temple had me feeling at once insignificant and

powerful beyond measure. There was a grim, lethal energy that buzzed beneath my feet, as if the stone itself were charged with dark magic. The air around me felt somehow ancient, a vacuum where time and space sat in wait and the impossible became reality.

“That’s the Lumnos portal,” the Arboros Queen said, nudging me toward the stone arch beneath the unlit cauldron.

“How do I know what to do?” I asked.

“Sophos leads the rituals. They’ll guide you through the process. Just stand outside of your portal until the other Crowns arrive.” She patted my arm, her kind eyes giving off a warmth of spirit that eased my nerves.

Several of the other Crowns had already arrived. My neighbors to the south, of course—Fortos, Faunos, and Arboros—stood at my right, and across the dais, Sophos and Meros had their heads bent in conversation.

The Meros King looked every bit the charming rogue his representatives had been. He wore casual attire, as if he’d decided to swing by on a whim in the midst of a long sail. Bright aquamarine eyes sparkled as they raked over me and winked. His dazzling smile shone bright against his warm, dark skin, and a coronet of cresting, foam-capped waves topped his beaded dreadlocks.

The Crown of Sophos was unique in every way. Neither overtly masculine nor feminine, but some rare beauty all their own, they were dressed in a fine pantsuit of silk brocade, the long tail of their jacket stretching into a floor-length train that splayed like a gown at their feet. Their androgynous features were delicate but reserved, divulging nothing of the thoughts hiding behind their shrewd, blush-colored eyes. Floating above their clean-shaven head sat a ring of crackling sparks that splintered out like lightning.

“Congratulations on your ascension, Lumnos,” they announced. “We’re pleased to welcome you to the Temple.”

On the surface, they were offering me nothing untoward—their voice was smooth and amiable, their expression soft, their words diplomatic—but my instincts hissed in my ear, warning me to beware.

And if there was one lesson of my father’s I would never fail to heed, it was to always trust my instincts.

I gave a simple nod in acknowledgement and offered nothing further.

Their eyes thinned at my lack of response. “I’ve learned so much about you already,” they continued. “The story of your upbringing is simply

fascinating.”

I gritted my teeth, and their smile grew at the reaction.

“I do hope to meet that mortal brother of yours soon. I hear he’s very clever.”

“He’s not interested,” I snapped. More than one eyebrow arched around the assembled group.

“How do you have a mortal brother?” The King of Ignios, wearing a crisp robe of cream-colored linen edged with sand-colored embroidery, sauntered into place beneath his archway.

His voice was as rough as the man it belonged to. His reddish skin was leathered and lined with age beneath a black, wild-growing beard, and his orange irises glowed almost as brightly as his halo of dancing flames.

“Half-brother,” the Sophos Crown answered on my behalf. “Her mother was a mortal.”

The Ignios King looked me over in disgust. “I thought your realm killed off all the half-breeds.”

“It seems our new Lumnos is an exception to the rules,” the Sophos Crown mused.

“Oh, you have *no* idea.”

I knew her voice instantly—the Queen of Umbros.

It had been eight months since I’d first heard it in my head that afternoon in the alley, but it had haunted my dreams ever since. Some nights I still woke up in a cold sweat with the lingering terror of being a prisoner in my own mind, unable to control my body or even my own thoughts.

Although her voice was familiar, her appearance was not. The hunched octogenarian I remembered was now a woman so beautiful, my breath stuck in my throat at the sight.

She was still on the mature end for a Descended, but age had done nothing to temper the striking mix of her full lips, long ebony hair, and hourglass silhouette. A strip of shimmering wine-colored gossamer clung to her curves, covering up only enough dark olive skin to leave her decent. Above her head, a circle of dark wisps writhed like smoke from a blown-out match, matching her mysterious allure.

“Umbros,” the Sophos Crown said coolly. “How nice of you to grace us with your presence this time. We missed you at the Forging Day ceremony.”

The black pools of her eyes rolled skyward. “I sent a vial of blood, did I not? Clearly you were able to complete the ritual without me.”

“That’s not how this works. Just because we made an exception to accommodate the old Lumnos’s illness does not mean you can pick and choose which rituals you wish to attend.”

