



Daughter of the Ninth Line: Part One

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Description: Every year, on the first day of spring, each of the Twelve Lines of Ebrus sends a conscript to enrol in Boellium War College, the training ground for Ebrus' Dawn Army. Some come willingly, others not so much.

Avalon Halhed had two goals: lie low and survive her conscription at Boellium War College, and then retire to be an eccentric old woman in a run down cabin in the secluded mountains of her family's lands. To achieve those goals she had keep herself apart from the other conscripts and not draw attention to herself. No friends. No connections.

However, as days turn into weeks, Avalon fails at remaining a shadow to haunt the halls of Boellium. Instead, she draws the gaze of two of the most powerful people in all of Ebrus. They look at her and see too much, and that terrifies her most of all.

Because what if they see past Avalon Halhed, unwanted daughter of the Ninth Line, and right down to her secrets? Secrets that killed her mother and made her father hate her?

Secrets that would make the whole country of Ebrus want her dead if they knew?

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One

Avalon

Conscription Day - The First Day of Spring

There was blood pooling on the cobblestone entrance of the Boellium War College. I shouldn't be surprised, given the baying of the crowd jammed into the front courtyard, and the man suspended in the air, bleeding steadily from his nose. The ruby liquid fell in huge drops, splashing on the ground beneath him with a gruesome dripping sound. Once the puddle of blood became too much, someone with water abilities seemed to wash it away.

That would definitely explain the pink stones.

The guy in the air, bound with invisible ropes, looked at me imploringly. "Help me," he gasped weakly.

I met his eyes, keeping my face shuttered and neutral, then timed my steps to walk under his blood droplets so they didn't splatter on me.

Someone huffed a laugh, and someone else muttered, "That's cold," but I ignored them all. I wasn't here to be someone's savior. I wasn't here to change the status quo.

I was here because I was the useless daughter.

Every one of the Twelve Lines had to enrol a child into the Boellium War College

every year, and once a decade, it had to send a young person from the leading family of that Line. If I had to guess at their reasoning, I'd say it was so they didn't all send simple farmers' sons and create an army of uneducated cannon fodder.

Some Lines sent their most gifted children, either physically or mentally, in the hopes they could make advantageous connections or better still, marriages.

But that was for the Upper Six Lines. I was the youngest daughter of the current Baron of the Ninth Line. I was barely better than pond scum to these people. The only thing worse would be if I was from the Twelfth.

So I didn't care who was hanging up there, dripping blood for the cause; I couldn't help them. I didn't want to help them. I wanted to learn to fight, then go home to where there were fewer people and smaller egos.

I'd spent hours reading journal accounts of prestigious Ninth Line warriors, who talked about coming to Boellium War College like it was the best and worst time of their life, so I knew what to expect. I knew this was part of the hazing, helping to sift the weak of stomach and will from the strong contenders.

I knew that a little blood was going to become an everyday occurrence for me. That was why I kept walking. It's why I avoided the eyes of the milling crowd, and closed my ears to their muttered commentary.

I wasn't cold. I was realistic. A tender heart in Boellium would soon bleed out, and then it would be their blood painting the courtyard's cobblestones red. That wouldn't be me.

I hefted my pack further onto my back and pushed through the heavy front doors. Again, I wasn't surprised that there was more carnage to walk through. There was a delicate balance in the power structure of this institution, and in the Lines themselves.

I didn't see him in the crowd in the courtyard, but the second son of the First Line would be out there, traumatizing the new recruits like it was his right, and I guess it was. The ruling family of the First Line, the Vylan family, ruled Ebrus with unwavering ruthlessness, maintaining their position of power through any means necessary, including their elemental abilities.

Means like suspending a man in the air and slowly allowing him to exsanguinate.

However, the second show of power would come from the next most politically powerful family. The Third Line. The Second Line had been assassinated by the First Line centuries ago, thus securing their power as the ruling body forever. None of us could stand against their rule, and really, none of us tried.

That made them sound like dictators, but they weren't so bad. They were ambivalent to the country outside of the Upper Six Lines, and their own lifestyles. They left the rest of us alone, except for taxes and the conscription of one person per year per Line to Boellium.

A deep growl let me know that my mind had wandered, which was dangerous in this institution. In front of me were two large hounds, easily coming up to my shoulders. Their fangs were bared, their ears pinned back. My limbs locked, but my face didn't so much as flinch, a skill I'd been working on for as long as I could remember.

I didn't think the college administration would let them tear me apart, but how could I really know? Still, I stood my ground, staring down those hounds, until a whistle pierced the air and they turned, moving with purpose toward their master.

I'd passed whatever test that was; it equally could have been an assessment of my courage or a measurement of my bladder control.

The Taeme family of the Third Line were the Lords of the Beasts, and rumor had it,

they were little more than animals themselves. If the Vylans were cold as an ice wind, then the Taemes were their polar opposite. Hot-blooded and uncontrollable.

I was going to stay out of the way of all the Upper Six Lines. I meant less than nothing to them, and I intended to do my two years here at the war college and return home, not even a blip on their radar.

Forgettable. That's what I was aiming for.

As I walked through the large atrium toward the administration offices, the hollering in the room echoed like a madhouse. Screams and cries, fighting animals and chilling sounds of pain. It grated along my already tightly strung muscles, but I kept my face impassive. This was nothing. The first few steps in going back to my life.

Show no weakness. I'd repeat it like a mantra until I believed it.

That was going great, until just outside the door I needed to pass through was a large war cat of some kind, cornering what looked like a stolt, a weird little hybrid between a tiny ferret and a rat, but a unique purple color.

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They were elusive, and avoided people, so I knew someone must have brought it here purely to feed to the war cat, for whatever reason. The big cat had it cornered in front of the door, and the stolt looked terrified, standing up on its hind legs, slapping at the air like it was ferocious and not ten inches from nose to tail.

Something twisted in my gut, but again, I kept it from my face. I had to go through that door, the one blocked by the war cat. That was the only reason I stepped between the big cat and the stolt. The fact you didn't cower in front of a predator was the only reason I stared down the enraged feline, baring my ownteeth. I was just being stoic when I didn't react to the tiny stolt running up the fabric of my long skirt, like it knew I was its one chance at survival. I put my hand on the door once it made it to my hip, and the soft scratch of its claws probably broke the skin.

Feeling eyes on me, I couldn't help looking over my shoulder at the crowd. A set of golden orbs met mine across the room, and I knew enough about public affairs to know that it was Hayle Taeme, the third-born son of the current Baron of the Third Line. I held his gaze for long enough to convey that I wasn't scared of him, but not so long that it was a challenge. Turning away, I stepped through the door into a hallway.

The silence inside was almost as grating as the noise of the atrium. Only the clock ticking above the administration office door broke the sound vacuum. Checking there was no one around, I reached under my skirt and pulled out the stolt.

It scrambled against my hand, its whole body rigid with fear, and I looked at it dispassionately. I should just let it go here and be done with it. I'd given it a chance; the rest was up to nature. But for a reason I didn't really understand, I found myself opening one of the wide, deep pockets of my skirt and allowing it to scurry in, hiding

deep in the fabric like a burrow.

I'd take it out to the woods later and release it.

Straightening my shoulders, I hefted my bag back onto my back and knocked on the office door. Someone barked to enter, and I did so with my chin raised high. Boellium wasn't a place to cower or show weakness. It gave you the respect you demanded. At least, that's what the journal of Hildor Halhed had said.

I stepped through the door and met the eyes of a woman with a shaved head and a wicked scar curling her lip, the effects of which made her look like she was scowling. She only had one arm and wore modified battle leathers.

"This frog shit never balances." Okay, maybe the expression on her face had less to do with her scar and more to do with the cursing she was throwing at the ledger in front of her. Slamming it shut, she looked at me and opened a different ledger on her desk with a heavy thump. "Name?" she snapped.

"Avalon Halhed, fifth child of the Baron of the Ninth Line."

Flicking through the book in front of her, she reached the desired page and wrote down my name. I leaned over a little and saw name after name of people from my Line. Some were my kin. Some were people who fell within our Line's fiefdom.

The administrator didn't look impressed by my pedigree, and I wasn't surprised. "Take this. It's your classes. If you're on time, you're late." She flicked her fingers at me, a clear dismissal. "Go down to the third subfloor. Surprisingly, you seem to be the only person from the Ninth Line in the college at the moment, so you might find it a little quiet." The don't complain was written so clearly on her face that she didn't even need to say it out loud.

I knew that last year's Ninth Line conscript had died in war games before he'd even graduated. It had upset the families in the fiefdom, which was why Father had promised to send his darling daughter this year as the conscript. Yeah, right. It had a double boon for Father; he appeased the fiefdom and got rid of me in one move.

If I played this right, I wouldn't have to go back to the house I grew up in, the one that held nothing but bad memories. He'd promised that if I survived and wasn't called up to fight in some imaginary war, he'd give me land on the very outer edge of Ebrus, right where our fiefdom turned into the wilds of the north. That's all I had to do. Survive two years here and go home. I just had to hope that nothing went wrong.

I shuddered at the echo of an old memory.

Lifting my chin in acknowledgement of the woman behind the desk, I turned and left the administration office. Looking left and right, I searched for the stairs that would lead down to the Lower Line dorms. I knew from the journals in Father's library that the Lines after the Sixth Line were housed in subterranean housing. The dorms went six floors below my feet, and the very idea made my skin itch. At least I wasn't of the Twelfth Line, stuck down in the pits of hell.

To the left, there was a large sweeping staircase that went up to what I would assumed were the other six dorms. To the right was an archway, with stairs down. That would be my path then. Straightening my shoulders, I walked toward the curling stairs, but not before catching a glimpse of what was going on in the atrium.

Some other poor soul—who'd probably been forced to join Boellium too—was being confronted by the hounds. Instead of holding eye contact and standing tall like I had, this fool turned and ran.

You don't run from a predator. That was the first thing they taught you where I came from. A predator will chase you down and tear you to pieces, just for the sport of it.

Which was exactly what those hounds did to the guy, dragging him to the ground before he'd even made it back to the door. Clearly, I was wrong—the collegewouldallow them to tear apart new students.

Pushing down the kernel of pity that formed in my chest, I descended the stairs to my new home, and ignored the man's screams as he was eaten alive.

Two

Avalon

The administrator hadn't been wrong about my floor being empty. It was covered in dust and looked like someone had used it for storage for the last few months, with large boxes and stacks of chairs piled up in the communal area. Moving around the boxes and assorted crap, I picked out a bedroom. There were six on this floor, all shooting off the main communal room. They didn't separate us by gender, only by Line, so maybe on some of the more populous levels, it was just one big orgy all the time.

I wouldn't have that problem, thank the Goddess.

Deciding on a room that was the furthest from the staircase landing, I put my bag down on the bed and scooped the stolt out of my pocket, placing it on the rough-hewn desk that made up the only furniture in the room, besides a skinny wardrobe.

Theoretically, I could fill out every single other wardrobe on this level too. There wouldn't be anyone else until next year. The Ninth Line weren't desperate to send their sons off to die as some of the other Lines. The area around our lands was tough and rugged—to eke out a living in the wilds took all the strong hands our fiefdom could muster.

That was why I'd been sent, not one of my brothers. That, and Father hated me. Some part of me even understood it.

I'd murdered my mother, and it was hard to love even your own child after that.

The stolt sat cautiously on the desk, sniffing around, before leaping down and scurrying beneath the bed. Well, clearly I wasn't setting it free in the forest anymore. It would make its own way back to wherever it needed to be.

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“How’s that for gratitude...” I muttered to myself, walking into the kitchen portion of the communal room. There was a cafeteria here, but I’d start smuggling snacks down to my dorm as soon as possible, so I didn’t have to spend too much time with the other conscripts. There were already a few cans of vegetables, some kind of dehydrated stew in a jar, and things that had gone moldy and I didn’t want to think about too hard. I guess no one had time to just clean out some random kitchen.

On the wall to the left of the doorway, the names of past Ninth Line conscripts had been carved into the wood paneling. There were some family names I recognized. Lorson. Mertridge. My own cousin, Mattlock Halhed. He’d gone on to be a high-ranking member of the army—well, as high ranking as someone from the Ninth Line could get. I’d read his journal years ago.

Next to some of the names were X’s. The conscripts who’d never made it out of Boellium War College. Walking to the kitchen, I grabbed a knife from the drawer and scratched an X beside the name Sly Lorson. He hadn’t returned home from this hellhole and would serve as a warning to me. Keep my head in the game, or it would be my own name with an X beside it.

Getting to work, I carved my name at the bottom of the list. Avalon Halhed. Daughter of the Ninth Line.

That ritual completed, I changed out of my traveling skirt, which had blood soaking the hem already, and set it in a bucket to soak. Walking to my bags, I pulled out a pair of my pilfered pants. I wasn’t going to die in this place just because I was hampered by the voluminous skirts favored by my Line. I’d stolen these from my brothers, and while they were a little long in the legs, they fit well enough. I folded up the hems

and noted that I'd have to cut and re-hem them tonight, as well as the others I'd stolen.

Not that my brothers wouldn't have given them to me if I'd asked; they didn't hate me the way my father did. Whatever had happened to my mother, they'd mostly been too young to remember, except for Kian.

My older brother and the Heir to the Ninth Line had been ten when our mother had died. He remembered every moment, but had never blamed me. More than once, he'd hidden me from my father's enraged grief. He'd ensured I was cared for, fed, safe. I'd been barely more than a toddler, but I'd known that Kian meant safety, even at that young age.

No, I'd stolen my brothers' pants, not because they wouldn't have just given them to me, but because I knew my father had forbidden them from providing me with any aid. My preparation for war had begun as soon as I agreed to come to Boellium. I'd had my wits, what I could gather with my charisma or by theft, and a long walk down south.

Shoving the melancholy thoughts from my mind, I slipped the pants on and buttoned them up. They were snug across my hips, but they fit better than they had when I'd left. Starving on the road would do that to a girl.

I was hardly a girl anymore, and that's probably why my father had sent me here. I was twenty-three, and no one would marry me. I wasn't a son. I was useless for anything but conscription fodder to him.

Sighing heavily, I shook off the thoughts of my family and my obvious father issues, and climbed the stairs back up. I was old to be entering the Boellium War College, though not the oldest. You could offer anyone between the age of sixteen and twenty-eight. Some Lines sent their conscriptions young, before their best years were gone,

before they had wives and children and emotional attachments to anything but the idea of being a badass warrior. Others waited for as long as they could—the more humane option, I believed, considering there was a chance we wouldn't return. You had a chance to live your life before it was stolen from you.

Reaching the main landing, I cursed the fact that no one had given me a map of this place. I looked at the crowd, the setting sun, and decided to just follow the majority of the other students in the direction they were going.

The food here was free, and if nothing else, the Lower Six Line conscripts wouldn't miss mealtime. Food wasn't plentiful in the outer lands of Ebrus. We struggled and toiled, and some years, we just plain starved. It was bad for us in the north, where the Ninth Line fiefdom was, but I knew it was even worse for the other Lines lower than us, relegated to the most barren outer rims of our country.

We moved from the main building of Boellium to one of the large outbuildings. It was basically a stone barn, a thatched roof holding tight against the ocean breeze. Boellium War College was on an island, ostensibly to protect it from marauders in the early days, but I suspected it was to prevent us from escaping once conscripted.

Something about the sea breeze was reassuring, though, reminding me of home. Crashing waves against the cliff sides and the loud call of seabirds were the lullabies I'd fallen asleep to for most of my life.

As someone jostled into me from behind, I gritted my teeth. The ocean of people before me, however, was far too new. Until Ovl—the sea port governed by the Fourth Line, which supported the only ferry from the mainland to Boellium—I'd never seen more than a hundred people in a room together. The lands of the Ninth Line were vast, and our population was sparse. It was a rare occasion that would bring us altogether to the Keep.

But on that one dock in Ovl, there'd been more people than I'd seen in my whole life. Hundreds of people from different classes, Lines, and professions, all crammed together perilously on a dock that I was sure couldn't hold us all. It was by sheer will that I hadn't had a panic attack right then and there.

Too many people. Too much noise.

And it smelled like ass.

Ass and rotten fish.

The misery of the day had been exasperated by the fact that I wasn't a natural seafarer. I'd spent half of the six-hour ferry journey throwing up over the side and feeding the marine life in the Alutian Sea. All that meant I was starving now.

Walking into the food hall, I saw the room was segregated by Lines. I didn't need to ask which one was mine; it was the only one that was empty in a sea of people. Heading over to the trestle tables that ran along the sides of the room, I grabbed a tray and a traditional Falain dinner plate. They were segmented plates with high edges, so you could scoop many different types of food into the one dish without any of the items touching, unless you wished. They were popular mostly here at Boellium War College, and more particularly on Boemouthe Island, the home of the Tenth Line, who cared for the college and lived out here in social exclusion by themselves.

Despite their isolation, one look at the Tenth Line table showed they were happy enough with their lot in life. Twelve conscripts sat around their table, which was a lot, but I could understand it. Many would come to work here at the college, or join the armed ranks that protected it. To the Tenth Line, Boellium War College was their way of life.

The next most populated table had twice that many people. Maybe more.

“They’re the Twelfth Line,” the girl behind me in the food queue said. “They’re in the middle of a famine after all their crops failed for the last three years running, so they’ve sent as many of their young people as they can to Boellium. Better to die at the end of a sword than from a hungry belly.”

I lifted my head in agreement, but didn’t turn to answer her. What a decision to make out there in the far western plains of Ebrus. To send away all your young people, or hope the next year’s crop took so they wouldn’t die.

“I heard that Master Proxius is turning them away now,” the next guy down the line added, and the girl behind me sighed heavily.

“Be real, Jacob. They’re never going to turn away cannon fodder for war.”

Normally, I’d agree. But that was the weird thing about our conscription laws; we weren’t actively at war. Hell, we hadn’t been to war in over five hundred years. But we still maintained a highly skilled army, and if I was a betting woman, I didn’t think it was for use against forces outside Ebrus’s borders.

I finished piling food on my plate, then turned from the buffet tables without responding to the people behind me. Their words, however, played on my mind, and I couldn’t help but look at the Twelfth Line table once more. The conscripts were stacked on top of each other, two to a small chair, with some even sitting on the table as they ate. I could see which ones were fresh recruits because they were so gaunt, their eyes sunken into their skulls and their hair stringy. They were falling on their food like savages.

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In comparison, my table was empty. What felt like the collective gaze of the whole room on my back was a heavy weight as I placed my tray down and steadily began to eat. I didn't meet anyone's eyes, just held myself stiff and pretended they weren't there at all.

The food was surprisingly good, some kind of thick stew full of vegetables and chunks of meat. I ate it slowly, hungry after so many days on the road, but not wanting to embarrass myself like the Twelfth Line conscripts.

The eyes on my face began to burn, and I chanced a quick look and fell straight into blue eyes, cold and sharp. Hair so dark, it seemed to absorb the light around him, perfectly curling up from his forehead like a wave, as if a wind had tousled it, even though there were no elements inside the building.

I didn't need anyone to tell me that this was an Heir of the First Line. He screamed privilege, from his ridiculously unblemished skin to the way his body had the musculature of someone who'd had bountiful food forever. His sapphire eyes met mine, holding me almost unwillingly in his gaze. I was like a deer, caught in the light beam of a hunter.

I was prey to this man, inside these walls. I knew it in my bones.

He didn't know me, though. I didn't care what Line he emerged from—I refused to be prey. I was going to keep my head down, but I wouldn't become a victim to do it. I kept my chin high as I dragged my gaze from his, hoping he didn't know how the very action made a shiver run down my spine, and went back to slowly demolishing my stew.

By the time I looked up again, the room was mostly empty, and the Prince of Ebrus was gone.

Three

Hayle

The Ninth Line conscript had stood out like fleas on my cousin, Lucio. I'd noticed her immediately, first when she walked through the atrium and stared down my hounds, followed by Lucio's war cat, then she'd been nearly impossible to miss as she stared down Vox Fucking Vylan.

Physically, she was unremarkable. The slightly too pale skin of the Ninth Line, with dark brown hair that was too unkempt to fall smoothly, but was thick and full. The fire in her eyes was something else, even if she was trying hard to stay under the radar like the rest of the Lower Lines.

Not that I blamed them. They could be the greatest warrior this school had ever seen, and the best rank they would ever achieve in our army was somewhere in the upper middle. Maybe Captain. They were here as troop fodder, not to jockey for influence like the rest of us. Because no matter how well you fought, when you were up against someone who had strong Line abilities—like Vox and his damn elemental strength—you may as well be one of the straw dummies we practiced against. I wasn't saying it was right. It was just how the world worked, so it was best if they didn't make waves and stayed in their own lane.

However, despite how hard she was trying to blend in, I knew this girl—thisnobody—from the Ninth Line was going to stir up trouble, and I was here for it.

I sent my hounds to find her, and they happily went. They had good instincts, and

they liked her scent, according to Braxus. They liked that she'd saved the stolt from Elaine, Lucio's war cat. There was no love lost between the hounds and the war cats. They would fight beside each other when it counted, but they bickered like a bunch of toddlers outside of their duties.

Alucius, Braxus's mate and my second hound, sent me a snapshot through our connection of the girl in the training arena with the new recruits. She was around my age, not one of the usual fresh faces that the various Lines sent.

I wanted to know her story, and there was one sure source of information. Slipping from my own training exercises, I called down my raven, Quarry. I was one of the strongest beastmasters of our line. The Third Line was known for its affinity with animals; our strong connection with some of the most powerful predators in Ebrus made us a formidable foe for our enemies, thus demanding respect from the other Lines.

However, a Line-wide secret was that the direct members of the Taeme family could shift into animals themselves. Lucio was a wolf, but I was something even more fearsome. Something that hadn't been seen in so long, our historians had needed to delve into the history books to confirm what they suspected.

Quarry swooped down and landed on my outstretched arm as I walked back toward the main building of Boellium. "Is Svenna in her office?" I asked him, and he made an affirmative grunt. I nodded my thanks as he flew back to whatever tree he was sitting in today, keeping watch on what was happening on the college grounds and even the surrounding island. I stomped through the courtyard, which was much quieter in comparison to yesterday, though there was still blood in the crevices of the stone.

Alucius and Braxus had attacked a new recruit yesterday, permanently maiming him. I hadn't interfered. The hounds had better instincts than most people, and whatever

threat they thought he posed to me or our Line was probably true.

He was still alive, but he wouldn't fuck with the Third Line again anytime soon.

Striding through the atrium, I entered the administration office, where Svenna was cursing at a ledger like it had personally insulted her grandmother. She'd once been one of the greatest warriors in the Dawn Army, and whatever punishment had led her to be stuck here in these four walls with only ledgers and students as foes was cruel. She was wildly unsuited to being a glorified secretary. It had nothing to do with the fact she only had one arm, and everything to do with the look she was giving me right now, like she wanted to set me on fire with her mind.

"What do you want, Taeme?"

I didn't know what Line she was originally from, but all the leaders of Boellium War College gave up their Line allegiance to become devoted only to the Dawn Army and the college itself. I couldn't imagine any role that would make me forsake my Line. They were my family. My life.

I gave her my most charming smile. "Maybe I just wanted to see you, Svenna?" I purred.

Svenna was scarred and had lost her arm in some battle or another, but beneath her constant scowl was what once would have been a fearsome beauty. Her blonde hair was cut shortish, but her blue eyes sparkled with intelligence and a ruthlessness that I found admirable.

"I was in the same class as your mother, and you piss me off more than a boil on my ass cheek. So spit it out, I'm busy."

I laughed, dropping the pretense. "I want to know about the new girl from the Ninth

Line.”

Svenna snorted. “Hardly a girl, Taeme. She’s basically a spinster, by your standards.”

I waved a hand. “You know what I mean. Who is she?”

Rolling her eyes in my direction, she slammed the ledger in front of her shut. “That’s none of your fucking business, Hayle Taeme. You want to know more about the Ninth Line conscript? Go and ask her yourself.”

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Huffing, I sat in the chair in front of her desk. “People lie, Svenna. I want my information from a vetted source. I can make it worth your time.”

She frowned, the ridged scar on her face pulling tightly at the skin of her cheek. “You have nothing I want.”

That was untrue. Reaching into one of the many pockets of my pants, I pulled out a small jar. “The scar cream you wanted from the village, the one they said was no longer being made.”

Svenna eyed the cream, and something flashed in her eyes. Desperation. “You’re very annoying, you know that? Fuck the Third Line and their spying eyes. I’m using a more accessible tincture now, so you can take that cream and shove it up your own puckered ass—”

I held up a hand to stop her tirade. Normally, I’d have had the hounds take a chunk out of someone for disrespecting my Line with so little care, but this was Svenna. She hated everyone, and that kind of removed a little of the sting.

Pulling out a piece of paper, I slid it across the desk so it sat next to the jar of cream. “And the recipe to make it yourself.” I was playing my hand a little early, but I was motivated. Besides, I liked Svenna. I didn’t want to extort her any more than necessary.

She muttered something under her breath. “Fine, but get your little furry minions to stop spying on me, or I’ll start making winter coats out of them.”

Yeah, my father wasn't going to go for that. Svenna was a key figure in Boellium, and he liked to have his finger on the pulse of every major institution in this country. "I can't do that. But I can give you a week?"

She made a rude gesture. "A year. The Third Line does know how invasive that shit is, right?"

I grinned. "We are all well aware, and don't worry, we aren't immune from it either. A dormouse told my brothers when I jerked off into a sock." I smirked at the memory of the shit I'd gotten for months after that. Even now, I checked for little spies before I jerked off. "I can give you a month, but that's it." Reaching toward the cream and the recipe like I was going to take them back, I wasn't surprised when she slapped her hand over them and dragged them back to her side of the desk.

"Fine. Dick." She stood and grabbed a different ledger. This one, I recognised as the admissions ledger. She pulled it from the shelf with her one remaining hand, and despite the fact it was huge and heavy, I didn't offer to help. I liked my balls where they were. She had incredible strength in her remaining hand and arm, and hardly struggled as she walked it back to the desk. "I'm going to leave this here, open to a certain page. Do not turn the page. In fact, don't even touch it. You get two minutes."

She swept out of the room, and I chuckled. Surly. Walking around her desk, I looked at the page, open to the section for admissions for the Ninth Line.

Avalon Halhed. So nobility then, not that you'd know it from the way she dressed. You could definitely tell from the way she held herself, though. Youngest daughter of Baron Halhed, unmarried and twenty-three. A spinster. Interesting. Normally, daughters were married off in their teen years up there in the Northern perma-frost, to keep the Line varied and to share around the mouths to feed during the long, cold winters.

She had three older brothers, none of whom had ever come to Boellium War College, I noted, along with one elder sister, who'd been married off to some other lordling of their backwater fiefdom. A description of her physicality—identifying features such as the birthmark at the base of her spine and the small scar she had on her chest—was listed on her page to help identify her body, should she be killed in training in a way that made her face unrecognizable.

A note was included under Psychological Fitness about the death of the Baroness Halhed. Just a brief line about Avalon being present at the death of her mother when she was a toddler. I guess growing up motherless could be a cause of some kind of psychological stress, but half of Boellium had lost a parent, either to infighting between the Lines, starvation, disease, or one of a multitude of other ways you could die in Ebrus. It was probably only listed because she was nobility. It was noted that she was the first female conscripted from her Line, however.

Other than that, her file was completely unremarkable, and I was a little pissed that I'd given up so much of my leverage for very little reward. It was the gamble you made sometimes in the information business.

Svenna stomped back into the room what felt like seconds later. "Time's up, Taeme. Get the fuck out of my office."

Giving her a cocky grin, I moved back around the desk toward the door. "A pleasure as always, Svenna."

She flipped me a rude gesture. "Shut the damn door on your way out."

Braxus was waiting for me outside the administration door when I stepped out. "Aren't you meant to be watching the girl?" I asked him, quirked a brow.

He yawned and sent me a mental picture of Alucius lying in the shade of a tree,

watching the new conscripts fumble with their swords, including Avalon Halhed.

Huffing a laugh, I tilted my head. “Fair. I guess it doesn’t take both of you to watch one girl.” I paused at the stairs. One set went up to my floor, with another set going down into the bowels of Boellium. “Actually, I have another job for you, and I think you’ll enjoy this one a little more. I know how much you love playing hide and seek.”

Braxus gave me a toothy grin, his tongue lolling out as I described what I needed. Maybe I had a better source of information after all.

Four

Avalon

I’d never hurt so much in my entire life. There were muscles in my body that I hadn’t known even existed until they felt like they were on fire today.

“Lift your fucking sword higher, Ninth, before someone chops off your damn head!” the instructor—Kika, a hardass originally from the Sixth Line—shouted at me. I gritted my teeth and did what was asked, despite the fact that I burned. I wanted to vomit, and I wasn’t the only one. Most of the class had already leaned over the rail of the training ring and lost their breakfast. I swallowed hard; I really didn’t want that to be me.

My older brother, Kian, had taught me a little swordsmanship, enough that I could protect myself if we were invaded. Or if my father got into a drunken melancholy and came after me again. It had only happened once, back when I was eight, but if Kian hadn’t stumbled upon us as my father pinned me to the hearth with the tip of his sword at my chest, I would’ve been dead.

Sure, Father had apologized—more to Kian than to me, but I’d taken it. That wasn’t

good enough for Kian, though. After that, I was never alone in a room with my father without one of my brothers there too. From that point on, Father had looked at me with guilt mixed in with his normal sadness and hatred.

All this was to say that I'd been overly confident coming to Boellium War College. I had held a sword before, and there were people from the Eleventh and Twelfth Lines who didn't even have that small experience.

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But swinging a sword with my brothers once a week did not make me a warrior, and the defensive moves Kian had taught me were only half the skills I'd need. I screamed in my mind and lifted my sword, striking at the dummy in front of me.

Finally, the instructor gave a high-pitched whistle to signal the end of training, and my arm went limp. I couldn't drop my sword. My fingers were locked around the hilt, seized from the sheer will of holding my muscles taught.

The punishment for dropping your sword in practice was missing three meals at the mess hall, and I had to admit, it was a ruthless but effective incentive for the starving Lower Six Lines. The Upper Six didn't seem to worry so much, laughing and joking with each other, their muscles strong and their faces full of good health. They joked and teased each other, and a couple even harassed the Lower Six recruits for their weakness, their ragged clothing, their inability to hold the bile from rising when exhaustion took over.

Fuckers. They didn't understand what it was like to put every ounce of your energy into just surviving another day.

I pushed the thought away and worked on releasing my sword. I did one finger, then another, and someone chuckled beside me.

"Do you need assistance?" The voice was smooth and cool, like a light snow flurry before a blizzard. Looking up, I met the eyes of the man from last night. The First Line Heir.

I shook my head. "I'm fine." Years of etiquette training had me choking out a

strained, “Thank you.”

He lifted a perfect dark eyebrow. Black hair. Blue eyes. Skin like a frozen lake. It was an intimidating, yet attractive package. “Do you know who I am, Ninth?” he asked haughtily, and I nodded, finally removing my fingers from my sword and letting it drop to the dirt of the training ring. “Then why do you meet my eyes so freely?” It was a pompous demand from a man who had lackeys instead of peers.

I tried to stop the intrusive thoughts, I really did. I wasn’t here to make enemies, especially those of the First Line. Instead of deferentially lowering my face, I met his gaze once more as I said, “My apologies. I’ll do my very best to avoid them in the future.” Then I held his eyes a heartbeat longer, because fuck this guy.

The Heir—Vox Vylan—grunted in the back of his throat as he reached for me, a sneer already on his face. Shit. I’d fucked up already.

Suddenly, there was a giant hound between us, its body blocking the Heir from me. Vox scowled down at the large canine, somewhere between a wolf and something even more wild. And huge. “Stay out of this, Taeme,” he said to the hound, and I looked at the dog between us, like it could actually be an Heir to the Third Line. “Or I’ll turn your little pet into a throw rug.”

The hound growled and bared its teeth, snapping its jaws, completely unfazed by the man in front of us.

Huffing, Vox rolled his eyes. “Learn your place, Ninth. I don’t want you to end up like the last of your brethren.”

Clenching my jaw, I turned my back on the Ebrus Prince and hurried away. We didn’t really have princes, or royalty, but if we did, he’d be as close as we’d get. I didn’t take a breath until I was around the corner and out from beneath the icy glare

of Vox Vylan.

Looking down at the hound that was still at my heels, protecting my back, I narrowed my eyes at it. “While I appreciate your assistance, I don’t need your help.”

The hound’s eyes glittered, and its tongue lolled out of the side of its mouth. If a dog could give you a skeptical look, this one was calling me out on my bullshit.

Huffing out an irritated breath, I grabbed a stick of the jerky I’d placed in my pocket earlier today. I’d known the training would be tough, and that I’d probably need to start stockpiling fuel to take down to my dorm. Oh well, I’d start hoarding food tomorrow instead. I held out the jerky to the hound, who took it gently between its teeth and laid down before me, chewing at the end.

“Now we’re even. And tell your master that the Ninth Line can care for itself. I am in no way indebted to him for today’s little stunt.”

“I’m sure he’d never even suggest you were.”

I stared down at the hound. Had it just talked?

The hound sighed audibly, and looked over its shoulder as if it worried about my ability to survive life. Hayle Taeme stepped around the corner, a cocky smirk on his face.

There was something incredibly wild about Hayle Taeme. His presence made the hair on the back of your neck rise, and raised goosebumps on your arms. That primordial awareness wasn’t lessened in any way by the easygoing smile on his face.

I straightened my spine, meeting those arresting forest-green eyes. “Good. Then we’re in agreement.” I needed to get the fuck out of here before I ended up a snack

for his hounds. For the second time in fifteen minutes, I held my breath as I hurried away from a predator, heading toward my dorm.

I was starving, because they'd made us train through lunch, but worse than that was the gritty, abrasive feeling of dirt in the crevices of my body. I'd go and sit at the bottom of the showerstall until I felt moderately human again, then I'd climb the stairs to the food hall.

Striding through the atrium of the main building, I avoided the eyes of the other recruits. I'd had enough human interaction for one day. The trip down the stairs to my dorm level felt interminable, and halfway down, I wondered if I'd done this whole thing backward. How was I going to climb these stairs on rubber legs later? I needed to build my food stockpile fast, especially if more of today was to be expected.

I stumbled onto my floor and straight into the washroom. It was just one big open room with three shower heads jutting from the walls. Stripping off my clothes, I set the spray to skin-peeling pressure. I needed something to pummel my muscles back to life.

The water down here was icy cold, and I gritted my teeth as I stood under the spray. I could deal with cold showers; I might be a Baron's daughter, but we lived in the mountains. Ice baths were a way of life. Though that didn't mean I wouldn't give my left tit for a warm tub right now.

The cold water chilled my overheated skin, and I tried to push my interactions with the lordlings of Boellium from my mind. I was just a novelty, the lonely Ninth Line recruit, and they'd get over it, especially when they realized I didn't want to play any stupid political games with them. I didn't want to marry either of them, or join their courts, or do any of the other shit people jockeyed for here at Boellium. In fact, if I didn't talk to them for the next two years, I would consider my time in this hellhole a success.

When my skin began to prickle from the coolness of the water, and my fingertips were numb, I turned off the stream, wrapping myself in one of the drying rags that hung on the walls. I tried not to think about who'd used them last, and whether or not they were actually clean. I'd have to find the laundry heresooner rather than later, because if I kept sweating through my clothes at the current alarming rate, they would be stiff and putrid before the week was out.

Moving naked toward my room, I was kind of glad for my forced solitude. This was the most privacy I'd had in... well, ever. No maids, housekeepers, or brothers. Just me.

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Opening the wardrobe, I sifted through my clothes. Pulling out another pair of men's pants, I screeched as something furry fell out of it. "Fuck!"

The purple stolt glared up at me, like I was the problem here.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now? Don't be mad at me just because you decided to sleep in my damn clothes, you tiny hairball. You could have been a war cat's dinner if it wasn't for me, so have some gratitude."

Despite my chastisement, I reached into the pocket of my dirty pants and split the remaining chunk of jerky between the two of us. It grabbed the little piece of dried meat in its jaws and disappeared beneath the bed. Guess I had a housemate after all.

I managed to pull on my underwear, but that was it. I laid down on the bed and tried to shuffle on my pants, but soon enough, I flopped back, exhausted. Maybe I'd rest for a little while, just to get my strength back.

Five

Avalon

When I woke, my clock said it was almost midnight, and my stomach said it was about to crawl up my throat and find a better person to live inside. Also, there was a girl sitting on the side of my bed, staring down at me.

"What the fuck?!" I screeched.

She tilted her head. “Your boobs are out.”

I recognized her from the Twelfth Line. I ground my teeth together, pulling a blanket across my body. “That’s because I’m in my room, in my bed. Alone.”

Shrugging, she stood. “We were worried about you when you didn’t turn up for dinner. I volunteered to come and check you hadn’t died after training.”

That was oddly sweet. “Uh. Thank you?”

Grinning at me, the girl thrust out her hand, palm up. I stared at it stupidly, until I remembered that it was the traditional farewell of the Twelfth Line. Placing my palm to hers, I slid it along and then curled my fingertips against hers. It was a gesture that they did when they parted ways, one small clinging motion that said they longed to see you again, or something. See, etiquette lessons weren’t a giant waste of time.

The girl turned and walked out of my bedroom, with no other explanation or even telling me her name. I slumped back against the pillow, weighing up whether I should go back to sleep, or find my way to the kitchen and hope I could sneak in and raid the shelves without alerting the staff.

My stomach gave another painful cramp. I was starving, and I needed food.

Decision made, I stood and pulled on a long-sleeved black shirt that hit my knees. Another one of Kian’s shirts. He was going to have to go to the tailor sooner than he normally would once he realized I’d stolen a large portion of his wardrobe.

Slipping out of my room, and then the Ninth Line dorm, I began to climb the stairs. Holy Mother of the Great North, my thighs...I hadn’t even been working my thighs in battle training, but they hurt with every single movement as I climbed the ancient stone steps.

By the Seventh Line dorm, I wanted to puke, but I kept pushing until I reached the atrium landing. My knees were shaking so badly, I almost collapsed on the slate flagstones. Dragging myself out the doors, I noted how quiet Boellium was at night. The solid stone building insulated any noise from permeating the quietness of the atrium. Or maybe it was magic.

Magic wasn't something the Lower Six Lines had much experience in. The First Line had more magic in their little fingers than the rest of the rest of us combined. The unfairness of the whole thing burned at times. Magic could have changed the lives of all of us.

The Eleventh and Twelfth Lines wouldn't have to starve if they had the same elemental magic that several of the Upper Six Lines had. They could bring on the rains, or promote the growth of their crops. They wouldn't have had to watch their children wither and die from lack of food and fresh water.

The night animals made a quiet soundtrack to the witching hour as I crossed the cobblestone courtyard to the mess hall. Not another soul stirred, which suited me just fine. While I might be slowly adjusting to the sheer amount of people housed in the college, I still found the quiet stillness of being by myself a physical balm to my soul.