“Calm yourself Sophos, it was one Forging Day out of hundreds. I had somewhere important to be that afternoon.” Her gaze slid to me as she smiled, and a shiver rolled down my spine. “I’m here now. Wouldn’t miss *this* ceremony for the world.”

I awkwardly shifted my weight. With mischief in her eyes and a knowing smirk on her lips, she clearly didn’t share my desire to hide whatever connection she and I had, but the others seemed unphased by her odd behavior—and she was far from the only Crown staring me down.

The sound of shuffling drew my attention to an elderly man leaning heavily on a gnarled wooden walking stick as he struggled through a slow ascent up the Temple stairs. The ring of jagged, sparkling ice shards above him marked him as the final Crown, the King of Montios. Though the others cast a bored glance in his direction, none made any movement to help him.

I frowned and stepped back from my archway. The chattering instantly fell silent as I moved to the man’s side and offered him my arm. He swatted me away, grunting as he dragged his frail, bony form up a step and paused for breath.

“May I assist you?” I asked.

He ignored me and leaned forward to attempt another step, but his momentum failed him, and his balance wobbled precariously in the wrong direction. I threw out an arm to steady him, and he slapped it with surprising strength.

He reared his walking stick back and I flinched in anticipation of a swing, but the moment his lavender eyes raised to mine, they bulged wide and his arms went slack. Beneath his bushy white eyebrows and the scraggly beard that extended nearly to his knees, his excitement as he gawked at me was unmistakable.

He raised a hand, his skin ice cold and spotted with age, and pressed a palm against my temple. His thumb tugged at the skin on my cheekbone as he peered into my eyes, his own still round with awe.

His attention shifted to my hair. His knobby fingers trailed down my loose white tresses, then to my skin. He snatched my bare forearm and pulled it into a spot of direct sun, twisting my arm back and forth and frowning at whatever it was he saw.

His gaze rose back to my eyes, lingering for a moment before settling just above my head as his frown deepened.

“Is something wrong?” I asked him.

“He doesn’t speak,” the Sophos Crown interjected. “At least not to anyone outside his realm. And he lives on the side of a mountain, so I doubt he needs your assistance with a single flight of stairs.”

I ignored them and remained at the man’s side. He seemed so frail, a strong wind might carry him away. I had a sneaking suspicion that he normally relied on his magic to ease his mobility, but his pride would not permit him to let any weakness show in front of the other Crowns.

“As the newest Crown, it would be a great honor if you would permit me to escort you, Your Majesty,” I said, adding a deep bow for effect. I’d worked with stubborn patients like him, and I knew exactly how to play to their egos.

He sighed and sniffed an acceptance as he finally took my hand. I bit back a smile and steeled my arms to mask the heavy weight he leaned into me.

We slowly made our way to the top, the two of us shuffling silently until he stood under the Montios archway, marked with a snow-capped mountain carved into the glossy stone floor. I offered him a small smile before I let go and turned away.

“Good luck, Daughter of the Forgotten.”

It was barely more than a whisper. When I spun back to see the Montios King staring into the center of the Temple, my presence seemingly forgotten, I started to wonder if I’d imagined it.

“Why did you call me that?” I breathed. “Where did you hear—”

“Get back to your portal Lumnos, I don’t have all day,” the Fortos King sniped.

My eyes darted around to the other Crowns. They were barely paying attention, their expressions impatient and uninterested.

All except for the Queen of Umbros and her intense, knowing gaze.

“We’re all present Lumnos, we’re simply waiting on you,” the Sophos Crown added.

The Montios King shooed me off with a mute dismissal. Reluctantly, I returned to my archway.

The Kindred's Temple served as a symbolic map of Emarion. Each of the nine arches pointed toward its respective realm. In addition to being etched on the godstone floor, the realm emblems were also carved deep into the tall obelisks, where they glowed as if lit from within.

In the center of the open-air rotunda, representing the island of Coeurîle, a low pedestal held a large, rough-hewn stone. It was glassy on its smoother faces, the smoky color so dark it appeared black, though a faint glow seemed to emanate from within.