Surprisingly, the mess hall was unlocked, though the door creaked so loudly, fear ran up my spine. I stilled, waiting for the sound of footsteps, or for someone to magically appear and send me back to my room, or kick me out or something, but no one came.

I stepped into the hall and walked softly across the heavy floorboards. The scent of dinner still permeated the room, making my stomach growl nearly as loudly as the door. First, I went and looked at the section that held snacks, but it had been completely raided. There were two nut squares left, and I pocketed those, but my churning stomach told me that probably wouldn't be enough.

Slipping behind the large trestle tables that held the dishes at mealtimes, I walked down a short hall and a set of stairs to the kitchens. A large fire was burning, kept burning by magic and not by a hearth boy.

My Keep had one of those, a little orphan who tended the fire during the night. Cerri was small for his age due to malnutrition, and had been found wandering through the town when he was little more than five. The Keep had taken him in, and now he was a constant in the Keep's kitchens, being fed up by the cooks and doted on by the maids. He was a sweetheart, but everyone in the North had a job, no matter how young or old.

My job was to be a sacrificial tribute.

Pushing the negative thoughts away, I went to the cool locker, again spelled by magic. I pulled out a huge hock of smoked ham, and my mouth watered. Finding some slabs of bread, I was well on my way to making myself a sandwich that I'd have dreams about forever when a throat cleared behind me.

Dropping the knife with a clatter on the countertop, I spun toward the noise, my spine jamming ramrod straight when I came face to face with the Heir to the First Line for the second time that day.

Although he wouldn't become the ruler, every direct descendant of a Line Baron was called an Heir, and could be called up to lead if something happened. Technically, even I was an Heir, but my father would rather rule as a corpse than let me become Baron of the Ninth Line.

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“Theft? Surprisingly cliché for a Lower Six conscript.” The Heir’s tone was filled with disdainful boredom, and it might have been because my blood was already pulsing with adrenaline, or maybe because he was so dismissive of the struggles of the people of Ebrus, but it made me irrational.

Sneering at him, I picked up the knife again and turned my back to the powerful Heir. “Willfully blind to the suffering of his people. Surprisingly cliché for an Upper Six Heir,” I snarked back, rushing through finishing up my sandwich while keeping my actions even and slow. He’d never know that I was halving my toppings. Maybe I just liked ham and cheese.

He sniffed. “I could have you thrown from Boellium for insulting me.”

I rolled my eyes, but thankfully, he couldn’t see me. “That’s your prerogative, my liege.” I used the title with my own disdainfully bored tone. Fuck, I needed to reel back in my tongue before I ended up hanging by my feet from the rafters, bleeding out from my nose. “I’ll inform the kitchen staff of obtaining my own food tomorrow morning. I was... otherwise engaged during the mealtime service.” Let him think I was actually doing something important, and not passed out from exhaustion.

He raised an eyebrow. “With Taeme from the Third? Don’t think you’re special. He’s had every female recruit on their back at one point or another. Some of the staff too,” he informed me with an irritated sniff.

Don’t say it. Don’t say it.

“I’m sure he’d have you on your back too, if you asked nicely.” My tongue was in

control now, leaving my good sense behind in the dust. I was a fool. A dead and buried fool. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to bed, if I’m to be a stellar student in this fine institution.”

I went to move past him, but suddenly, it was like moving through quicksand. Bands of air tightened around my body, holding me still. Oh fuck. I’d lasted one whole day at Boellium before dying. It wasn’t a record, I knew that, but even so, it was a record for our Line.

Vox leaned in, his lips so close to my face, he could probably bite off my nose. His eyes sparkled with anger. “If you think Hayle Taeme would be on top, you know very little about me, Low Class.”

That’s what his issue is?

He leaned forward and took a bite of my sandwich, still suspended in front of me. Then he plucked it from my fingers and threw it on the ground, striding with a confident swagger from the kitchen.

I struggled against the invisible bonds, but it was futile. I was here, at the mercy of anyone who walked in. Despite logically knowing it was useless, I pushed and strained until I was making a wounded animal noise, tears leaking from the corners of my eyes.

I was trapped as easily as a mouse by a barn cat.

A soft noise had me straining to look over my shoulder. I saw the hound first. The same one from today during training, I thought. It had a purple stolt in its mouth, and I recognized its tiny white socks as my stolt. Or the stolt that lived on my floor. Not mine. I wasn’t attached to the rodent.

“Drop it,” I hissed, and both the hound and the stolt cocked their heads at me.

But the hound indeed dropped the tiny creature. Unlike with the war cat, the stolt didn’t run away. It sat on its haunches and indignantly smoothed all the canine slobber from its coat.

I glared at the stupid creature. “You must have been the dumbest stolt in your whole litter.”

On the stars, I swear the hound grinned back at me, like it thought my comments were hilarious. The hound—which was a she, I thought—shuffled closer to me and sniffed the magic surrounding me. One of her lips peeled back from her canines, and I knew I was about to die. It was the surprise of my life when she let out a giant sneeze, shaking her head in disgust at the scent of magic and covering me in hound snot.

“Agreed. It does stink.” I stopped struggling and let my body slump against the bindings. If Vox wanted to waste his energy keeping me suspended all night, I could sleep like this. Dick.

Footsteps suddenly sounded outside the door, and I froze. I was fully aware of how very vulnerable I was right now. What if Vox had sent someone down to beat the shit out of me—or worse—while I was incapacitated? What if it was someone completely unrelated, and they took advantage anyway?

Sensing the spike in my anxiety, the hound wrapped herself comfortingly around my legs, while the stolt stood by, cleaning its butt.

I was almost relieved when Hayle Taeme appeared around the corner. He looked dishevelled, like he’d been asleep, or if Vox was to be believed, mid-fuck. The grin he gave me made me believe it was probably the latter. A man as handsome as Hayle

wouldn't sleep alone.

"We have to stop meeting like this," he murmured, coming closer to poke at my invisible bindings. "You pissed off Vox, I see."

Straightening, he pulled out his necklace. There were two chains, one empty and one laden with talisman charms. There must have been twenty charms on the second necklace, each attached by a tiny silver clasp. Without looking down, he slipped the empty chain over his head, then moved his fingers along the chain remaining around his neck until he found the charm he wanted. With deft fingers, he unclasped it and hooked it onto the empty chain.

That manytal must have cost his family a small fortune, but I guess the Third Line had a lot of wealth, so why not deck out your favorite son with enough talismans to ward off the hand of death itself?

He reached toward me, and I flinched away. I didn't know if they were offensive or defensive talismans, and in the dim lighting, I couldn't make out the details on the swinging charm.

Noting my flinch, Hayle raised his hands. "It's an elementaltal. It nulls the effects of bindings that use one of mother nature's elements." Easing toward me, he slipped the necklace gently over my head. "Earth. Fire. Water." The talisman fell against my chest, and the binding broke immediately. I would have dropped to my knees if Hayle hadn't been there to catch me. "And air, of course." Steadying me back on my feet, he gave me a once-over. "What did you do to annoy everyone's least favorite Ice Prince?"

Well, I couldn't exactly tell Hayle that I'd insinuated that Vox wanted to fuck him, so instead, I flushed and went with the next closest truth. "I may not have shown the proper respect that an Heir to the First Line feels is due. I might've suggested he was

willfully blind to the state of his people.”

Hayle raised a brow, but didn’t say anything else. “I would avoid pissing off Vox Vylan. You are playing outside your league, Avalon Halhed.” He grinned at me. “But I find it kind of hot.” He gave a soft whistle, and I realized the stolt and Hayle’s hound companions—I hadn’t even noticed the other one appear—were all eating my sandwich.

I glared at the stolt. “Seriously?” Sighing, I let them have it. I had my nut squares still in my pocket; that would have to tide me over tonight.

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Hayle laughed, looking at the animals near our feet. “You have yourself a loyal companion. He came to find my hounds when he realized you were stuck. You should name him, though. It’s a show of respect.” With that, he let out another low whistle and turned. “I’ll be seeing you, Avalon Halhed. Stay out of trouble and away from the bastard prince.”

Then he was gone, yet again.

I looked down at the stolt curiously. Was it more sentient than I gave it credit for? “Should I name you, or are you returning to the wild now?” As if answering my question, it picked up a piece of ham and stuffed it in its mouth. It was a wonder any more food would even fit. “I’ll take that as a sign you’re staying. I guess Hayle is right. You need a name.”

I started walking back toward the entrance of the food hall toward my dorm room. I guess I couldn’t call himIt. Or Stolt. Or like, Fuzzy, or anything that lame. He reminded me of the purple and white epsirialle flowers that grew in the cook’s garden back home. Epsirialle might be a little girlish, though. Hayle had suggested it was a he, and as a Master of Beasts, he’d probably know.

“What about Epsy?” I suggested to the tiny creature.

He flicked an ear at me and ran up the side of my pants to perch on my shoulder. When had he gone from terrified of me to an unintentional fur scarf? “Epsy it is.” Tentatively, I reached up and scratched his ear. “Thanks for the save. I appreciate it.”

Epsy just curled his long, fluffy tail around my throat and dug his little claws into my

shirt, still chewing on the food stuffed in his cheeks.

Apparently, I had already accrued one friend in this shithole. But that was my limit.

Six

Vox

The girl from the Ninth Line was a distraction. I couldn't put my finger on what exactly it was about her that riled me so badly, but every time she was in my presence, my blood burned hot with irritation.

Like right now, in the weekly briefing from the headmaster of the college, Master Proxius, my skin itched as my eyes burned into the side of her face. She wasn't doing anything, per se. No, her disinterest in me bordered on disrespect.

My brothers would roll their eyes at the fact that I was riled by a person not showing me the due amount of respect and awe. It was vain and ridiculous to feel this way, especially as I'd spent the better part of my childhood trying to avoid the crowds of people who were desperate to make a connection with an Heir of the First Line.

I growled at myself and focused on Proxius's welcome speech. "This year, we've had one of the highest enrollment numbers ever in Boellium's esteemed history. Thirty-seven students from across all eleven eligible Lines have begun training to protect Ebrus far into the future..."

Blah blah, so on and so forth.

I'd once asked my parents why we had the conscription laws when we were never actually at war, and my father had merely given me that disappointed look he was so fond of when it came to me. It had been my mother who explained that the

conscription rules made sure the people felt connected to the safety of Ebrus, and it also kept the other Lines from getting too unruly. Because mounting a coup was all fun and games until you were facing your nephew across the military fronts.

We also weren't stupid enough to think we were the only civilisation out there, with First Line astronomers creating countless books about planets and moons beyond stars. It was good to be always ready for an attack, because as soon as you let down your guard, that was when the enemy emerged. Or something like that.

Proxius continued. "And for the first time in quite a few decades, four out of the eleven eligible Lines sent us their best and brightest, with Heirs from the Lines themselves within our college walls. The First, Third, Sixth and Ninth Lines have all sent direct descendants, and we appreciate their Lines' sacrifice."

All eyes turned to me, and I transformed my face into what I considered my political mask: bored, superior, and more powerful than they could even comprehend. Not necessarily untrue on any front.

Besides, it was hardly a sacrifice. There was no way I'd ever see a battlefield. At the very worst, I'd be in the commander's tent, pretending to be helpful while they organized battle strategies.

I looked over at Hayle Taeme. I doubted he'd see much battle time either, but the Third Line weren't known for strategy—more for their ability to fight. Barely more than beasts, that was what my mother had always muttered whenever we were forced to receive them at the palace. My cool, aloof mother would think that; she held herself apart from everyone, even her children. The sheer level of physical affection the Third Line showed each other would be enough to turn her stomach in disgust.

Hayle Taeme was a cocky son of a bitch, but my opinion differed to that of my parents. They thought the Third Line were basically rabid, but I'd seen the scheming

that Hayle Taeme had done here at Boellium, and he wasn't fluttering around blindly like a dog in heat. No, he had almost as many spies and informants as I did, and if rumor was to be believed, maybe untold more.

Those hounds of his were more self aware than any street dog I'd ever seen. They watched me with intelligent eyes, and I knew whatever connection they had with Taeme, they were an extension of the threat the Third Line Heir posed to me.

Edgar Marlee was the sixth son of the Baron of the Sixth Line, who had weak mental abilities, but strong alliances with the First Line. Father called them our walking library, with their eidetic memories. However, politically, it made them a threat to the First Line, because while they had almost no physical abilities to rise up against us, they remembered everything and were not easily bamboozled.

It also made them fundamentally boring. They were very black and white; things were historically accurate or they were plain wrong. The Sixth Line played politics very poorly, which was a blessing for the rest of us.

And then there was the Ninth Line. My sources told me her name was Avalon Halhed, the youngest daughter of the Baron of the Ninth Line, who, until she came to Boellium, had never left her home in Rewill.

My sources also told me that there was some kind of animosity between the girl and her father, and despite appearances, there was no love lost. Given the way she had no respect for her betters, I was unsurprised that her father didn't have a lot of affection for his daughter.

The Ninth Line had very low-level psy-abilities, a touch of foresight, but usually only within a few minutes of the future, and only one possible outcome. Nothing that a bit of self-awareness and the ability to read a situation couldn't already divine.

But that was the way of it in Ebrus. The further you got from the First Line, the less powerful you were.

No, the Heir to the Ninth Line was little better than the Twelfth, who had no abilities to speak of at all. Not even luck. What they did do was procreate at an alarming, obviously unsustainable rate. Without the benefit of true magic, they had little to trade, and everything they had was achieved with backbreaking labor.

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Avalon Halhed's words from last night were coming back to haunt me. Not the thing about Hayle Taeme; I was definitely the more dominant Heir both in and out of the bedroom, of that I had no doubt. No, it was what she'd said about me being willfully blind to the suffering of the people we ruled.

My father believed in a hands-off style of leadership. He let the Lines govern themselves, leaving their fates in their own hands, as long as they never attempted to rise against his ultimate rule and they paid their taxes promptly. But last night, while I couldn't sleep, I wondered if their fates really were in their own hands. The Line with the least amount of power had basically been banished to the farthest outreaches of Ebrus, to a climate with long, harsh summers, followed by dry, cold winters.

When my ancestors had been dishing out land to the other Lines, they'd done it strategically. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. And of course, we'd given ourselves the prime real estate, because that was the boon of the victor. So those least able to withstand the harsh environment had been sent to the worst possible land, because they had no power to stand against us, and we'd stood idly by for decades as they starved under the guise of not interfering.

I looked at the Twelfth Line students now, and told myself that I would take more time to get to know the Lower Lines. Not that I would ever rule Ebrus, but I would advise my brother; we could try and make life better for those weaker than us. Maybe set up a taskforce of weather manipulators to go to Eelrood, the seat of power for the Twelfth Line, and aid in the growth of the crops. Any alternative was better than sending whole generations of children to Boellium just to prevent their starvation.

Avalon Halhed's spine was ramrod straight, like she could feel my eyes on her, and I

sent down a tendril of air to wrap around her body, squeezing her tightly. The sound of her gasp echoed around the room, but she swallowed it down before anyone but those directly around her could pinpoint the exact location of the sound.

It was hard to keep the smirk from my face, but as she turned slowly to look at me over her shoulder, the fire in her eyes would have singed me if she'd had any form of elemental power.

I stared back, haughty and unaffected by her disdain. She needed to be reminded of who was the one in a position of power here, and of her place in the hierarchy of not just Boellium, but Ebrus as a whole. She was so far down the Lines of power that she wouldn't even be allowed to be my mistress, let alone be anyone in a position of authority.

Not that I'd want her as a mistress. She was far too plain. Like a length of coarsely woven cotton in a world filled with bedazzled silk.

The feeling of eyes on me prickled against my awareness, and I acknowledged that I'd spent too long looking at Avalon. Turning toward the glare burning my skin, I was unsurprised to see the wild eyes of Hayle Taeme on me. If anyone could match me in power, it was Taeme, but even he fell below me. Maybe I should teach him a lesson too, show him that while he might be powerful, he fell short of my own strength.

His eyes held mine, a silent battle of wills with the droning voice of Master Proxius going through the upcoming events of the college. I didn't care. It would be the same as last year, and probably the year before that. No, this was far more important.

Neither of us would yield, but Taeme tilted his head down to the front of the auditorium. At the girl? Was he actually fucking her?

Whatever was between them, his meaning was clear. Stay the fuck away from Avalon Halhed. I felt the corner of my lip curl. His interest had just made her a thousand times more interesting.

Game on, fucker.

Seven

Avalon

Despite my love for reading, historical battle strategy had never been my topic of choice, which I was regretting now as Instructor Perot glared at me.

“I’m not sure, Instructor,” I said for the eleventh time during this lesson. Why he kept calling on me when I was obviously inept at the subject seemed vindictive in a way I didn’t understand.

“What were you learning up there in the home of the Ninth Line? How to knit?” His tone told me how useless he thought that skill was, but down here in the warmth of Boellium, he didn’t know that being able to fashion warmth from the harsh wool of our mountain sheep was a life-saving skill. Perhaps even more so than being able to swing a sword, and definitely more than being able to recall thousand-year-old blood feuds from memory.

But I didn’t say that. Instead, I apologized once more and wore his mockery like a coat of shame.

I wasn’t sure what I’d done to piss him off, though. Maybe it was the mere existence of my Line. Maybe I should have paid more attention to the ancient blood feuds, because apparently, he was trying to start a new one.

The college wasn't huge, which meant that we didn't do separate classes. If it was time for battle strategy, the whole college was doing battle strategy. If it was combat training, the whole college was fighting.

Which meant I got no reprieve from the heavy presence of Hayle Taeme or the sharp looks from Vox Vylan. I wasn't sure where I'd gone wrong; instead of keeping my head down, I'd attracted the attention of the two most powerful conscripts here.

One of Hayle's hounds was lying under my chair, and the conscripts around me were either looking at me with curiosity or with concern, like I'd done something terribly wrong and was now under constant guard. It was never the same hound—they seemed to take it in turns—but no matter how many times I told them to leave, they'd sit doggedly at my heels with defiant expressions. Yep, the hounds had expressions. They were obviously not ordinary beasts of burden.

I'd had to come to terms with the fact that if I wasn't in my dorm, there was a hound beside me. Hayle hadn't said anything about it. In fact, I hadn't even spoken to him in a week. Boellium wasn't that big, so I had the suspicion he was purposefully avoiding me so I couldn't confront him about his furry shadows.

"Miss Halhed, who was the General for the Fifth Line during the Battle of Cregmire in the year 602?"

Who the heck would even know that? I sifted around in my brain for anything I knew about the Fifth Line, which was pitifully not much. The current family line was Ingmire, so I was just going to have to take a wild stab at it. "Ah, General Ingmire, sir?"

"Is that an answer or a question, Miss Halhed?"

I gritted my back teeth, wishing I had an elemental ability so I could set the churlish

instructor's pants on fire. "An answer, sir."

"The wrong answer, yet again, Miss Halhed. I'll thank the Goddess every day that the Ninth Line only ever produces grunts and not ranking officers, because I am fairly sure your ilk would have us walking off the Herelean Cliffs."

My cheeks flushed red at his derisive words, and the hound at my feet let out a rumbling growl, so low that I felt it more than heard the sound. I buried my fingers in his fur, which was either going to soothe the beast or get my fingers bitten off. I figured if they were ordered to attack me, I would've been dog food by now.

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The hound looked up at me, disgruntlement in his gaze, and I gave him a quick smile. “It’s okay. His opinion of me doesn’t matter.” I said the words low, so no one could judge me for talking to an animal like I was from the Third Line instead of the Ninth. The hound huffed and put his big blocky head back on his paws.