Even from a distance, I felt the magic radiating from it. It reminded me of how I felt whenever Luther walked into a room, his immense power both calling others to its force while warning of its threat, pushing and pulling all at once. It had made him terrifying and irresistible, and as I gazed into the inky depths of this stone, I felt that same dangerous attraction.

The Sophos Crown began to speak.

"Millenia ago, when the Blessed Kindred arrived on this continent, they brought with them a piece of their home world we now call the *heartstone*. They shed their blood on this heartstone to Forge a mighty spell that created our nine realms." They gestured to the central pedestal. "This is our most precious secret, the truth that each of us guards with our lives. For if the heartstone is destroyed, so too shall our realms crumble and fall."

Eight gazes sharpened on me in challenge as the gravity of the words hit me. This was the secret to the downfall of the Descended and their reign. The flameroot may weaken, the godstone may kill, but only the heartstone could put an end to their rule forever.

I fought furiously to suppress my smirk. They should *never* have told me this.

"If it's so important, shouldn't it be more heavily guarded?" I asked lightly.

The Fortos King scowled. "It's safe here. No one gets on or off this island without my knowledge."

The Umbros Queen let out a soft chuckle.

"It's not as fragile as it looks," the Faunos Queen said. "It isn't affected by weapons, hammers, magic, even gryvern fire. It can't be lifted. Can't even be touched, unless you want to lose a hand."

I squinted my eyes curiously at the stone. “Why is it so important—what does it do?”

“The Kindred’s elemental magic is blood magic. Anyone who shares their blood inherits those abilities. But there’s also a second kind, a magic of life and death that flows through everything—the earth, the air, every plant and creature. The heartstone acts as a conduit between those two forces. It allowed the Kindred to weave their magic into this world and control how it can be used.”

“Why does the heartstone work here when our magic doesn’t?”

“Because that’s how the Kindred willed it,” the Fortos King snapped. “Now shut up so we can finish.”

“We can discuss it more *after* the ritual,” the Sophos Crown agreed, pulling their shoulders back as they resumed their script. “The Kindred bid us to renew their spell by shedding our blood into the heartstone on two occasions—once each year, on Forging Day, and once upon the coronation of each new Crown.” They swept out an arm. “May the loyal children of the sacred nine pass through these portals in peace. Let us begin.”

The Sophos Crown walked through their archway until they stood above the insignia of their realm, then gestured to their left for the Meros King to follow. One by one, each Crown repeated the movement.

When my turn came to step forward, I again felt their eyes fix on me. I held my breath and stepped into the inner sanctum.

Immediately, the powerful energy radiating from the heartstone seemed to lift its head and turn its gaze toward me. The magic in the air clung to my skin, at first merely brushing with curious interest—then, gradually, the sensation began to change.

Its light caress became stronger, fiercer, hotter. Invisible boiling-hot hands gripped at me and *squeezed*. I fought desperately to conceal my reaction with a false smile and a shrug, but in the midst of my panic, my eyes found the Umbros Queen’s, and I could tell from her grin she knew what I was hiding.

My hands fisted as I braced for her to expose me. I could fight my way out—the odds were grim, but I was likely the only one used to relying on physical combat. And I was fast—if I could get to Luther, we might stand a chance.

But as the Montios King hobbled forward and the Sophos Crown launched into another droning monologue, I realized the moment had

passed. The magic was still making every breath and movement a painful battle, but I had escaped the Crowns' scrutiny.

I dared another look at the Umbros Queen. She was still watching me with that infuriating smile, her eyes still gleaming with the silent taunt that she knew something I didn't want her to know.

"...and as we welcome a new Crown of Lumnos, let the magic of the Forging be strengthened once more."

The Sophos Crown strolled to the pedestal and pulled a short-bladed dagger from a sheath at their hip. The handle was set with a series of milky white gemstones. As they pulled the blade across their palm, the creamy stones turned a pale shade of rose matching the color of their eyes.

They held their hand out and squeezed it into a fist, allowing a crimson trickle to fall. The moment the blood hit the heartstone's glassy surface, the obelisk above the Sophos portal glowed brighter, and the fire in its cauldron hissed, its pink-hued flames stretching higher into the sky.