I took notes and tried to comprehend as much as I could in the class, but Instructor Perot wasn’t wrong—I’d been learning to knit and keep house instead of history and politics. I’d been learning to dodge flying fists instead of memorizing the different alliances and great battles. I hated feeling this inept.

So when the class ended, I waited until everyone left before I stood up and walked down to the instructor. “Sir, if I may have a quick word?”

Instructor Perot looked annoyed, but he cast a quick look at Braxus, the hound guarding me today. Everyone had known their names except for me; they were clearly something of a legend among the Upper Six Lines. Trained to work as a pair, Braxus and his mate Alucius were efficient machines of death. They could take down even the biggest prey, tear apart an enemy in seconds. People looked at them with equal parts awe and fear.

I understood the feeling, really. They were at least six feet long from nose to tail tip and five feet from paw to the fluff at the tips of their ears. Braxus might have been even taller. When we walked, his head was at my shoulder. They were terrifying, but something about them made me feel safe rather than scared.

My own stupidity, probably.

“Yes, Miss Halhed?” Instructor Perot’s tone was clipped and icy.

Sucking in a deep breath, I swallowed down my pride. “You’re correct in thinking that I am lacking in this facet of my training, and I was wondering if you had any reading materials that I could work through to catch up on what I assume is basic knowledge.” It was bullshit. I’d seen the glazed looks on the faces of the rest of the new conscripts; this wasn’t common knowledge, despite the derision of the instructor toward me. Still, I didn’t want to spend two years being his chew toy for this class.

He eyed me, silent for a long moment. “Your mother was from my Line, did you know that?”

I pulled back in shock. I hadn’t known that. I knew almost nothing about my mother; only the soft memories of Kian, and they were the memories of a boy who missed his mother. I remembered a soft scent, like lilacs, and sometimes I thought perhaps that was just my own delusions.

Sadness swamped me. Anger. Hurt. Regret. “I didn’t, no. I’m sorry.”

The apology was automatic; they were words that always followed mentions of my mother. I’m sorry she’s dead. I’m sorry I killed her. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, please, don’t hurt me again.

I shook the panic from my limbs, and Braxus huffed, stepping closer to me, his teeth baring at the instructor.

Instructor Perot wasn’t perturbed by Braxus’s rising aggression, or perhaps he couldn’t feel the tension in the hound’s body the way I could. “My cousin. She married your father and was never allowed to return home. She died within a decade of marrying him. He didn’t even tell her parents she’d passed.”

My mouth felt dry, and I licked my lips nervously. I didn't know what to say. Didn't know what to do. The instructor's obvious hatred of my family was palpable between us. So I just went with the truth.

"He wiped her from our lives. I don't remember her, or know anything about her, only her name and the stories my older brother could tell me. That she was kind and beautiful. That she grew flowers and loved the water. That my father was devoted to her, and he became a monster after she died. He doesn't ever talk about her, but he made sure we all felt the pain of her death." Mostly emotionally, but sometimes physically. "I don't even know what Line she came from, or you, for that matter."

Grief flashed briefly in Instructor Perot's eyes. "The Fifth Line. She was from Cyne, third cousin to the Ingmire line. She downgraded considerably, marrying Halhed, but she loved him, she said." The pain in his voice made my heart constrict in my chest. He'd obviously loved my mother, if the pain of her loss still put that look on his face after nearly two decades. Would he turn into my father if he knew that it was my fault she died? "You look like her."

Shock had me stepping back. No one had ever told me that before—not the staff who'd been in the manor when she died, not my brothers, and definitely not my father. I'd never seen a portrait. She had always been a ghost to me, or maybe a spectre that haunted me through no fault of her own. When I was younger, I'd hated her. She was the reason I was hurt, or hungry, or despised.

No one had ever said I looked like her.

"I... I didn't know."

Instructor Perot turned away, his shoulders stiff. He scribbled on a piece of paper, which he handed to me. "These are books available in the library to get you caught up on your severe lack of education." All vulnerability was gone from his face now, and

he turned and walked out of the classroom. Away from me and the open wound he'd just inflicted on my soul.

Braxus whined, nudging me toward the door, and then I ran. I ran out the door, through the hallway. Past the other conscripts and instructors. Past the mess hall and the open gate in the fortress wall. I ran through the village around the outer rims of the college and down the sand dunes until my feet were in the ocean. I didn't even care that my shoes were getting wet, or that soft, sucking waves were pulling me further and further out into the ocean.

Braxus was right there; he took my wrist gently in his mouth, the waves splashing up on his midnight fur, holding me so I didn't walk any further into the ocean. I collapsed down to my knees in the waves and allowed my salty tears to be dragged away by the sea. Braxus whined, but didn't release my hand. I realized I was sobbing, and he came around, putting his body between the ocean and me. Burying my face in his stiff fur, I cried even harder.

I don't know how long I cried. Minutes. Hours, maybe. But suddenly, strong arms were picking me up out of the water and walking me back to the shore. I wasn't surprised to see Hayle, even though I hated that he would see me like this. I scrubbed my eyes and wriggled in his arms, but he just tightened them around my body.

"Be still," he ordered, and I didn't want to fight the command. When he sat on a rock, instead of putting me down beside him, he rearranged me in his lap. I turned my face into his chest, trying to wipe the tears from my face and hoping he'd just think they were ocean water. "What's wrong, Avalon? Why are you crying like your heart's breaking?" he asked softly into my hair, and any control I had over my tears disappeared.

"I'm cursed." My voice was shaky and weak, but I couldn't even find it in me to care. "I murdered my mother, and now I'm cursed."

Eight

Hayle

When Braxus had sent me images of Avalon trying to walk into the ocean, my heart had tried to explode out of my chest. I'd never run so fast, drawn on my power so deeply, as I had in that moment. I'd ordered Braxus to stop her, and he'd sent me the mental equivalent of snapping teeth. He liked the girl, that much was obvious; they both did.

Alucius had been mad that I was too slow—despite running faster than any other person in Boellium could ever contemplate, it still wasn't fast enough for my hound. She seemed aggravated that she had to watch my back instead of running ahead and helping Braxus with the girl. She kept circling back, nipping at my heels, urging me to go faster. I'd have been annoyed if I wasn't so panicked. That didn't make sense either.

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Neither did the pain in my chest when I saw her from the top of the dunes, kneeling in the water, crying into Braxus's fur. I'd flown down the sand and had her up in my arms, safe against my chest, before I'd even consciously thought about it.

I'd carried her away from the unpredictable ocean, away from the temptation to walk into the waves and just keep going. I carried her to the long, flat rocks that the people on BoemoutheIsland used as seats when they came down to this beach. The conscripts of the college had used this very bay as a place to party more than once.

There was room beside me, but I couldn't bring myself to put her down. Not yet. Her clothes were plastered to her body, her shoes a soggy mess around her feet. The cool sea breeze was whipping around us, and I worried that she would get sick if she didn't get back to her dorm room soon and change.

Even with all that, I couldn't let her go. I wasn't sure why, but I didn't fight the urge. Her pain was so thick in the air that I could almost taste it on my tongue.

"What's wrong, Avalon? Why are you crying like your heart's breaking?"

Her sobbing increased, and she murmured so quietly, I wondered if I misheard her. "I'm cursed. I murdered my mother, and now I'm cursed."

What the actual fuck? I thought about what I'd read in her enrollment ledger, about her witnessing her mother's death, but it had mentioned she was a toddler. I didn't know much about the powers of the Ninth Line, but I'd met my fair share of toddlers, and they couldn't shit by themselves, let alone murder their parents. "What do you mean?"

She just shook her head. “I don’t remember it. But she fell off a cliff and into the ocean.”

“That sounds like a terrible accident, Avalon, not murder,” I said softly, and she shook her head, crying harder.

“They said I pushed her.” Shock had me blinking in stunned silence, but I didn’t release her. “Her maid said I lured her to the edge, then pushed her off.”

What the hell did I even say to that? I’m sure you didn’t mean it? You were basically a baby. Something about this whole thing seemed off. “I’m sure she was mistaken, Avalon. She was a grown woman, and you were a baby. I’ve never met any toddler who could push me over, let alone right off a cliff.”

She was shaking her head again. “Doesn’t matter whether it’s true or not. It’s what everyone believes, and it’s followed me through my life, like a cloak of darkness I can never emerge from. I thought coming here would be different, but it’s followed me here too.”

I looked at Braxus, who was licking the salty water from the pads of his paws, and my companion sent me an image of Instructor Perot, followed by flashes of pictures that I deciphered to mean that Perot and Avalon’s mother were related, and he held some resentment for her death.

I was going to kill him. I didn’t care if he came around by the end of the conversation or not. He’d caused this turmoil in Avalon, and that was an offense I wasn’t sure I was willing to let go. I couldn’t explain this feeling in my chest, this urge to protect a girl I barely knew.

Alucius gave me an eye roll like I was still an errant pup and not her master. Well, kind of master. To the rest of the world, they followed my commands; in reality, our

goals merely aligned and they did what I asked out of respect.

Alucius sent me an image of two wolves licking each other's muzzles and then her and Braxus fuc... "Alucius!" I snapped, and she gave me a toothy grin.

Avalon sat up, startled, and she looked over at my hound who looked completely innocent, lying on the sand like a stuffed toy and not a killing machine.

I got Alucius's point. She thought we were mates. Or at least that I was attracted enough to Avalon that I should fuck her. It would explain the ache in my chest at her pain, I guess. It was pretty inconvenient, though.

My parents would not be impressed if I brought home a mate from the Ninth Line. It would be like bringing home a seacucumber and telling my parents we were soulmates. Still, we respected the Goddess and her plans more than any other Line, so they might dislike the idea, but they'd still accept her.

I gave into the compulsion to breathe in her scent. She smelled really nice when she wasn't covered in sweat and dirt from the arena.

I sat her up. "I haven't known you very long, Avalon Halhed, but I've been watching you enough to know a little. Someone who'd murder their mother would not save a stolt from being eaten. In fact, they'd probably stay to watch. A person who would purposefully harm another would not share their food with the conscripts from the Twelfth. Or with my hounds. You might pretend to be an ice queen, but you have a big heart that you're trying to hide." She snorted disbelievingly, and I wondered if she didn't actually see it. "Your family... They don't believe that you murdered your mother, right?" Anyone with two working brain cells would know it would've been an accident.

But the darkness in her eyes told me that they did. "My father—" She broke off, like

she didn't know what to say, and honestly, if she told me that he believed a tiny toddler could push a fully grown adult anywhere, I would run all the way to Rewill and kick his ass myself.

"Your father?" I prompted.

She sucked the back of her teeth, looking back over the ocean. I held her tighter around the waist, the fear of seeing her neck-deep in the water earlier coming back full force.

"He believed the maid. He went crazy. He stopped everyone from taking care of me from the moment she died. My brothers told me he'd scream that I'd murdered my caregiver, and I'd never have another."

Shock made me stiff again. Well, shock and a rage so strong that I could feel it singe my veins. "He ordered everyone to neglect an infant?"

The idea was insane to me. In the Third Line, family was everything. Community was everything. Our bonds were our very lifeblood, and central to that was the idea that every child was a gift, to be loved and cared for by the whole Line. There was nowhere inside Hamor that a child could not go by itself and be one hundred percent cared for and protected. Anyone who committed violence against someone vulnerable would die a very painful, drawn-out death.

The idea of a father ordering their child to be neglected, despite the chance of death, was abhorrent to me.

She was nodding, no self-pity in her eyes. Like she believed she deserved it. "My eldest brother, Kian, defied him. He took care of me, with a little secret help from the staff, until I could care for myself. Kian stood up to my father, as his Heir, even though he was only ten."

I tried to imagine how much courage it would have taken a boy to stand up to his father. I wanted to visit her family, to shake her brother's hand and murder her father slowly. There would be no doubt who killed him.

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“Your brother believed you didn’t kill your mother?” I asked, and when she winced, I regretted my careless words.

She shrugged. “Maybe? He said that it was irrelevant whether I pushed her or she fell. What mattered was that she’d loved me with all her heart, and she’d want me to be cared for. So that’s what he’s done. He cared for and loved me, and made sure my siblings did too, despite our father’s rage. We became closer for it; we had a bond born from death and violence.”

I was silent, but I held her tightly, until her stomach rumbled and the warm sun began to set behind the castle, making the chill of the wind even colder.

I forced myself to release her. “Come on. Let’s go get you changed into something dry and feed you.” I held out my hand, hoping she’d take it. But for the first time in my life, I wasn’t sure the gesture of friendship, or something more, would be accepted.

Eyeing my hand like it was a rattlesnake ready to strike, she eventually placed her small palm in mine, and I tried very hard to hold back my smile.

In that moment, I made a silent vow to her. One that I would tell her out loud when the time was right. She would never be alone again—I would stand between her and her ghosts like a shield, until she was ready to fight them herself.

Nine

Avalon

Hayle Taeme had fed me and put me to bed after my emotional breakdown. To thank him, I avoided him like he carried the pox over the next two weeks. Shame heated every inch of skin when I remembered him holding me like a child as I poured out my deepest, darkest secret. He now had something over me, not that it wasn't common knowledge back home. But Rewill was basically another country to the people down here; I doubted the hushed rumor had made it all the way to the walls of Boellium.

There was a stolt in my pocket and a hound on my heels, and I wondered if maybe I was an honorary member of the Third Line now, with the amount of animal companions I had. My body felt stronger after being here for a month. A month of regular meals, rigorous exercise, and sweet sleep. I was basically a new woman.

However, a month was how long my loner mystique had kept away the other conscripts. As someone sat down opposite me at my table in the dinner hall, I kind of expected Hayle. Instead, it was the girl from the Twelfth who'd checked up on me. The one who had seen my boobs.

"Viana." She said the word like I was meant to know what it meant.

"What?" I asked around a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

Shaking her head like I was the ill-mannered one, she sighed heavily. "My name is Viana. You never asked. It's kind of rude, if you ask me, considering I went to check if you still lived."

"Avalon," I replied. "And thank you, I guess?"

Viana plucked a bread roll from my plate, but replaced it with a muffin. "You need the sugar for energy. Everyone knows who you are, Avalon. Even if you weren't the only Ninth Line conscript, you have one of Taeme's hounds following you around at

all times. It's made you a bit of a topic of conversation..”

Great. So much for keeping a low profile and getting through this without making waves. “Not my choice.” I looked down at a grumpy Braxus. “Not that I don't enjoy their company,” I told the hound, and he gave me a toothy grin.

Viana looked between me and the hound like I was nuts. “That shit right there is why everyone knows who you are. Also, why everyone is too scared to approach you. But I've got nothing to lose, and you look like you need a friend.”

I wanted to argue with her, but if I was honest, loneliness was hitting me harder than I'd thought it would. I'd always lived a solitary lifestyle, people avoiding me to stay out of the firing line of my father's wrath. But I'd still spoken to the cook and my brothers and the maids. The stablemaster. The shepherd. They weren't more than acquaintances—except my brothers, of course—but they'd helped stem the loneliness.

Purposefully isolating myself here had been different. I ate alone. Trained alone. Lived alone. And it was harder than I'd thought.

Shaking my head, I reminded myself of my goal. Get through this with no ties. I wanted to disappear after this. I didn't want to emotionally connect myself to someone I'd lose all too soon.

“Thank you, but I'm fine. I like being on my own.”

Viana just raised her eyebrows at me. “No one likes being alone, Avalon Halhed. We aren't made for that. But if you aren't ready to admit you need a badass bestie, I'll be waiting.” She waggled her eyebrows. “Or maybe you're getting it on the regular from Hayle Taeme, so you really aren't lonely. If that's the case, though, you definitely need a girls' night to tell me if the rumors are true.”

“Rumors?”

“That Hayle Taeme is hung like a horse. I’ve heard it hangs between his thighs like a third leg. Peony heard that he had to get special undergarments made to keep it contained, so people don’t accidentally clip it during hand-to-hand combat training.”

The hound beside me grunted, his eyes sparkling, and I wondered if he was keeping track of my conversations. He was a dog, though; there was no way he could inform his master that we were talking about his cock, right?

Looking at Braxus, I wasn’t entirely sure that was true. “I’m not sleeping with Hayle,” I told Viana softly. “I’m not sleeping with anyone.”

I’d never slept with anyone. No one would dare to defile the daughter of the Baron of the Ninth Line, and I’d never had any suitors, the way my sister Lenora did. Everyone knew of my father’s hatred—it was infamous up north. Ignoring my existence was a better way to get into his good books than asking for my hand.

“Yet I’ve seen how he looks at you,” Viana told me with a devious chuckle. “He’s imagining what you taste like between your thighs.”

I gasped, my face flooding pink. “Viana!”

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The girl opposite me cackled even louder, drawing stares. “You Upper Elevens are such prudes. So caught up in your alliances and chastity and arranged marriages, you don’t know how to live.” She looked at me with pity. “When life is a struggle, you find your happiness where you can,” she said seriously, before her smirk reemerged. “Especially if it’s in an orgy, and you’re the meat in a Polus and Link sandwich.” She looked over her shoulder at two Twelfth Line guys.

They were looking better too; regular food had filled out their muscles, and their faces were less gaunt. Water that they could use bathing instead of just surviving meant that they were clean and handsome. And they were looking over at Viana like they wanted her to consume her pleased screams.

I felt myself flushing just being in the proximity of that much sexual tension. “Good for you.” I wasn’t even being my usual sarcastic self. “Won’t one get jealous?”

She shook her head. “In Eelrood, between death and malnutrition, birth rates are down. It’s quite common to create family groups. Several men to tend to one family, one farm”—she gave me an exaggerated wink—“one woman.”

“And the Twelfth are all just... what? Having orgies down in the bowels of Boellium?”

Viana just smirked. “You’re always welcome to come down to the Twelfth and find out.”

My cheeks pinkened, and I was trying to think of a way to say thanks, but no thanks, but I had the distinct impression that Viana was teasing me, especially as she

continued eating with a stupidly large grin on her face.

A moment later, her face went slack at something over my shoulder, and I looked, almost unsurprised to see Hayle standing there. “Viana.” His voice was smooth and cool, like marble.

The girl from the Twelfth looked up at Hayle like he was some kind of avenging angel. “Mr. Taeme.”

I snorted, and he turned his gaze on me, his eyes sparkling with mirth. “Just Hayle is fine. I’m about to steal your dinner companion, so I suggest you move along.”

It was a clear dismissal, but I knew from experience, she wasn’t easily deterred. She looked back at me and raised an eyebrow. “I’ll see you later?” she asked lightly, and Hayle actually growled in the back of his throat.

He couldn’t know what we’d been talking about, right? He hadn’t even been in the dining hall with us.

“Avalon won’t be going to the bowels with you, Viana,” he said with so much certainty that I knew without a doubt, he’d been informed of our conversation.

I looked at the hound at my feet. Any doubt I might’ve had that he was sentient and aware, could follow along with conversations and was reporting back to his master, disappeared. Traitor, I mouthed, and Braxus just huffed and laid on his side, like he was exhausted by my humanness. I still reached down and scratched the fur at the base of his tail, so he knew I wasn’t really angry at him.

Looking up at Hayle, I narrowed my eyes. “Hayle isn’t the boss of me, Viana, so I’ll do what I like.”

Viana looked between us and stood. “I’ll leave you two to decide. Uh, it was good to see you, Hayle.” She stepped away, and behind Hayle’s back, she tapped the middle of her thigh, mouthing the word, Horse.

My cheeks were on fire. It took every ounce of etiquette training I’d ever had to wipe the horror from my expression and look up at Hayle dispassionately. “Is there something I can help you with, Hayle? Perhaps you’re here to reclaim your furry snitch?”