The Sophos Crown pulled a handkerchief and wiped the blade clean, then turned to the King of Meros and beckoned him forward to repeat the process. This time, the dagger's stones darkened to turquoise, and the glowing blue-green fire of the Meros portal roared with renewed vigor.

As the ritual continued around the circle, the excruciating assault from the heartstone's angry aura did not relent, and my head pounded as it wore on my strength. My senses were screaming at me to leave the Temple and get as far from the heartstone as I could.

I gritted my teeth and held my ground. If the magic guarding the Temple had let me enter, then it must not be able to keep me away completely. I only needed to suffer long enough to complete the Rite of Coronation. The destruction of the heartstone, and the Descended monarchies along with it, could wait for another day.

Finally, my turn came, and all eyes again settled on me. I shuffled stiffly toward the center, feeling like I was trudging through boiling tar. When I reached the podium, I was nearly panting with effort. I glanced over my shoulder to the Lumnos portal, its obelisk dark and its cauldron empty.

"Child of Lumnos," the Sophos Crown began, "may your blood now reignite the flames of your realm. With this ritual, your reign begins. May you serve your people well."

"I will," I murmured, and though the heartstone may have doubted my intentions, I meant that vow with all my heart.

I held my hand out, and the Sophos Crown dragged the jeweled blade across my flesh. My senses were already so overwhelmed by the agony of the Temple's power that I barely felt the cut, though a tremor shook through my arm, knocking a single glittering droplet over the side of my palm and onto the glossy stone.

An earsplitting crack of thunder shattered the air. Out of nowhere, grey clouds rolled into place, blocking the sun's light and blanketing the sky with a menacing shadow.

I shot a questioning look at the Sophos Crown. Their eyes were fixed on the blade in their hand, its opalescent stones now a smoky grey.

"Blue," they whispered. "The stones should be *blue*."

A series of popping sounds rattled around us as each of the obelisks and their fires died out, leaving the Temple cast in murky darkness. My hand jolted in surprise, squeezing instinctively into a fist. A thin trail of blood seeped through my fingers and onto the heartstone.

A bolt of lightning rocketed down from the heavens and into the jagged rock, sending up a cloud of sparks that had me staggering backward and tumbling onto the floor. The other Crowns shouted and clung to their archways while the ground quaked with a shockwave that rippled out from the Temple across the island.

When the chaos quieted, I scrambled back to my feet. The burning pressure of the heartstone's defensive magic had vanished, leaving me lightheaded and shaky.

"You," the Sophos Crown gasped. They stared at me in terror, eyes wide, their face deathly pale. Their horrified gaze dropped to the heartstone, and my blood froze solid.

The rock had been carved straight through. A gash ran down the center, leaving a web of tiny fractures splintering through the night-black stone.

"You did this," they barked. "You broke the heartstone."

"I—I didn't—I couldn't," I stammered. "I only did what you told me!"

Their eyes shifted from surprise into a dangerous fury. They raised a single quivering finger, pointed in accusation. "You are not the Queen of Lumnos. You are an *imposter*."

I shook my head and backed away, looking frantically around to the other Crowns and hoping for one of them to come to my defense. They were all frozen in shock, equally unable to make sense of what they had just seen.

All except the Queen of Umbros.

Her face was smooth with perfect calm and that cold, all-knowing smile.

“Her,” I yelled, pointing in her direction. “*She* did this! She knows something, she came to Lumnos and she—”

A flash of coppery red caught my eyes.

And a voice.

A voice I knew and loved on a soul-deep level. A voice I had been praying to hear again for eight long months. A voice calling my name as if my very life depended on me hearing it.

Just outside the Kindred’s Temple in the wild overgrowth beyond, her brown eyes bulging and her face twisted in fear, my mother sprinted toward me with arms extended.

“Diem!” she screamed. “*Diem, run!*”

And with a deafening boom and a blast of fire and rubble, everything exploded.

And my world went black.

Epilogue

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ELSEWHERE ON COEURÎLE...

When the first Crown climbed the Temple steps, Auralie Bellator's heart nearly burst with joy.