He threw his head back and laughed, the sound drawing the eyes of everyone in the room. Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“Will you stop?” I hissed.

He continued to look amused. “Why are you avoiding me?”

I screwed my nose up at him. “I’m not avoiding you.” Lies.

“I haven’t seen you in two weeks.”

“Classes are busy, I guess.” I stood, moving around him, carefully not meeting his eyes. Let everyone around us think it was deference, not that I was embarrassed that I’d been caught talking about his cock.

After taking my tray to the return spot, I almost sprinted from the dining hall, Braxus on my heels. Not far behind him was Hayle, eating up the distance with his damn long-legged stride, even though he wasn’t moving faster than a swagger.

Spinning on my heel, I waited for him to catch up. “Fine, I was avoiding you. I’d like it if you could respect my wishes and leave me alone.” I spun back around and strode toward the main building and the library. I had a reading list a mile long, but at least

Instructor Perot had stopped calling on me in class. Our little heart-to-heart had obviously traumatized us both, because now, his eyes just skipped over me like I wasn't even there.

That hurt too, in its own way, but at least I understood it.

Hayle appeared back at my side, the two hounds walking behind us. Sighing, I looked over at him. "I should have saved my breath."

Shrugging, he kept up easily. "Probably. My mother always said I must have an affinity for a donkey, because I was a stubborn ass." His smile was fond, and it didn't take a genius to know that he loved his mom, and that she probably loved him.

I snorted a laugh. Man, what would it be like to have parents who loved you? "She sounds like a smart woman."

"Doesn't hurt that she's where I inherited my stubbornness from, so if I'm an ass, so is she. I wouldn't say that to her face, though. She could probably put me down without breaking a sweat." Hayle reached out and grabbed my hand. "Wait a second. Look, Avalon, we can forget the beach ever happened, if that's what you want. I won't push you about it, though I think talking to someone about it might be helpful."

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He went on before I could tell him to mind his own business. “Do you know what I really want, though?” he murmured, stepping close until he was towering over me, his sparkling eyes hot with something I didn’t want to name. “What I really want is to invite you to a party.”

I knew the Upper Six partied hard. Sometimes, if I was at the base of the stairs that ascended from the atrium, I could feel the steady thump of drums, even if magic muted the sounds. But that wasn’t for the Lower Six, which included me.

“I’m not allowed at your parties,” I whispered.

“Who says? Vox Vylan? Fuck him. I’m inviting you, and I want you to come.” He said those last five words as a purr, and I could imagine him saying them, in a different time, a different place, making heat pool in my lower belly. “What do you say, Avalon? You can even bring your friend from the Twelfth.”

I wanted to say that Viana wasn’t my friend, that I barely knew her, but admitting to this man that I had no friends was just too embarrassing. “Uh, I’ll think about it?”

His grin made me lose my breath. It was bright and wide and heartstopping. “I’ll pick you up from your floor at ten.”

Before I could argue more, he was gone. I looked down at Braxus, whose tongue was hanging from the side of his mouth, as if he found this whole thing hilarious. “Don’t you laugh, buddy. You’re on my shit list.”

Turning from the library doors, I moved back to the stairs down to the dorms.

Studying would have to wait. I had to find something to wear.

Ten

Avalon

Despite Hayle's insistence that I never go down to the bowels of Boellium, I found myself descending past my own floor and down three more flights to the home of the Twelfth. My first impression was that it was loud. There were people laughing, music was playing, and conversations were being yelled over the top of one another. The smell of food cooking permeated the landing. The whole floor felt like a living, breathing creature.

I knocked on the door, but no one answered. I knocked again, but I doubted anyone could hear me over the noise. I pushed it open slowly, unsure of what I was about to see. Viana had suggested that it was an all-day orgy, but when I stepped in, everyone was wearing pants. Most of the guys were without shirts, though, and I felt a flush climb my cheeks.

I had brothers. I'd seen my fair share of man nipples in my life. But there was something about being surrounded by so many unrelated-to-me man nipples that was freaking me out. Why did I keep thinking about their nipples? That was odd, right?

Fuck, I should just go.

"Are you okay there?" A girl shorter than Viana, with shockingly orange hair, appeared in front of me.

"Uh, I'm looking for Viana?"

The girl rolled her eyes and smirked. "She disappeared to her rooms with Polus and

Link ten minutes ago, so if you want to talk to her before tomorrow, we better interrupt now. Wait here.” She strode down a short hall and slammed her fist against a random door. “Viana! Avalon Halhed is here to see you!” Thumping once more for good measure, she walked back toward me. “They’ll probably need a minute. Are you hungry? Sit down; we’ll grab you something to eat. Clancy, get Avalon a bowl of the stew that’s on the back burner.”

She pushed me toward the couch, where two other people were sitting, eyeing Braxus like he was about to pounce and tear them to shreds. I’d say that was preposterous, except he’d done that very thing the day I’d arrived. I gave the hound a raised eyebrow, and he huffed, wandering over to sit by the door.

The people on the couch scooted to the left, giving me a spot, their smiling faces welcoming. Clancy appeared with a deep bowl of thick stew that was golden in color. It smelled amazing, spicy and aromatic, and my mouth watered, despite the fact that I’d eaten less than an hour ago. He also edged toward Braxus with a large lamb bone in his hand, placing it on the ground a good four feet in front of the hound and scurrying away. Braxus just yawned and stretched toward the bone, picking it up and gnawing on it like it was the very least of the tributes he deserved.

Chuckling at the hound’s antics, I lifted a spoonful of stew to my mouth, and despite a soft burn, let out a moan of appreciation. “This is amazing,” I mumbled. We didn’t eat many spices in the Ninth Line lands; they didn’t grow easily in the high-altitude cold weather, and we were too far away to trade with the Eleventh and Twelfth lines, who had the right climate to grow such things. So whatever this stew was, it was a damn revelation. “I’ve never tasted anything like it.”

Clancy looked wildly pleased. “We brought the spices with us. We all know the Upper Six are allergic to flavor, so anything served in the food hall will be tailored to their tastes. We stockpile what food we can from scheduled mealtimes and make dishes from home down here.” He handed me a plate with some kind of fluffy bread

resting on top like a cloud. “We do tasks for the kitchen staff to get the leftovers as well.”

I was wondering how I could get a permanent invitation to dinner when Viana appeared, her hair mussed but smiling. Two guys stumbled out after her, giving me a wave, but heading over to a large vat in the corner. They poured what looked like wine into wooden cups.

“Hey, Avalon. I can’t believe you’re here. If Hayle Taeme told me to do anything, I’d say, ‘Yes, sir.’”

“Is this before or after he spanked you and told you that you’re a good girl?” the redhead quipped.

Viana threw back her head and laughed. “Hopefully both.” She looked back at me. “Are you here for the orgy?”

My face was physically on fire at this point. I was just waiting to smell the smoke. “Uh. No. Hayle invited me to a party, and said you could come too, if you want. No pressure.”

Viana actually squealed. It was ear-piercing, and I was fairly sure had damaged my eardrum. “Oh my fucking Goddess. An Upper Six party. I bet they have the good booze, Acacia.”

The redhead, Acacia, screwed up her nose. “Yeah, but it comes with a heavy dose of condescension, and guys who are hot but probably couldn’t find the clit if you gave them a road map and step-by-step instructions.” She gave me an apologetic expression. “Hayle Taeme excluded, of course.”

I shrugged. “I don’t sleep with Hayle. He could be shit.”

Viana snorted. “I’ve heard rumors, girl. I think if your dick is that big, you’re good by default.”

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“Unless he’s a two-pump pony,” Clancy offered.

“A three-stroke joker,” someone shouted from the other side of the room.

“A preemer-creamier,” Acacia added.

I wasn’t sure if you could die from the embarrassment of being a prude, but I was testing the theory right now.

Viana giggled with delight. “Avalon is going to have to save the poor man’s reputation now.” She looked at the group of people in the room with so much love. What would it be like to grow up in such a close community, bonded by hardship and laughter? “I’d love to attend your stuffy Upper Six party. Goddess knows, you’ll need the backup up there with those sea dragons.” She looked at my tattered pants and oversized shirt. “Is that what you’re wearing?”

I shrugged. “I don’t have anything else.”

Viana looked at Acacia, who was aghast. Glancing over her shoulder at the rest of the room, she clapped loudly. “You know what to do!”

I wasn’t sure how it had happened, but two hours later, I stood in front of the mirror in Viana’s room. I was in a deep yellow dress that Acacia had informed me was dyed with the pods of some of the spices I’d eaten. It was a rough fabric that had been treated with love and respect until it created something beautiful and unique. There was beautiful stitching on the bodice and the hem, and the skirt flowed around my body in a swirl when I walked. It laced up at the back, hugging all my curves in a

way that made me look like a siren.

“You guys, it’s beautiful. I promise I’ll take care of it and give it back to you tomorrow.”

Acacia waved me away. “No, keep it. It was always a little long on me, and I’m too lazy to hem it. Besides, I’d never be able to wear it now, because I could never look as amazing as you do in it.” She sighed heavily, but her eyes were shining with mirth.

I spun from the mirror, the fabric swishing with me. “I... I can’t pay you for it. I don’t even have anything to offer you in return.”

Acacia waved a hand. “It is a gift from the Twelfth. We don’t believe in tit for tat. We know that one day if you’re in a situation to help another person, you’ll remember this kindness and how it felt, and you’ll aid the other person.” She sat me down on the chair, pulling out what I assumed was makeup. “Do you know the Twelfth believes that while we are the furthest from the First Line, we are the closest to the Goddess herself? That we survive by honoring her every day—not through pointless dogmatic rituals that make the Upper Six feel vindicated for their cruelty. I mean, we celebrate the small things every day. Helping people, sharing our food, our shelter, our clothing. We thank the Goddess when the seeds take root in our crops, when a baby is born, when we light a bonfire and celebrate life with friends and family. We honor her by living and loving and giving freely.”

Emotion clogged my throat. I might not be close to the First Line, but apparently, I wasn’t close to the Twelfth either. My life had been as cold as our climate, as barren as the mountains that towered around my home.

Choking back the lump in my throat, I murmured, “That’s a good way to live.”

Acacia squeezed my arm. “My mama always said a great tree can’t grow in a desert.”

I wanted to say something, to thank her again, but Viana reappeared, looking beautiful. Her dress was a muted orange that bled down into a deep purple. It should look like too much, but somehow, it was art. “Come on, Avalon! We’ll be late.”

Polus and Link appeared behind her, both dressed for the party. I raised an eyebrow, and the taller one—I was pretty sure he was Link—shrugged. “No offense, but we aren’t letting you go to a party with the Upper Six with only Taeme as protection. The Upper Six can be...” He trailed off, like he was trying to think of a non-insulting thing to call them, his eyes slipping to Braxus.

“Entitled cunts?” Viana supplied.

Link leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “Exactly.”

Having met Vox Vylan on several occasions, I couldn’t even disagree. Hayle seemed different, though.

Viana grabbed my arm, and we ran out of the room, Braxus leading us up the stairs. My thighs were burning by the time we got to my floor. “How do you guys climb from down there to the atrium after training every day?”

Snorting, Viana held out a hand. “We’ve always worked hard. Starving might rob the meat from our bones, but that didn’t mean we got to stop.”

Braxus let out a short bark, announcing that Hayle was already there. Hayle’s eyes went wide as he looked at me, and I realized I hadn’t checked my makeup before we left. Hopefully, I didn’t look like a court jester. But the more Hayle stared, the more I worried.

“Sorry we’re late,” I said warily.

Shaking his head, Hayle grinned. “Right on time. Brought a few extras?” he asked lightly, nodding at Polus and Link.

“Didn’t want to walk into the lion’s den without backup.” I wasn’t going to be apologetic about it.

Hayle, however, just laughed. “Fair. Well then, let’s go.” He held out his elbow. “My lady?”

Placing my fingers in the crook of his arm, I told my thundering heart to behave itself. No ties. No waves. That was the goal.

Who was I kidding? I’d failed miserably already.

Eleven

Vox

Each of the Upper Six Lines took it in turns to host a party. I didn't usually attend, unless I thought it was beneficial to whatever alliance I needed to create, or I needed to get my dick wet, or it was held by the Third Line.

Which was why I was here today. I couldn't let the Third Line get too out of hand, couldn't let Hayle Taeme win more people to his side. So I came to the Third Line parties, and I held court like I was royalty. I invited people to sit with me. I engaged. I was personable and friendly, sociable to a degree that I wanted to vomit at the shallowness of it all.

Looking around the room, I was surprised that Taeme wasn't here; I could see his cousin and a few of his inner circle mingling, as well as people from every one of the other Six Lines that mattered, most of them already well on the way to being black-out levels of inebriated. Before the end of the night, Lines and alliances wouldn't matter as they all got drunk off their faces and fucked like the Lower Lines. Like animals.

A murmur flowed through the crowd, and I tuned out what Ephily from the Fifth was droning on about on my lap, because Taeme had arrived, but not alone.

No, he'd brought three dirt scrabblers from the Twelfth, and her.

I clenched my back teeth, grinding them together, as Avalon Halhed looked around the room with wide eyes. She looked unsure of herself, but fuck, she was beautiful. She was in a dress in the style of the Twelfth Line, which might explain the other

guests, but with her soft, creamy skin and her full breasts, she looked like a goddess.

I fucking hated her. Or perhaps more correctly, I hated that I wasn't fucking her.

“What the hell, Taeme?” Eugene from the Fourth Line muttered. “These parties aren't for them.”

Audacious of him to say that to the host of the party.

I made a mental note to talk to Eugene, especially if he got on Taeme's bad side. The enemy of my enemy was my friend, or whatever the saying was. I dreaded it already, though, because Eugene was a boring, pretentious asshole.

Taeme's eyes snapped to Eugene, his vicious smirk just shy of a snarl. Eugene was an idiot; he wouldn't be able to sense the pure threat in Taeme's stance. “What floor are you on right now, Eugene? Is it yours? No?”

Eugene just stared.

“Then shut the fuck up. I'm the Heir to the Third Line, this whole domain is mine, and I'll invite whoever the fuck I want. Or uninvite anyone who I want. Get the fuck out.”

Eugene blustered, stuttering over his words, but Lucio Taeme just picked him up, walked him to the door of the dorm, and threw him out.

Hayle spun in a circle, meeting the gaze of every person in the room who was staring at the small group. “If anyone else has a problem, get the fuck out.” His eyes met mine, a challenge in them once more. I could fight him over this, but why bother? Having her here would just give me a better chance to fuck with Hayle.

And I didn't give a shit about the dirt scrabblers either. I didn't need to jockey for power like the rest of them. So I shrugged, like it meant nothing to me.

With Taeme and I in agreement, the party had no choice but to restart, and Lucio Taeme turned the music back up. "Shots!" he yelled, receiving some half-hearted cheers, and the night went on. Taeme directed the girl to the other side of the room from me, and pointed out the bar to the Twelfth Line conscripts.

Ephily crawled back into my lap. "What is Hayle thinking, inviting this trash to our parties? Look at their clothes, their hair. They don't fit in here at all," she tittered, and I resisted the urge to shove her off my lap. Ephily sometimes forgot she was Fifth Line, so to me—and my parents—she may as well be Twelfth. She wouldn't be suitable for the Heir of the First Line. I was probably going to end up with someone from Fourth, or if my parents wanted to appease Third, someone from there. If they wanted to cement our place among our own people, I'd probably marry the daughter of one of the Capital diplomats.

What Ephily seemed to fail to understand as she "accidentally" ground on my dick with her ass, was that she could warm my bed, but I had little to no choice in who I married. She was still yammering on, and it was beginning to give me a headache.

Time to distract her. "I'd like a drink."

As predicted, Ephily leapt off my lap like this one act of service was going to secure her a ring.

I watched Avalon Halhed until she was shifting around, and just to fuck with her, I wrapped a small thread of wind around her ankle, then up her calf muscle. Her eyes snapped to mine, and I hated how much I enjoyed the fire in them as she glared. I wondered how she'd look at me if I ran the wind thread a little higher.

Holding her gaze, I curled it further up her dress, twisting it around her knee, then her thigh. Her jaw clenched, her eyes turning furious. I should stop, but something about her reaction was almost addictive. The dislike in her expression that she didn't even try to mask. Her complete lack of social etiquette. So I didn't stop. I moved the wind thread higher, at her very upper thigh, a mere inch from her pussy.

She leapt to her feet, marching toward me. I leaned back in my chair, giving her a crooked grin. I liked her flushed cheeks, even if it was with anger. I liked the way her eyes flashed at mine.

"They really are letting anyone into these parties." I echoed the words of Eugene. "Is there something I can help you with, Ninth?"

She glared at me. "My name is Avalon."

I arched my brow. "I know. And you are infecting the air around me with the scent of mountain sheep shit. So I repeat, what can I help you with, Ninth?"

"You can keep your magic to your goddamn self," she snapped.

I tilted my head and ran a small tendril of air across the seam of her panties. They were damp. "Seems to me you might like it."

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Predictably, her eyes went wide. Unpredictably, her fist snapped out and cracked me in the nose.

I roared as pain shot through my face. I could feel the splash of blood on my hands as I jumped to my feet. “You little...”

Taeme was immediately there, his eyes flashing with his beast that he kept leashed inside. At his feet were his hounds, growling with their teeth bared and saliva dripping from their maws. He stepped between me and the girl. “Make a move, Vylan,” he rumbled. “We’ll see which one of us is more powerful, once and for all.”

I scoffed, which made blood fly between us. “That isn’t even a question, Taeme.” The rest of his Line were behind him, and I didn’t even need to look behind me to know that my own Line was prepared to retaliate on my behalf. I waved a hand behind me, telling them to stand down. I’d gone too far. “Apologies, Avalon. I will keep my magic to myself until you beg me to share it.” I winked, though it hurt my face to do so.

Taeme hissed an angry noise at me, and I rolled my eyes. Fucking Third Line. Little better than animals.

Shaking my head, I looked around the crowd of people all staring at the three of us with varying levels of horror and glee at the thought of me and Hayle throwing down. Turning my back on him, I looked at Shay, my cousin and the next most powerful person in this school after Taeme and I. She was glaring at him, but gave me an equally annoyed look.

“Relax. Just a misunderstanding.” Someone handed me a pocket square, and I squeezed my nose to stop the flow of blood. It had been a decent punch, so I guess Avalon Halhed was learning something at Boellium after all. “Isn’t that right, Ninth? You wouldn’t purposefully commit treason by hurting your superior?”

Avalon’s eyes were still flashing, but she turned on her heel and moved back across the room to her Twelfth Line friends. I found her lack of bootlicking refreshing. How long had it been since someone other than Hayle Taeme and the rest of the Third Line disrespected me so thoroughly?

I grinned, and when Ephily shied away, I knew I must look like a mess. Taking the drink from where it dangled in her hand, I gulped it down. My nose stung, but I pressed a finger to the bridge, icing it so it didn’t bruise too badly. It didn’t feel broken, and I didn’t want to leave the party just yet.

The altercation had changed the vibe of the party, adrenaline now running high, and I noticed more and more people coupling up. One of the Third Line couples was already fucking against the wall, the steady thump of music muffling the girl’s moans. As if permission had been granted, the party kicked into gear, devolving into the debaucherous sexfest that it normally did.

It was inevitable, really. We worked hard, and we partied harder. Most of us would never get the choice later to choose our marital partners, and it was an unspoken agreement through the Lines that what happened at these parties stayed here. The price for running your mouth was ostracization, and I knew that in previous years, there’d been more than a few “accidents” in the training ring for those who’d opened their mouths to people they shouldn’t.

Hayle was sitting with Avalon, and whatever he was saying to her was making her laugh. But her eyes kept shifting around to couples fucking, the room getting hazy and filled with pheromones. The music was low and sensuous, made for fucking and

dancing, and more than a few people were doing both right there on the makeshift dancefloor. Third Line parties always ended here faster than any other Line. Animals.

Avalon's eyes met mine, and I grinned. I reached for Ephily, and she came willingly. "My nose hurts. Make me feel better?" Her eyes sparkled with glee as she began to kiss her way down my body, unbuttoning my shirt as she went. Her fingers scraped down my skin, and I gave myself over to the sensations.

Ephily slowly kissed her way down my abs, and I resisted the urge to push her head where I wanted it. I didn't want or need foreplay. She undid my pants, dropping to her knees between my thighs. So pliable and eager to submit. Tedious, really.

I hated the idea that Ephily was blowing the Heir and not the man. However, she served a purpose for stress relief, and when she took my semi-hard cock in her mouth, I closed my eyes and buried my fingers in her hair. Avalon Halhed's face popped into my mind, and despite the fact it was unfair to Ephily, I imagined it was Avalon's mouth on my cock right now. Imagined her defiant eyes looking up at me as I fucked her face. I was suddenly rock hard and fucking Ephily's mouth, her saliva dripping down my shaft.

"Good girl," I growled at imaginary Avalon. She would be a good girl as she took everything I gave her.

My eyes snapped open, and I looked straight into Avalon's, feeling them burning against my skin. I held her gaze as I blew inside Ephily's mouth, and when Avalon dragged her eyes back to Hayle, I realized he'd been staring at me too. His expression was harder to read.

Ephily tugged on the ends of my shirt, and guilt swept through me. I looked down at her, staring up at me with stars in her eyes. She might have been using me to get a better position in society, but I'd always promised myself I wouldn't use women the

way my brothers did, the way my father did with his mistresses.

So despite the fact that I'd just imagined she was a stubborn girl from the Ninth Line—and I'd just blown in her mouth while Avalon was hatefucking me with her eyes—I pulled Ephily up onto my lap and spoke to her softly for the rest of the night, like she mattered to me. Like that blowjob had meant anything more than a quick release.

I ignored the woman across the room, ignored the way she was laughing huskily at Hayle Taeme, ignored how much I still wanted her. Because she wasn't for me, and never could be.

If I was honest with myself, that was the real reason why I hated her so much.

Twelve

Avalon

I watched some girl give Vox Vylan a blowjob and tried not to examine my feelings on the matter. I didn't look too long at the burning in my gut that felt a little like lust. I hated that prick; if some little sycophant wanted to take his microdick in her mouth, so be it.

I sighed, not prone to lying to myself, especially when his cock was so obviously not a microdick. The girl was gagging as it hit the back of her throat, and it wasn't even halfway past her lips.

Turning away, I looked back at Hayle, who was watching me with dark eyes. "You okay?"

I shrugged. I was okay. Honestly, I could have stood up and demanded he stop

teasing me with his air a lot earlier, but the feel of the breeze gently caressing my leg had been... erotic. Even if the manipulator of the element was a psycho.

“I’m fine. He was just being an asshole.”

Hayle laughed. “That’s his default.” The silence settled back between us, and the mirth slowly left his face. “He’s powerful, though. Stay out of his way if you can.”

Shaking my head, I gave him a sad smile. “You’re all dangerous to me, Hayle. I shouldn’t even be here.” I was breaking my own rules, and this was my karmic justice. I looked around for Viana and her guys, but they seemed to be joining an orgy in the corner of the dorm.

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Ah, sex. The only time Lines didn't matter.

I wouldn't drag them away, but I still stood. "Tell Viana I've gone home?"

Hayle reached up and grabbed my hand. "Don't let him chase you out," he said softly, and I stared down at our connected hands. His skin was so hot, almost like he was running a fever, and his eyes were imploring. He wanted me to stay, but I didn't know why. I didn't want to be the plaything for a powerful man. If I wanted that, I could have stayed in the wilds of the Ninth Line lands and married some rugged mountain lord.

The warmth of Hayle's skin on mine seemed to be running through my veins, heating my body, or maybe it was the desire in his gaze. It was muddling my thoughts, flaying my willpower so that I was helpless to resist his next words.

"Stay, Avalon. For me?"

This was dangerous; nothing good could come from forming an attachment to the man in front of me. "Why?"

The tilt of Hayle's head at my question was undeniably animalistic. The Master of Beasts. "I thought that was obvious?" he rumbled, his deep voice like a caress.

I laughed, a crazed, almost demented sound. "Nothing about this place, or you and these people, is obvious, Hayle." I waved a hand around the room as I leaned closer. "I have no idea why Vox keeps seeking me out to torment me. No idea why this place even exists if we aren't at war." Closer I went, until we were almost nose to nose. "I

definitely have no idea why you gave me a hound bodyguard, or why you invited me to this party, or what your interest in me even is. None of it is obvious.” I went to move away, but Hayle captured my face between his palms.

“I want you to stay because you’ve captivated me since the day you stared down Lucio’s war cat in the atrium to save a stolt. Something inside my chest knows you, wants you, and while I don’t fully understand it either, I trust my instincts above all else. My hounds might actually like you more than me.”

Braxus gave a short yip from somewhere, but I couldn’t turn to look. Because Hayle was holding me tightly, not with his hands, but with the heat of his gaze.

“So sit back down and get to know me. I’ll help you make sense of all this.”

“I’m not going to sleep with you, Hayle Taeme, so if this is an elaborate ruse to get the poor little Ninth Line country mouse into bed, you’re out of luck.” I gave him a hard look. “And if you’re thinking of pressing your obvious advantage over me, you should know I’ve castrated a lot of barn cats in my life, and I’m pretty sure the concept is the same with people.”

Hayle threw back his head and laughed, dropping one hand to cover his dick. “Duly noted, Avalon Halhed. I won’t even suggest taking you to bed until you climb onto my lap and ask me so prettily for what you want.”

It didn’t escape me that both powerful Heirs had suggested I would beg for their attention eventually, but with Hayle, the temptation was too real.

Someone was making pornographic noises, and I couldn’t help but look. The girl kneeling in front of Vox was making a show of it, either for the crowd at the party or for Vox himself. But the Heir had his eyes screwed tightly shut, his head tipped back, and his lips parted in pleasure. His fingers flexed in the girl’s hair as his body tensed.

I'd learned enough about sex from books and stable boys that I knew he was about to blow, and I couldn't look away.

When his eyes snapped open and met mine, there was something burning hot in them. I didn't have time to look away and pretend I wasn't staring at him.

No, he held my gaze as he came in someone else's mouth, and I should've felt disgusted, but instead I felt... hot. Aroused. Disgusted with myself. My pussy clenched—that traitor—and when he looked down at the girl slipping off his cock, I dragged my eyes back to the man beside me.

Hayle was also watching Vox get off, his face unreadable. However, when he turned back to me, he gave me a lopsided grin. "I knew the Heir to the Throne was a one-touch fuck," he murmured against my ear, and I couldn't help but laugh.

I purposefully didn't look at Vox Vylan the rest of the night, or at the girl on his lap. Instead, I concentrated on Hayle, and he made it so easy. He was like a sun the entire party revolved around. He was warm and engaging, and funny. He got me drinks, asked me questions, told me stories until I was sure I was going to wet myself with laughter. People came and went from his stratosphere like moths to a flame.

As the night went on, I forgot more and more why it was a bad idea to fall for Hayle Taeme. He loved his hounds, his home, and most of all, he loved his family. It was right there in every anecdote, every dream, every funny story he shared.

Right now, he was telling me about the time that Lucio had wanted them to prove themselves against their older brothers by doing some ancient ritual that involved a bonfire and being shirtless with mud smeared on their chests. But when they couldn't get the fire started, Lucio had tried pouring his father's home-distilled alcohol on the flames and got third-degree burns to his nipples.

“To this day, he can’t grow chest hair,” Hayle said conspiratorially, pointing over at Lucio, who’d lost his shirt at some point during the night. He was indeed hairless. I couldn’t draw breath through my laughter.

Braxus and Alucius looked relaxed, but both were clearly keeping an eye on the people in the dorm, and it felt nice to just let go. To be happy.

I was pressing closer and closer to Hayle, and the drinks were definitely helping me feel warm and free and a little light-headed. I needed to get out of here before I made stupid decisions and begged him to kiss me already.

As I stood, Hayle stood with me. He was so warm and alive, and for a moment, nothing mattered. Not my past, not my future. It was a heady feeling. “I should go,” I murmured, and he nodded.

“Dance with me, just once, then I’ll walk you home?”

Logically, I knew I should tell him that I didn’t want to dance, that I could find my own way down a couple of flights of stairs, but I didn’t. Instead, I took his outstretched hand and allowed him to lead me to the living room, which was currently doubling as a dancefloor.

The song playing was slow and undulating, a song made for sex and hedonistic pleasures. Hayle’s hands landed on my hips, and he pulled me closer. This wasn’t like the polite waltzes I’d been taught by etiquette tutors. This was something else entirely, something that would make Madam Proctor, my dance instructor, have a stroke.

His leg went between mine, and he hooked my hands around his neck. “I’m so out of my depth,” I muttered beneath my breath, but Hayle just chuckled, moving me to the music.

“Don’t you dance up there in the Ninth?”

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I could feel the hard press of his body, including his dick, and I was desperately trying not to think about it. Had I mentioned his cock was hard too? “Not like this.”

His hands wandered up my spine, and he smiled down at me. That smile should be illegal. Maybe that was his magic really; getting girls to lift their skirts with just a smile. I knew I was helpless to resist.

“Relax, Avalon,” he whispered against my ear. “Feel the music. Let it flow through you into me.” I was so close to him now that if my father could see me, he would have had me thrown in a temple to devote myself to the Goddess quicker than you could say whore. But Father wasn’t here. He would never know that Hayle was almost fucking me with our clothes on, and that I wanted more. So, so much more.

I wanted to feel. I wanted someone to look at me like Hayle was right now, every day and forever.

Shaking away the dangerous thoughts, I stepped back slowly, and Hayle let me go. His eyes were burning with desire. He could have had any person here, and he was undressing me with his eyes. He let me put space between us, but his fingertips remained on my body, like he was finding it difficult. Wishful thinking on my behalf.

He let out a shuddering breath, before a self-deprecating smile crossed his face. “Give me a minute, then I’ll walk you back to your dorm,” he said softly, and I made the mistake of looking down between us. At the hard line of his cock.

Holy shit, Viana was right. Definitely a horse shifter.

“Avalon, if you don’t stop looking at my cock like that...” The gentle threat was there, but the threat was sounding more like a promise of pleasure. With willpower I didn’t know I possessed, I lifted my focus back to his forehead, then down to his laughing eyes. My face felt like it was on fire, and he chuckled deep in his chest; I could almost feel the sound against my skin. “I’m not sure the doe-eyed look is much better. Come, let’s go.”

He led me off the dancefloor, and I couldn’t help but look over at Vox Vylan one more time. He raised an eyebrow at me, and I gave him a rude gesture in return. My etiquette tutor would have been horrified that I’d given the two-fingered salute to the Heir of the Goddess-damned First Line.

More surprising was the fact that Vox threw back his head and laughed, making everyone in the room turn toward him. Hayle looked between us, but shuffled me out of the Third Line dorms and into the stairwell.

Shaking his head at me, he wrapped an arm around my shoulders, his fingers brushing over my bare skin, making goosebumps of pleasure rise in their wake. “I bet you were the kind of kid who stuck their head in a beehive just to see how it worked, weren’t you, Avalon Halhed? Just beware that it doesn’t come back to bite you.”

“Lucky I’m friends with the Prince of Beasts then, isn’t it? A predator with even bigger teeth,” I said haughtily, though it was hard to hold back my grin.

“A Prince, am I? Or was it a predator?” he growled, picking me up and walking down the stairs as sure-footed as one of the wild mountain goats near my home. Still, I squealed and wiggled to get down.

“Hayle, if you drop me down these stairs, I’ll kick your ass,” I warned, making him laugh again. He shifted me in his arms and looked down at me. I realized we were already at the atrium—the halfway point between us and them.

“I’d really like to kiss you,” he whispered, and my heart stopped beating.

It was so foolish, but my tongue darted out, wetting my lips. “I’d like that too,” I whispered, like the silly little idiot I was.

He lowered me slightly, until my feet barely touched the ground, and then he kissed me softly. Just a brush of his lips against mine. He sighed, or maybe it was me, and brushed another kiss across my lower lip once more.

“I knew it would be perfect,” he whispered. Then he scooped me back up in his arms and all but ran down the rest of the stairs. I hung on tight, and when we stopped outside my floor, I looked up at him.

He backed me up against the door to my dorm and kissed me again, but there was nothing soft about this kiss. Nothing delicate. He plundered my mouth with his own, his tongue stroking along mine, tempting me to throw caution to the wind and invite him in. To have a night of something I would remember forever, even if I left it all behind in two years.

Suddenly, I wanted nothing more than that. Nothing more than to see a gloriously naked Hayle. To feel every inch of his skin. To taste him intimately. Fuck the consequences and my goals and Boellium and the Lines.

But Hayle dragged his lips from mine and took a small step away. His lips curled at the edges in a grin that set my soul on fire. “You’re going to ruin me, Avalon Halhed, and I can’t wait.” One more brush of his lips, and then he was climbing the stairs.

I watched him go, forever changed.

Thirteen

Avalon

Something had changed since the party with Hayle. Before last week, the other conscripts of Boellium had been happy to let me live on the periphery. An anomaly, sure, but ultimately uninteresting. Now? Now they knew I was firmly Team Hayle, and the divide in the college was all the more pronounced.

People who'd never spoken to me before went out of their way to converse with me. I'd said hello to more people in the last week than I had in the month I'd been at Boellium. And it wasn't just the Lower Six Lines, either. Even some of the Upper Six acknowledged my existence, especially the Third Line. Their Heir had all but announced that he was interested in me, and they let it subtly be known that they had my back.

However, the people who were loyalists to the First Line had decided to curry favor with Vox Vylan by making my life as miserable as they could. They aimed to maim me in battle practice. They tried to trip me down the stairs of the auditorium. They talked about me behind my back and sometimes to my face.

The ringleader of the new Avalon Halhed Hate Club was none other than the girl who probably still had cock breath from Vox's dick. She was definitely trying to get in Vox's good books by being an almighty bitch, and I even understood, kind of. There weren't a lot of places for women to go in our society, especially if you were of noble blood. Other than being bartered through marriage or being good enough at Boellium to become some kind of high-ranking officer, you were pretty screwed. Literally. Just there to make Heirs.

What a conquest the second son of the First Line would be, the best thing outside the actual Heir, I guess. I'd heard rumors that Vox's older brother, Yaron, was an utter manwhore and already betrothed to some powerful First Line daughter. I'd also heard that he cheated on her as often as he bathed, as was often the trade-off for a life of

luxury and power.

So while I felt sorry for Ephily, she was still a raging asshole. As she tripped me once more by using the Fifth Line's terraforma powers to create a divot in the training ring, I contemplated punching her in that cute button nose and burying her in one of her own potholes. I glared at the woman, then continued back to the large barrels that held the swords. It was hand-to-hand combat day, and she was making it all the more miserable.

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Viana appeared at my shoulder, giving Ephily a death glare of her own. Between us, we had almost zero magic, but I was pretty sure we could beat the crap out of her if it came down to it.

“That woman needs to pull the stick out of her ass and have some self-respect before Hayle’s hounds take a chunk out of her,” Viana said loudly. “Vox isn’t going to want to put his dick in you more, just because you can put some holes in the ground.” She wasn’t talking to Ephily directly, but there was no doubt she wanted her to overhear, as well as everyone else in the training ring.

I laid my hand on my friend’s arm. “Don’t. I don’t want you to become a target too.”

Viana crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m not scared of them, Avie. They’re so full of themselves and their magic, they forget they’re just as susceptible to a knife to the throat as the rest of us.”

Before I could even comprehend her movements, she spun and threw a dagger. Where the hell did that even come from? It thunked into the tall fence right beside Ephily’s cheek. An inch to the left, and it would have been in her rapidly widening eye.

Hell, my eyes were just as wide. “Holy Goddess, Viana. That was incredible. How?”

She grinned at me, dragging me toward the swords. “Comes from starvation. Not a lot of food or money in Eelrood, so a lot of us became excellent hunters. You should see me with a slingshot.”

“You never cease to amaze me, Viana of the Twelfth Line.” Shaking my head, I

pulled a sword out of the barrel, which Viana quickly grabbed from me and discarded. She pulled a smaller, thinner sword from the selection.

“That one was too heavy. Try this one.” As I swung it, she watched me intently. “They use it like a crutch. The magic, I mean. It makes them overly confident. They could do with a reminder every now and then that the rest of us exist.”

Someone appeared with her throwing knife, and I realized it was Lucio, Hayle’s cousin. “I believe this is yours?” he asked lightly, and I didn’t need to have psychic abilities to see the interest in his eyes as he looked at Viana.

She stared back at him, absolutely zero fear in her eyes. “Thank you,” she purred.

“That throw was amazing. I saw it from across the ring.”

She chewed her lip, and I leaned in close. “I verified the rumors about the Taeme family attributes. One hundred percent true,” I whispered to her, and winked at Lucio before disappearing back into the crowd of conscripts. One of us should be getting laid by a guy with a huge... personality.

Hayle and I hadn’t been alone since the party; he’d been called back to Hamor, the seat of the Third Line, for some kind of political business. In fact, Vox had disappeared too. I wondered if they’d caught the same ferry back to the mainland.

Lucio had remained here, and so had Vox’s cousin, Shay, to maintain the status quo. The two glared daggers at each other, and I would’ve thought it was sexual tension, except Shay seemed to throw possessive looks at Ephily. Honestly, it was almost insane, the relationships in this place. One would need a full season and a blessed amount of patience to unravel it all.

“Avalon,” someone called, and I turned to see Eugene from the Fourth Line.

What the hell does he want? I frowned, suddenly missing Braxus and Alucius. I hadn't realized how much of a security blanket Hayle's hounds had become; they always seemed to know more about the people near me than I did, and they had far bigger teeth.

But the hounds had returned to Hamor with Hayle, because they were meant to be his bodyguards, not mine. Hayle hadn't left me without a guard, though, as there was a raven who sat on the fence post even now, watching me with a disconcerting amount of intelligence. Quarry the raven seemed to watch everything, and even though roosting at night underground in my dorm must have been uncomfortable for the bird, he didn't seem to mind.

Epsy, my stolt, loved him. I swear, he curled around Quarry's feet like he was offering to be his very own living nest. So freaking weird. I'd already established Epsy had no survival instincts.

I realized I'd been staring silently at Eugene for too long, and he was looking a little annoyed. "It is Avalon, right?" It might have been posed as a question, but his tone suggested that he was checking I didn't have some kind of brain damage.

"Uh, yeah. What can I do for you?"

"Would you like to spar?"

Fuck no. From memory, Eugene was from the Fourth Line, and if he wanted to spar with me, it was because he wanted something. I bet he'd been practicing swordwork since he could walk. I didn't feel like getting my ass kicked today.

"Uh, no, thank you."

He lifted his sword and swiped half-heartedly at me, forcing me to block his sword

with mine. “It wasn’t a request, Ninth.”

“Yet you posed it as a question, fuckface. How about you work on your language skills?” I snarled back, pushing off his blade and parrying into a strike of my own. He wanted to spar? So be it. He sneered at me, and I rolled my eyes. “We’re sparring now, so how about you get to the point,Fourth?” I used his Line instead of his name, because I could be a disrespectful ass too.