For eight months, she had been hiding out on this awful island, living in solitude among the shadows of her past and counting every passing day. Finally, her patience was coming to fruition. In a matter of hours, gods willing, she would be wrapped in her husband's arms and holding her two precious children close once more.

The time away from her family had been a torment. She had woken up every morning with their names on her lips, and fallen into dreams every night with their faces burned into her thoughts. Perhaps if she had known how long she would be gone, she might have reconsidered her mission, or at least taken the risk of telling them her plan.

She wondered where they were now. Did they still believe her to be alive—did they hold out hope for her return? The thought of the happiness on their faces when she walked back through the door of their humble cottage on the marsh brought a wide smile to her lips.

They would be angry, of course. She was prepared to face their resentment and their demands for answers. She could only hope they would eventually come to understand how important this mission had been, how necessary their sacrifice for the greater good.

Another Crown emerged at the top of the Temple steps, and Auralie's heart skipped a beat.

So close. She was *so close* to going home.

She leaned as far out of the brush as she dared, straining to make out which Crowns were present. Her eyes watered and burned under the bright sunlight. Over the past months, she had become nocturnal, moving under the cover of night to avoid being spotted by the army ships just off the island's shores. She silently cursed herself for not taking a few days to let her vision readjust to the strength of the midday sun.

She sank back into the cover of the tall grass and closed her eyes. She took a mental tour across the island, retracing her steps over the last few months to confirm no evidence of her identity could have been left behind.

After today, the Crowns would be scouring the island for clues, and she could not risk leading them back to her—or her family.

She peered into the heavy satchel at her side. A heap of jars containing bright red powder filled the bag to its brim. Another sizable stash was hidden in a shallow pit near the Lumnos dock. If all went to plan, she would grab it before escaping, leaving her with a decade-long supply—but if things went all to hell, she at least had this small batch to get her daughter through a few more years of hiding.

Though *hiding* would not last much longer. Even flameroot couldn't quicken Descended aging. Soon, Auralie would be forced to unearth some truths she'd spent the last two decades desperate to keep buried. But not today—and with any luck, not for years to come.

A slight rustle of grass from behind her gave away that she was no longer alone.

Before she could react, a hand clamped over her mouth. Another hand wound around her ribcage, pinning her arms to her sides, and hauled her up against a man's chest of rock-hard muscle.

She didn't bother trying to scream—no one on this island would be coming to save her. Instead, she thrashed like a wildcat, ramming her elbow backward into his ribs and flinging her head back to smash against his face. He yielded nothing, as immovable as stone, taunting her with a low chuckle.

"Now I see where your daughter gets it."

She stilled, the words chilling her to the bone.

The scent of moss and cedar wafted to her nose as the man growled in her ear. "You have a great deal of explaining to do, Auralie Bellator."

As recognition washed over her, the terror in her veins turned to ice. She let her body go slack, and the man's grasp loosened and released her. She jerked a blade from the sheath at her hip and spun to face him.

"If you hurt my Diem, I'll—"

"Hello?" a voice rang out from nearby.

He raised a finger to his lips to shush her as his eyes darted in the direction of the path. She raised the blade higher until the point was an inch from his neck, her glare hardening.

His focus lowered to the blade. The tense feathering of his jaw coaxed a vicious smile to her lips.

"Is someone there?" the voice asked.

Something about it poked at the corner of her mind in alarm, the nagging fear of a burning candle left forgotten at home. Her eyes wandered curiously in its direction.

The man took advantage of her distraction and clamped his hand around her wrist in a vicelike hold. “Drop the blade,” he mouthed, his fierce eyes flashing in warning.

She shook her head, and his grip tightened to a bruising pressure. Her arm barked in pain, but she fought against the reflex to let go.

The wall of foliage enveloping them rustled as someone moved closer. They crouched in unison, bodies still locked in mid-scuffle, both of them sinking into the shadow of the wild-growing grass.

A soft glow illuminated the brush. Just above the tall vegetation, Auralie caught a glimpse of dark vines and twinkling stars. Her eyes went wide.

The Crown of Lumnos.

Her gaze snapped to the man, suddenly aware of the vacant space above his head. *Impossible*. There was no other candidate, no one else even close. But if he had not taken the Crown...

“Hello?” the voice said again.

Auralie barely allowed herself a breath, though her mind was racing. The voice was feminine—so Lumnos had a Queen. But if Prince Luther had not inherited the Crown, how could he be here on the island?

He had been relentless in reminding her that his ascension as King was not guaranteed, and if it didn’t come to pass, he would have no way of smuggling her back into the realm. She had pretended to debate the risk, but in truth, she had never intended to rely on him for a safe return.

She had her own plans for that.

But Luther could have only come today with the permission of the new Crown—and he seemed as desperate to avoid being discovered by her as Auralie was. Had he snuck onto the island to rescue her—or had he come to silence her forever so the new Queen never discovered his secrets?

The voice struck up again, and this time it was joined by a new one, harsh and masculine. Auralie didn’t need Luther’s warning glare to know that a discovery by a foreign King would be the kiss of death for them both.

The Crowns moved further away, their arguing voices joined by two more women, and soon the conversation faded into the distance. Auralie’s

shoulders sagged with relief. Even Luther's tightly drawn posture softened, but his punishing grip held fast to her wrist.

"Who is the new Queen?" Auralie whispered.

Luther's eyes narrowed and jumped around her face, searching for something, but he didn't respond.

"Is she an ally or an enemy?" she pushed.

A deep crease formed between his brows. "You truly don't know?"

"I've been trapped on this island. How could I possibly know?"

His hold on her arm loosened slightly. "This wasn't some part of one of your plans?"

"My *plan* was for you to be King." She dared a peek above the brush to see the Crowns now gathering at the Temple. "You need to go. You can't be here."

"*You* need to go," he growled, tugging her toward him. "If anyone spots you on this island, they'll have you killed. Let's get back to the boat, and I'll explain everything."

She dug her heels into the soil to hold her ground. "Leave me be, Luther. I know what I'm doing."

"Whatever plan you think you had, the situation has changed." His gaze flitted briefly toward the Temple. "Your family needs you, Auralie. It's time to go home."

He pulled at her arm again, and again she resisted. Their eyes locked in a war of obstinate glares, two predators daring the other to bite first. He swore softly and released her. "You're as stubborn as your daughter. And just as determined to get yourself killed."

Her heart stuttered. She jabbed the knife closer to his neck. "What did you do to my daughter? If you hurt her—"

"I would *never*," he snarled.

The vicious insistence in his tone took her by surprise. He'd had no trouble making veiled threats against her family in the past, especially after she'd blackmailed him with his own family secrets.

"I am helping your daughter," he hissed. "If you want to protect her, you need to come with me."

There was a surprising sincerity in his tone, and for some reason, she found herself believing him.

But she couldn't go. She'd come too far, sacrificed too much. If she didn't see this plan through, she might never have another chance, and then

there was no telling how many innocent lives would pay the price.

“I’m doing this for her,” she answered. “And for my son, and my husband, and all of the mortals like them.” She shoved her satchel into his arms. This wasn’t part of the plan, but it would have to be enough. “If I don’t return, give this to my daughter. Now go—and don’t turn back, no matter what you hear.”

He glared. “Auralie...”

“I’m sorry.” She could only hope her own sincerity shone through those words as she dove forward and sliced the blade across his ankles, severing his tendons.

He shouted and fell backward. She wasted no time in bolting away at a dead sprint. She had a short window to act before his healing abilities closed the wound and restored his ability to chase her down.

By then, it would be too late to stop her plans.

She no longer bothered with any attempt to stay hidden. She leapt onto the path and ran in a desperate race against time.

A fleeting glance at the Temple’s dais confirmed the Rite of Coronation had already begun. Perfect—all nine Crowns were in place.

She’d made arrangements to keep the Crown of Lumnos protected, but only if they matched Luther’s description. A pang of uncertainty needled her at that thought. If this woman was working with Luther, perhaps she deserved to be spared. An alliance with a Crown would be a powerful tool.

It was too late now. Whoever this new Queen was, she was on her own. If the gods wanted her alive, they would have to protect her themselves.

A deafening thunderclap tore through the sky. Auralie stumbled and skidded to her hands and knees. The tiny rocks on the gravel path sliced into her palms, bringing beads of blood to the surface.