He lazily adjusted his grip and advanced, forcing me backwards. “I just wanted to see what was special about you to have both the First and Third Heirs panting after you. Whatever it is, I can’t see it. You’re magicless. You’re unskilled. You’re uneducated and have no etiquette. You’re fat and averagely pretty.” He swung at me, one after another, making me scramble backwards until I tripped over my feet and landed my ass. He stood over me, his sword to my throat. “You’re nothing. I don’t get it.”

A shadow blazed across my vision, and then Quarry was there, slicing at Eugene with his talons, his loud caws sounding like a death knell. Eugene swiped at the bird with his sword, clipping Quarry.

A giant war cat was there then, and so were Lucio and Viana. The war cat launched itself at Eugene and had his throat between giant fangs faster than should be physically possible. Lucio looked furious. He stomped on Eugene’s wrist that was holding the sword, and an audible snap echoed around the training ring.

He glared down at the man from the Fourth Line. “You were warned,” was all he said, as Viana helped me to my feet.

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Hatred mixed with the pain and fear in Eugene's eyes as Lucio whistled, calling away his war cat. There were divots on Eugene's throat, proof that it had just been a fraction of force away from killing the man.

A soft noise had me searching for Quarry, and I found the raven near the fence, his wing hanging loosely by his side. I fell to my knees in the sand, his soft caws filled with pain. "Oh, sweet boy, did he get you?" I stroked Quarry's head, holding my breath. Blood dripped from his wing, and I hoped Eugene hadn't done irreparable damage. "Does anything else hurt?"

"He says that it's just his wing. But he'll need to go to the healer," Lucio informed me softly over my shoulder. "He also said don't cry."

I hadn't even realized I'd been crying, but when I swiped at my cheeks, they were indeed wet. I looked up at Lucio. "He said don't cry, or was that you?"

Lucio grinned down at me. "A little of both. Reach down, and he'll hop on your arm. Or I can take him if..."

I was already shaking my head. "No. He got hurt protecting me. I'll take him; I owe him that and much more." The war cat huffed, and I smiled down at her. "You too. Thank you for defending me."

The war cat just sat on her haunches, giving me an imperious glare as she cleaned the fur that was ruffled on her shoulder. I'd find a way to thank her later.

I leaned down and Quarry hopped onto my arm, his wing still hanging limply. "Come

on, handsome.” I looked over at Lucio and Viana. “Thank you both too. I...”

Viana waved me away. “It’s what friends do. We have your back.”

I raised an eyebrow at Lucio, who shrugged. “Hayle told me to look after you. You’re important to him, so you’re important to all the Third Line here at Boellium.” He grimaced. “He’s going to kick my ass when he realizes how close you came to losing your head on my watch. I won’t let it happen again. I swear it.”

None of this made sense to me. Not why Eugene was so pissed at me, or why Hayle was making his Line look out for me. We had a barely casual friendship and a few kisses between us, that was it.

Those were questions for my insomnia demon tonight.

Sighing, I excused myself from battle training and went to the healer. The trainers didn’t even blink; they’d likely seen the whole thing and hadn’t lifted a finger.

For the first time since I arrived, I seriously wondered if I’d even survive Boellium.

Fourteen

Hayle

It was standard practice that when a Conclave was called, the current Barons brought their spare Heir. The official Heir to the Lines stayed in their seat of power, out of harm’s way, and acting as an underlying threat in case of betrayal from one of the other Lines.

Any Line could call a meeting of the Conclave, and we’d all have to journey to Fortaare and hear their grievances. Most of the time, it was tedious shit: taxes, land

disputes, tariffs, that kind of thing. However, the Eleventh and Twelfth Lines had called this Conclave in conjunction with each other, and it was already proving more exciting than the sixteen other Conclaves I'd had to attend over the last six years.

Feodore Vylan waved a hand. "I understand that you're facing hardships, Baron Abaster, but we govern our own Baronies. It has been that way since long before my time, and the times before my father. It is not the responsibility of the rest of the Lines to save you from poor planning."

Jacob Abaster bared his teeth at the Baron of the First Line, our ruler, and if I hadn't been able to scent the rage coming off him in waves, I'd almost think it was a smile. "I understand, Baron Vylan, but our people are starving. This drought is a once-in-a-hundred-year weather event. We need aid from the Capital."

"A once-in-a-hundred-year event would insinuate that this has happened before. What did you do a hundred years ago?" Roderick Rován asked haughtily, his nose scrunched as he took in the Lower Lines across from him.

Ingrid Ulsen glared at the man across the table. She was the only female Baroness at the table. "We died, Baron Rován. The Eleventh Line barely survived the Great Drought 163 years ago, and we did it by seeking aid with the Eaglehoth, who graciously allowed the survivors refuge until the drought broke. Our numbers dropped into the hundreds, and it has taken a hundred years for our population to recover."

Baron Rován, of the Fourth Line, shrugged. "Can't Eaglehoth come to your aid again then?" He looked at the Baron of the Eighth Line, like it was his fault he was sitting at the Council table with the rest of us plebeians.

If Ingrid Ulsen was the only female Baron at the table, then Zier Tarrin was the only Baron under the age of fifty. Zier had come into his Baronacy three years ago at the

age of twenty-seven, when his father died in a hunting accident. The new Baron was a lot less patient with the bureaucracy of these events, and I couldn't fault him.

"We would, as we don't believe that we could just sit by and watch as our neighbors starve to death. However, we can't take this many drought refugees without sending our own people into a famine."

There was a not-so-subtle censure in his words, and honestly, I agreed. Having spoken to the Twelfth Line conscripts now, I was a little more sympathetic to their plight than if I'd been living it up over here close to the mainland, with bountiful access to hunting, the ocean and farm land. The food on the table at last night's welcome dinner must have felt like a slap in the face to the Lower Line Barons.

I looked at my father. We should offer assistance. There's power in the Lower Six Lines, despite what Vylan and Rovin think. I'd rather have six friends at my back than enemies all around.

My father inclined his head slightly to tell me he'd heard me and agreed. The fact that our family could speak mind to mind was a well-kept secret and had been the ace up our sleeve in many of these negotiations. "I believe that no matter our Lines, we have a duty to Ebrus to care for all its people. The Third Line will send what aid we can to the Eleventh and Twelfth Lines."

"As will the Eighth," Zier Tarrin agreed, and I saw some relief in his expression. I had a feeling that no matter what decision was made today at the Conclave, Tarrin would have provided aid to the Eleventh and Twelfth Lines.

I'd suggest to my brothers that perhaps a visit to Eaglehoth might be advantageous soon. My father was already talking about retiring to spend more time with family, and Remy and Lyle would step up sooner rather than later. Having good relations with a younger Baron would definitely ease the tension of these things.

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Lunderov, of the Seventh Line—a small island Barony that sat in the middle of the Alutian Sea, almost directly between my home of Hamor and the western parts of Ebrus—offered to transport the goods from the eastern side of the country to the west, cutting weeks off the transport times. The Seventh Line had seafaring magic, and you could get from Hamor to the seaports of Teneby in four days.

Not everyone offered assistance—most notably the Fourth Line, whose very magic was the weather and could break the drought in a week, and the First Line, who were just asshats. However, almost everyone from Fifth Line down offered aid.

Vox Vylan looked tense as he left, which gave me a little satisfaction. If Vox was an asshole, then his father was a power-hungry megalomaniac. But he was powerful in magic, and no one could stand against him or his Line.

Baron Abaster came over and shook my father's hand. "We appreciate you speaking up. Your position definitely influenced the outcome of today."

Father's eyes slipped to mine, and I could see pride there. "Of course. We are all one country; divisions help no one."

They began talking about trades and logistics, and I wanted to shed my human skin and run. We would head back to Hamor tonight, and then I'd be on the ferry back to Boellium War College by the end of the week. I'd run all the way there if I had to; it had been a long time since I'd run with my hounds.

The more I thought about it, the more the idea excited me. That freedom to run and hunt had been denied to me for far too long. There were no good places to flex my

skills on the tiny island of Boemouthe. If I didn't want all the Lines knowing our powers, I had to stay constrained in my human skin.

I transmitted the idea to Alucius and Braxus, getting their enthusiastic approval, if the tail wagging was anything to go by. Decision made, I waited until my father was done with politics and we were in our carriage home.

We both sat in silence for a moment, lost in our thoughts, before my father broke it. "You're heading back to Boellium in the morning then?"

I was no longer surprised about what my father knew. He'd been this way my whole life, always far more knowledgeable than he should be.

"Yes. I thought I might run back with my hounds. It's been too long since the beast has been able to stretch its legs."

My father arched a brow at me. "And it has nothing to do with the girl from the Ninth Line back at the college?"

I clenched my back teeth and shot a glare at my hounds. Braxus huffed, and Alucius glared right back. They both protested in my mind that it wasn't them, and I reached out and scratched their heads in apology. I shouldn't have doubted them. They were loyal to our family, but to me first and foremost.

My father had his own animal spies. It could have been a mouse in the kitchen, or a kestrel from above who'd seen me mooning over Avalon Halhed.

Taking in a deep breath, I steeled my spine, then raised my eyes to meet my father's piercing gaze. "Avalon is my Soul Tie. My other half. She calls to me in a way I don't understand, but she's mine."

My father stared at me for a long time, his eyes a blazing gold. His gaze had disconcerted many men before, but it was the same gaze that had watched me learn to shift forms, to ride a horse, to wield a sword. I knew beneath it was a love so deep that he'd lay down his life for me.

Finally, he nodded once. "When you choose to bring her home, we'll be excited to meet your Tie."

And that was it. No censure. No edict that she wasn't good enough.

It was what separated us from the other Lines, what made our people so loyal. Family came first, and the honor of the Line came second. And every single person who was the Third Line was family to the Taemes.

We were as loyal as we were fierce.

I knew politically, this was a setback for the family. We couldn't create bonds through my marriage anymore, and allying with the northerners was not beneficial to us at all. Besides, I'd barely held myself back from ripping off Baron Halhed's skull already, after what Avalon had told me of him. I couldn't make myself ally with him if I tried. So Avalon would bring nothing to the strength of the Third Line, not politically at least.

But to me, and to my family, it wouldn't matter. A Soul Tie was something greater than marriage, something greater than even magic. It was the very hands of fate that made us for one another, and it was so rare that the last Tie had been my grandparents. It was respected and revered. The Line would cope without marrying me off to some Fifth Line golden child or First Line debutante.

A sea falcon slammed into our carriage with uncanny precision, coming to rest on the bench seat beside my father. Zephyr was my father's eye in the sky. The sea falcon

was as familiar to me as my own beasts and had been a constant in our household for as long as I could remember.

Whatever Zephyr was telling my father had him frowning, before he looked at me. My heart stilled in my chest. He flicked his fingers, and the horses slowed. There was no groom or driver. The horses pulled the carriage out of loyalty to my father.

“There has been an issue at Boellium. Someone attacked your Soul Tie, although Lucio was there to stop it. Quarry was injured.” I was already jumping from the carriage before my father had even finished. He leaned out the door, shouting at my retreating back, “Do not change until you reach the Mistwoods, Hayle. I mean it.”

The Mistwoods were the edge of the Third Line lands, and the dense forest meant we could shift unseen. I held up my hand in acknowledgement, and took off through the trees. My hounds were already running alongside me. It would take me an hour to make it to the Mistwoods on human feet, then an entire day to get to Ovl if I ran as a beast.

I didn’t care. I’d swim the whole way to Boemouthe if I had to, and if anyone in that forsaken place had hurt my Soul Tie, I would burn the place to the fucking ground in retribution.

Fifteen

Avalon

“My poor, sweet hero. Do you want some more steak?”

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Quarry squawked pitifully, opening his little mouth like he was a baby bird, and I popped some of the meat into his beak. He had a wooden box filled with the softest fabrics the healers would let me have, and was positioned in a prime spot in front of the fire in my dorm room. My stolt Epsy was curled around him, looking at him lovingly.

Lucio had left his war cat with me, just in case someone else got murderous thoughts toward me before Hayle returned. Honestly, I thought Eugene might have been an anomaly. With both Hayle and Vox away for the time being, the buzz around me had died off.

Well, until Eugene had tried to chop my head off, and then it picked back up again.

“I swear, I just wanted to get through these two years without drama. What the heck happened?” I said to Leviat, the war cat, who looked at me like I was stupid. I didn’t know how she managed to convey her thoughts so clearly, but I knew she was here begrudgingly, that she thought I was as useless as a cub, and she only remained in case there was a chance to eat someone.

Epsy had remained by Quarry’s side, perhaps a little because the war cat still looked at him like she wanted to eat him. Lucio had promised me she wouldn’t, but there was some serious longing in the predator’s eyes.

Suddenly, the war cat was on her feet, ears pricked as she looked at the door to the dorm. I stood too, palming the knife I’d been using to cut up Quarry’s food. The bird seemed unperturbed, but maybe he was just full and sleepy?

Blink. The door to my dorm slammed open, and Hayle was there, his hounds on his heels.

Blink. He was in front of me, picking me up in his arms and holding me in a hug so tight, I couldn't take a deep breath in.

"Hayle!" He nuzzled his face into my neck, inhaling me into his lungs. Well, at least one of us could inhale. "You're suffocating me."

He finally loosened his arms and dropped me to my feet, but didn't release me entirely. He looked down at my face, and when he saw the slight cut on my throat, his eyes turned murderous. "I'm going to destroy him."

He spun, but I grabbed his hands just in time to halt him. "Hayle, stop. It's fine. Calm down."

"Calm down? Calm down?!" He was definitely losing it. "Eugene almost killed you."

I dragged him to the couch, my free hand dropping down to reassure the hounds that were snuffling at my palm. I scratched their coarse fur, and they licked my fingers. They were filthy, with a twig even caught in Braxus's coat. "You guys look rough."

Leviat licked her paw, like even being in the room with the hounds was making her dirty, and then slunk out of the room, her need to watch over me done now that Hayle and the hounds were back. "Thank you, Leviat!" I called after her, and she swished her tail in my direction.

Hayle watched the cat go. "Lucio has a lot of explaining to do. How he let anyone get close enough to—" He cut off, like the idea of me getting injured actually physically hurt him too. He sat down on the couch, but pulled me onto his lap. I hadn't realized we'd progressed this far in our friendship, but it was obvious that Hayle needed this,

and there were worse places to be than snuggled into the chest of a very hot man.

I held his neck as he stroked his cheek against mine, marking me in an animalistic display of possession. “It wasn’t Lucio’s fault. Who could have predicted Eugene becoming a fucking lunatic? Besides, Quarry was there to protect me.”

The raven cooed happily, drawing Hayle’s attention. He was silent for a time, and I wondered if perhaps they were conversing. Finally, he drew his eyes back to mine. “I owe Quarry a life debt.”

Braxus huffed and laid down at my feet, his head knocking against my ankles. Alucius laid by the door, rolling onto her back, sticking all four feet in the air and falling asleep immediately.

Hayle chuckled low in his chest. “They’re exhausted. We ran.”

I gaped at him. “From Hamor?” He nodded, and I blinked at him. “Why? Lucio said you wouldn’t be back until the weekend.”

Instead of answering my question, he kissed me. No, it wasn’t a kiss. That seemed too mild for the way his lips devoured me, his tongue pushing into my mouth, stroking mine like he was tongue fucking me, like he couldn’t get enough of the taste of my lips. I kissed him back, because holy shit, and his hands slid to my hips, pulling me tight against his body and the hard ridge of his cock.

“You’re mine, Avalon Halhed. Mine to protect.” He squeezed my hips. “Mine to kiss. Mine to pleasure.”

Uh, yes please. I slipped my legs either side of his thighs, and then his cock was there, rubbing on the rough fabric of my conscript uniform, barely anything between us. We let our bodies speak for us as he ground up into my core, making me moan.

He dragged his mouth from mine, panting hard. “Avalon, please,” he begged.

He wanted to fuck. I had enough clarity of mind to know that. And I also knew that I wanted him to do it. I wanted him to be my first. The connection between us was almost undeniable as his fingers stroked fire over my skin.

When he shifted my shirt upward, feeling the lack of breast bindings, he groaned like he was in physical pain. “Let me taste these glorious tits.”

In answer, I dragged my shirt over my head and threw it across the room. Hayle stared at my breasts like he was moonstruck, his eyes glued to them like they were a target. Then he stood, still holding me to his chest as he walked me into my room, shutting the door with his foot.

“Don’t need a four-legged audience for what I want to do to you,” he rumbled, then took my nipple in his mouth, sucking hard.

Holy shit.

I arched toward him, my fingers threading through his hair, holding him tightly to my chest. Given the moans that were vibrating my nipple, I didn’t think he was going anywhere, but just in case. He pulled off and moved to the other nipple, not before breathing, “Gorgeous,” at my boobs like they were artwork.

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As he sucked, he laid me on the bed, his fingers on the buttons of my pants. He stilled, his eyes begging for permission. Was this it? The moment I lost my virginity? Was Hayle the right person?

There was no doubt in my mind that the answer was yes. Absolutely yes. “Fuck me, Hayle. Make me feel good.”

He let out a pained groan and dropped to his knees. He dragged my pants off roughly, grunting with annoyance as they got caught on my feet. “I can’t wait to taste you, Avalon. I can’t wait to commit the flavor of you to memory. I can already smell that you’ll be the sweetest thing I’ll ever taste on my tongue.” He tore my underwear off, and I squeaked a protest. He looked up at me completely unapologetically, any words of chastisement halting on my tongue as he sucked my clit into his mouth.

Oh Goddess. “Hayle!” I shouted, and his happy hum almost shot me into the stratosphere.

“Fuck, I love the way you shout my name. Do it again.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Make me.”

“Didn’t you ever learn not to challenge a member of the Third Line? We are extremely competitive. Hold on, Avalon Halhed, because I’m about to make you scream until your throat hurts and your body is mine.”

His firm tongue slid up and down my slit, before he began thrusting it inside me. Holy shit. I gripped his hair tightly, and he moaned, doubling down his efforts. He licked

and sucked and scraped his teeth along every part of my sensitive core. Before I could even contemplate what was happening, what that feeling building in my belly was, I was coming in an avalanche of pleasure, the sensation flooding through my veins like I was dying. I slammed my thighs around his head, stopping his movements, because any more and I was going to be eviscerated completely. I would be an Avalon stain on the bed.

Despite the power of my thighs, Hayle managed a gentle nudge of his nose through my folds, like he wanted to collect as much of my release on his face as he could. He was making soft groaning noises, and as I came back down, I knew I wanted him right now. I wanted him to fuck me. I wanted him inside me.

“Hayle...” I begged.

“What, baby? What do you need? Tell me,” he crooned, and my vagina wept tears of joy.

I tugged on his hair, making him climb my body. “I want you to be naked and inside me in ten seconds, Hayle Taeme, or so help me...”

He grinned down at me. “So help me what?”

“I’ll go join the orgy in the Twelfth dorm.”

Mirth slipped from Hayle’s face, and he growled, his eyes intense. “Never, baby. After this, when I take you, you’ll be mine and mine alone forever, do you understand? I’ll fuck you so good, you won’t even look at another man. I’ll make love to you so thoroughly, you’ll see only me. I’ll protect you so well, you’ll never have to be scared again. I swear it.”

This seemed intense, but something deep in my chest cried tears of relief. Like it had

been waiting for this moment, for this man. So I found myself nodding, and he breathed a sigh of relief. It only took him four seconds to get naked and line his cock up at my entrance.

But then he paused. “This means something to me, Avalon. You understand, right?”

I was so dick-dazed, I would have agreed to anything to have him inside me at that moment. My soul knew, though. “It means something to me too.”