The sunlight around her dimmed with impossible quickness. In the span of a breath, the blue, cloudless sky was a hazy fog of grey. This was no natural weather event—it must have something to do with the ritual, which meant she was running out of time.

She scrambled to her feet and ran to the back side of the Temple, shoving aside the piles of dried leaves she had carefully laid out to conceal the long black cord of the fuse. Her hands trembled violently as she pulled her few remaining matches from the pouch at her waist, the lot of them tumbling to the dirt before she could take hold.

She dropped to her knees, forcing herself to take a deep breath and steady her hand. The first match scratched against the Temple's shimmering black stone walls—once, twice, three times—before snapping in her fingers.

She swore and grabbed a second match. Her heart nearly leapt from her chest as it caught fire on the first strike. She held the match to the tip of the fuse. A bright orange flame caught and began to zip rapidly along its length.

A crack of lightning split through the sky. The electric thrum of it crackled in the air and raised the hair on her arms.

Her pulse pounded in her ears. She launched into a sprint due east, her sharp focus fixing on the makeshift shelter she'd constructed. She threw herself behind it and yelped in surprise as she collided with a large, masculine body.

"Vance," she gasped, grabbing his arm. "You made it."

Her old colleague nodded solemnly. "Did you get all our plans completed here?"

"Every last one. It should only be seconds now."

She turned back to the Temple and strained to see what was happening with the Crowns. Two of them were standing near the central pedestal, just beside the strange rock that had left her hand blistered and grey, though one was blocked by a column.

Vance was still staring at her, his posture curiously still. "Auralie, there's something you need to know."

"It's going to have to wait, Vance."

"Auralie," he started again, an edge to his voice.

But before she could give him her attention, the person at the Temple's center shifted to the right, revealing a full view of the woman standing beneath the glowing Crown of Lumnos.

Auralie's heart stopped.

Long, wavy white hair.

Grey, terrified eyes.

A face she knew and loved more intimately than any other in existence.

"Diem," she breathed.

She bolted to her feet, no longer caring if she was in the path of the bomb's—

Oh gods. *The bomb.*

“Diem!” she shouted.

“Stop,” Vance hissed. “You’ll ruin the mission!”

He lunged to grab her. She yanked away just in time, leaping over the shelter and running for the Temple with a fiery panic burning her from the inside out. Tears streamed down her face as she sent out a desperate prayer to the gods.

“Diem!” she shrieked, again and again, her throat nearly bleeding with the force of her cries.

On the Temple’s dais, her daughter’s eyes turned to her and flared wide.

“Diem!” Auralie screamed. “*Diem, run!*”

And with a deafening boom and a blast of fire and rubble, everything exploded.

To be continued....

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Diem's journey continues in Heat of the Everflame, book three in the Kindred's Curse Saga, releasing September 2023 and [available for pre-order now](#) on Amazon.

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Acknowledgments

If Spark was a book about forging your own path, then Glow is a book about self-acceptance. Sometimes we are our own biggest obstacles, and it's not until we push past the doubts that hold us back and accept ourselves in full that we find the freedom to be our most powerful.

It's also a book about prejudice and the complexities of fighting for justice. As in the real world, many of the characters in this series have good intentions, but they are also blinded by their own privileges, biases, and emotions. Confronting those things in ourselves is often just as important—and can be just as difficult—as fighting injustice in others, especially for those of us who want to be allies to marginalized and oppressed people.

My hope is that these books will not only be fun to read, but will also inspire you—to love yourselves, to love others, and above all, to never stop fighting.

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Finally, to anyone reading this: When things are dark and you can't find the light, just keep fighting, little flame. The world needs your glow.

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About the Author



Penn's life has taken her through many ups and downs, but her love for literature has forever been her true north. Ever since she was a child, she has been filling mountains of notebooks with elaborate worlds, feisty women, and angsty romances.

After a detour as an artist, attorney, and small business owner, she is thrilled to finally have accomplished her lifelong dream of becoming an author.

Although Penn is a Texas girl born and bred, she currently lives in France with her husband, where she can usually be found sipping wine and eating far too many pastries.



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