Relief washed over his face as he pushed inside me, and my eyes watered at the sting of his intrusion. Hayle threw his head back, his jaw tense. “So tight, baby. You feel like bliss on my cock. It’s taking everything in me not to slam myself deep inside you right now.”

I let out a choked noise. “Considering I’ve never done this before, we should probably leave the slamming until the second round.”

His eyes went comically wide. “You’re a virgin?” My cheeks pinkened with embarrassment as I nodded, but his lips were quickly on my cheekbones, kissing away the heat. “Fuck. You don’t know how wild that makes me. How honored...” He choked on the words, dropping his forehead to mine. “I’ll make this so good that you won’t ever regret giving me this gift. Lie back and be my pillow princess, because I’m going to ruin even the thought of other men for you now. Only my hands will ever touch this body; only my cock will find its home in this pussy. Fuck... I’m going to blow just at the thought.”

He sucked in a few deep breaths, and then resumed his movements, more tentative now. He rocked into me, making me see stars as he slowly got deeper and deeper inside me. So deep, I was sure I could feel him in my stomach.

“Hayle...” I breathed. “More. Fuck me harder.”

“Anything you want is yours, Avalon, my Avalon.”

Be careful what you wish for, because he fucked me like an animal. He pounded into me as he sucked my nipples, his body curled like a contortionist so he could touch and taste me everywhere.

Ilovedit.

“Come for me, baby. Goddess, I need to feel you clench around me. I need you so badly.” The authority in his voice was like a blanket over my body, and I was helpless to resist. My limbs seized with pleasure, my muscles contracting and my breath stilling in my lungs as wave after wave of my orgasm rocked me.

I feared that Hayle was right. He had ruined me for any other man ever.

Sixteen

Vox

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Isighed as I disembarked from the ferry. As much as this island was almost primitive, it was blissfully free of Line politics. Well, sort of. On a much smaller, less treacherous level, politics was still played at Boellium War College. It was more fun than it was dangerous. The same couldn't be said for Fortaare.

The Conclave had been interesting, for several reasons. One, it was interesting to see where the Third Line was placing its pawns. I didn't think that the Taemes gave a single fuck about the Lower Lines, no more than we did anyway. Although maybe Hayle Taeme was going soft, hanging around with the dirt scrabblers all the time. Maybe that was rubbing off on his father.

The other interesting part of the Conclave had been meeting the Baron of the Ninth Line. Roman Halhed was an average-looking man, with a craggy face and a full beard. He was short and muscled, like most of the men of the northern mountains. There was nothing of his daughter in his face or coloring. If I hadn't known Avalon was his daughter, I wouldn't have been able to pick her as a relation at all.

More than that, he had none of her spark. He seemed flat and gray, nothing interesting or useful coming from his attendance at the Conclave. He hadn't offered aid to the Twelfth Line, despite his daughter's friendship, and I wondered if they even conversed. He hadn't asked me or Hayle about how she fared at Boellium, which even my father might have been inclined to do.

No, the only color I saw from the man was when he was deep in the liquor at the banquet, and dwindling our alcohol stores was the only thing he contributed to the meeting at all.

He was a disappointment.

My cousin Shay met me on the dock in Boemouth. She picked at her nails with impatience, but she could wait. We would take this moment to discuss matters of importance, while we were outside the walls of Boellium, which always seemed to be listening.

“Cousin,” she greeted coolly. She might have the emotional range of a rock, but I trusted her nearly more than any other member of my family. Shay and I had grown up together, and there were very few secrets between us. It had always been that way.

I liked to think she was more loyal to me than my father, but that might be wishful thinking. “Hello, Shay. Make anyone cry while I was away?”

She raised an eyebrow. “No, but you’re not technically back at the college yet. I could race ahead and remedy that.”

I smirked at her and indicated we should start walking. It was about a twenty-minute walk to the walls of Boellium War College, and it wasn’t worth getting our own mode of transportation to make the distance.

“What did I miss?” I asked, lowering my voice, swirling us in a dome of air to keep our conversation private.

“Not a lot. There’s rumors of the Lower Six starting their own networking parties, but so far, nothing has happened. Taeme was away with you, so the Third Line were also quiet. Lucio is far more relaxed than Hayle, so they were more of a disorganised rabble than usual. Hayle’s new girlfriend almost lost her head to Eugene, though, which was possibly the most exciting thing that happened while you were gone.”

My feet stuttered on the well-worn path, and it was only decades of training that kept

my face neutral. “The girl from the Ninth Line?”

Shay nodded. “They were sparring, and Eugene lost it. Had her on the ground with a sword at her throat before Lucio had even stopped flirting with some girl from the Lower Lines. If I was Taeme, I’d be asking for a new Second.”

“Was she injured?” My tone was bored, but my heart felt like it was pounding, for reasons I didn’t want to understand.

Shrugging, Shay glared at a conscript who was walking down the path toward us, making the soldier move onto the grass and hustle a little faster. “Barely a scratch. That damn bird of Taeme’s swooped in to save the day, and got injured in the process, but the girl from the Ninth managed to escape any real harm.”

Some of the tension released from my shoulders. “Is that why I didn’t see Taeme on the ferry today?”

“He got back yesterday. I heard that the noises coming from the Ninth Dorm have sounded like a brothel on the dockside in Ovl. Taeme was obviously very worried about his mistress. I even saw one of the Third Line conscripts packing them food to take down. Have to keep up your strength to do it doggy style.” She chuckled at her own joke.

I gritted my back teeth, but the idea of Taeme fucking Avalon made rage burn in my stomach. It wasn’t jealousy, though. Why would I be jealous of the fact he was fucking a whore from the Lower Lines?

I was silent as we walked the last little way to the walls of Boellium War College. It was impressive, I’d give it that. It had stood here for centuries. A pillar of strength, or maybe a subtle threat.

Stone walls ran around the whole college, and the atrium shot from the center like a jewel in its setting, a taunt made of glass. It was impenetrable; whoever had built the main building of Boellium had powers that were lost to us now, because it was stronger than stone or steel. We hadn't been able to replicate the material, and it had frustrated Father to no end.

Stepping through the large iron gates of Boellium, I relaxed a little more. I knew what to expect here. I was the king of this domain, and the people within it were predictable.

Except for her.

Avalon Halhed had been an anomaly since she arrived. I didn't like people who stepped out of their expected roles, and it was hard to deny that she'd had some effect on the social structure of the college. The mingling between the Upper and Lower Lines had always been frowned upon, but the girl didn't seem to care.

Add Eugene from the Fourth stepping out of line like that, and something was off in Boellium. People needed to be reminded of their standing, their place in the power structure of the college, and moreso, in the structure of Ebrus itself.

I looked over at Shay. "I think it's time we had a little healthy competition. What do you say?"

She grinned. It reminded me why she was here with me, rather than being someone's diplomatic bride. It wasn't just that she was strong, and that we'd been similar ages. She'd been raised with me as a sibling, far more so than my actual siblings.

It was also because Shay was bloodthirsty. She loved to fight; she'd fight the stable boys, her brothers, our cousins, and as she got older, the younger soldiers and bodyguards. She was fast and strong, but more than that, she was mean.

No, not mean. She was angry. Simmering rage had flowed just below her skin since we hit ten years of age, and it had stayed there. No matter how badly her mother had tried to beat it out of her, had tried to turn her into a lady, Shay stubbornly remained the person she was.

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She'd told me once she did like the stilettos beneath the ballgowns, though—all the better to stab a man with.

No, it wasn't that Shay was a psycho, despite the rumors.

Shay just didn't want to be some diplomat's wife, because she had no interest in men. Shay was only interested in women, and that didn't fit with our family's agenda. So when I left for Boellium, I'd convinced my family that I trusted no one else to have my back, and gave her a reprieve from her family duty. It wasn't untrue; I didn't trust anyone with my back the way I trusted Shay.

I couldn't help her forever, though. Eventually, my father would put his foot down, and she would be forced into a political marriage, unless I could keep her out of his reach until one of my brothers took the mantle of Baron. They were more sympathetic to her predicament than Father.

Shay twirled her favorite dagger over her fingers. "What are you thinking?"

"A battle of strength, no powers. Just a nice fair fight where people remember why I sit on top of this fucking shit heap, and that my word is law."

"A tournament?" She looked at me imperiously. "You know, you could always just fight Taeme for the girl, if you want to fuck her so bad. Or maybe you can just ask nicely. He's an animal; they've been known to share."

I glared at her as we headed toward the stairs that led to our penthouse dorm. "It's got nothing to do with Taeme, or Avalon Halhed. It has everything to do with the fact I'm

not sure I like the unrest and the boldness of the conscripts this year. They need to respect their betters, and what more perfect way is there than handing them their asses without my superior magic?”

I was highly trained, as was Shay, and I’d been learning the art of war since I could hold a sword. I could comfortably beat any man, or woman, in this college, including most of the instructors. It was time they remembered.

“Let me guess, you want to be paired in the first battle with Taeme?”

I snorted. “No, cousin. I want you to pair Eugene and Taeme in the first fight.”

Shay quirked an eyebrow at me, but shook her head. “Eugene’s funeral, I guess.”

It would be bad if the Lower Lines rose up, but honestly, they could only do it through full-scale revolution, and even then, it would be hit or miss. With the current drought, they had neither the manpower nor the resources for such actions.

No, the real threat to the current status quo weren’t the Lower Lines, but the ones with just enough power to think they could stand with the big boys. Eugene had been getting a little too cocky, a little too power-hungry, and it was certainly time for him to remember he was the Fourth Line for a reason.

And Taeme would eat that slimy fucker for lunch without ever having to lift a finger, especially if what Shay had said regarding Taeme and the Ninth conscript was correct.

That was the reason I wanted them paired. It had nothing to do with Avalon Halhed.

She shook her head at me. “Sometimes I wonder if you missed that Vylan cruelty gene, then you do shit like this, and I remember that you’re still your father’s son.”

The words were meant to be a slap in the face, and Shay was the only person I'd allow to deliver these verbal barbs.

"I might not respect the man, but not all his notions are incorrect." A flash of hurt in her eyes told me she thought I meant the sexuality thing. I didn't. So I squeezed her arm gently. "Most of them are bullshit, though." Straightening before we both became uncomfortable with the contact, I added, "Arrange the tournament for the weekend. Tell them I'll give fifty gold coins to the winner."

Shay whistled low, striding off. I put my bags on my bed and didn't think too hard about what the fuck I was doing this for.

Seventeen

Avalon

Four days after Hayle returned home, we emerged from my dorm. Lucio had covered for us both, and none of the teachers would contradict the Third Line's claim that we'd both gotten food poisoning from bad clams.

The Third Line had also been bringing us food and leaving it in my dorm's kitchen, though more often than not, by the time we dragged ourselves from the bedroom, either one of the hounds or Epsy had nibbled at the edges.

It was blissful, this connection to Hayle. He worshipped me for hours on end, until I thought I'd go insane from the pleasure of it all. A little voice in the back of my head told me that he'd get bored of me eventually, that I was just new, and he was a predator who enjoyed the chase. That eventually he'd get bored, and I'd be back to being alone, only it would be worse. I would know what it was like to be as close as humanly possible to another person, and the loneliness would be unfathomable. Unbearable.

When those thoughts entered my brain—usually late at night while I was awake and Hayle was snoring softly beside me—I tried to remember his face when he'd burst into my room. That panic wasn't the response of a man who was merely playing with his food before he moved onto something more tasty.

I didn't understand it, but I knew deep in my gut that what was happening between us meant something.

Grabbing my hand, he pulled me closer on the stairwell. "You're thinking awfully hard over there. World domination plans? Because I can help."

I snorted a laugh, and didn't even try to resist the urge to stand up on my toes and brush my lips over his. "Not today. You just focus on your battle."

Lucio had brought word that Vox Vylan had returned and was bored enough to set up a tournament for the conscripts. The prize was fifty gold coins, basically a generational wealth to the Lower Lines, and had made the rules of battle magicless. Everyone would fight with the same amount of magic as the Twelfth Line, evening the playing field. The buzz around the tournament had found us, even though we'd been buried deep in the haze of lust.

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Viana had marched into my dorm last night and declared that the entire Twelfth Line was going to participate, and the fact that Hayle's name wasn't on the signup sheet had been noted and whispered about. Hayle had left to sign up immediately, though he did apologize by bringing me back an entire cake and then eating it off my naked body.

Like they'd been waiting for him, the First Line had closed the signup and announced the rounds would start the following day.

Now, he kissed my temple. "I was born for battle. Unless they put me against Vylan in the first round, there's no one else in this school who's even close to my skill level."

I wouldn't put it past Vox to put himself against Hayle in the very beginning. Maybe that's what this whole thing was—a giant dick-measuring contest.

We reached the atrium level, and Hayle stepped away, putting distance between us for the first time in days. I pushed down the hurt in my chest. He was Hayle Taeme of the Third Line. I was a Ninth Line nobody. Of course we could have sex, but he couldn't be seen with me up here, in the cold light of day. I knew enough about politics for that.

Inhaling deeply, Hayle turned to look at me, frowning down at my expression. "What's wrong?"

Shaking my head, I pasted a smile on my face. I'd just had countless orgasms, so maybe my hormones were all over the place. Logically, I knew I should be so blissed

out that none of the negativity could touch me.

Logic and emotion rarely saw eye to eye.

“Nothing, just hungry. You better go before people talk.” I shoved him gently in the other direction.

Understanding dawned on his face. “You think I don’t want people to know?” He was back in front of me in a single movement, picking me up with his hands under my ass and walking me backwards toward one of the large stone pillars that held up the atrium. He pressed my back against the smooth stone and fucked my mouth with his tongue in a way that was definitely indecent. “I want every fucking person in this college to know you’re mine, Avalon Halhed. I will shout it from the rooftops, if that would reassure you. I told you that you’re mine, and that means I’m yours too.”

He kissed me hard once more, branding me as his. Whistles and laughter and the hushed chatter of dozens of people whispering at once drowned from my hearing slowly until there was no one and nothing but Hayle.

He pulled back, letting my feet slide to the floor. Turning, he faced everyone in the atrium: conscripts, tutors, college staff. “Listen up. Avalon Halhed is mine. I claim her, and I will fuckup any single person who says something to her about it. Am I clear?”

No one said a single thing, but it was clear from their expressions that they understood and definitely would be gossiping about this later in their own Line dorms.

Grinning, Hayle turned back to me. “You aren’t my dirty little secret, Avalon. This is deeper than that.” He kissed my forehead. “Go get some breakfast. I have to race up to my dorm and get my weapons and armor. I’ll meet you back downstairs?”

I felt like I was in a daze, but I must have nodded, because he was bounding up the stairs toward his own dorm room. I hoped he remembered the way after all this time.

A self-satisfied smirk curled my lips as I headed toward the food hall, and I tried not to enjoy the fact that people got out of the way for me now. Blending in was a dream that was long gone—might as well enjoy it while I could.

Walking into the food hall, I had a feeling that Hayle's declaration was only just reaching ahead of me, because heads still turned. Viana waved me over to the Twelfth table, and I held up a finger so I could grab a piece of fruit first. I needed sustenance after the last few days. I couldn't even feel my thighs, and it felt like I'd been riding a horse across all of Ebrus.

Acacia moved over so I could sit between her and Viana. "Good to see you've left your den of ill-repute down there on the Ninth Level," she quipped, grinning.

Viana hummed her agreement. "Did you see her waddle from the food line? She's got dicked all the way to the dungeon, I think. Don't worry girl, I've got an oil that will clear that right up." She winked at me and laughed at the flush in my cheeks. "I heard in the breakfast line that Hayle just fucked you in the atrium in an animalistic mating ritual."

I frowned. Okay, so the declaration had gotten a little skewed between the atrium and here. "Uh, he kissed me, but we were both fully clothed?"

Viana actually pouted. "Boo. But regardless, way to go, girl. Bagging a Taeme is like finding a chest of gold buried in your lavatory."

I wasn't sure exactly what response that visual was meant to produce, but ew. "Thanks?"

Deciding it was a good time to change the subject, I bit into my apple. “Are you guys all going to the tournament?” I looked at the rest of the Twelfth conscripts.

Acacia ate another piece of bread slathered in honey. “That amount of money is life changing. We could save our entire village with that much coin.”

“We could save ten villages with that much coin,” someone interjected, and I shook my head. Vox was dropping that amount on some random tournament to keep himself entertained, and he could literally feed the whole of Eelrood with that money. That was the difference between the Upper and Lower Lines in a nutshell.

Not Hayle, though. He’d told me that he’d encouraged his father, the Baron of the Third Line, to support the drought efforts of the Eleventh and Twelfth Lines at the Conclave meeting he’d been forced to go to. Something in my chest had fluttered, but I didn’t want to think about that feeling just yet.

Viana shrugged. “I don’t think we could beat any of the First Line, or the Third Line even, but it’s worth the risk. They’re doing it magicless; we’ve trained without magic forever, so maybe we have a small advantage. Maybe they’ll knock each other out, and the Goddess will be on our side.”

Acacia nodded. “We’ve all agreed to send the prize home if we win. So we have the numbers too.” The Twelfth did that often—operated as one entity. “Plus, the college tutorshave suspended lessons so we can have this tournament, and personally, I’m going to enjoy the lack of theory work and nine-hour drills, even if I get knocked out in the first round. It’s almost a holiday.”

We all laughed, but just as suddenly as it started, the mirth around the table died off, their eyes over my shoulder. I knew who was behind me before I even turned to look.

Vox Vylan stood at the table of the Twelfth Line, probably for the first time ever. He

didn't look at them. Didn't acknowledge them in any way. "Ninth. I see you didn't sign up for my little tournament."

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I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t feel the urge to perform for you, my liege,” I mocked gently, but I couldn’t keep my lips from curling. He enjoyed our bickering as much as I did; I was sure of it. “Are you participating in your own tournament?”

He gave me an imperious look. “Of course. I need to show the masses that I do not need my magic to be the most powerful person here.” I wondered how long he’d been listening to our conversation as he glanced behind me at the Twelfth table.

Rolling my eyes, I cleared my throat. “Of course. What was I thinking? Is there something I can help you with, Vox?”

He opened and closed his mouth several times, before he shook his head. “No. Just wanted you to know that you are a disappointment to me yet again, Ninth.”

Yeah, I didn’t think that was it, but I didn’t want to dig around in Vox Vylan’s words for his hidden meaning today. I inclined my head. “I’ll be sure to cry myself to sleep tonight over your words.”

Had his lips just twitched? Before I could confirm, his face was once again the royal, pompous mask.

“Be sure you do. Enjoy the first round.”

Then he was gone. I didn’t have time to wonder what the fuck that was all about, because Hayle was bounding over, a grin on his face as he scooped me from my spot. “Hey, guys,” he said quickly to the Twelfth conscripts. “Just going to steal my girl.” He didn’t wait for anyone’s response, just carried me like a sack of potatoes to the

Third Line section. “Guess what?” he said as he dumped me on the table beside Lucio’s plate.

I smiled apologetically at Hayle’s second-in-command. We’d bonded over my almost death. “Hey, Lucio.” I turned back to Hayle, and my heart beat faster in my chest. Why was he so damn beautiful? Surely this feeling in my chest should have disappeared by now. “What am I guessing?”

“They put out the rounds. My first battle is against Eugene from the Fourth.” His grin was purely predatory. “I’m going to make him wish he was never born.”

I frowned, my eyes drifting to Vox, but his back was to me as he talked to his own second, Shay. Had he done that on purpose? Did he know about Eugene trying to kill me? Why would he even care?

The mysteries of Vox Vylan’s actions were far outside any mere mortal’s ability to comprehend, that much was clear. But maybe, just maybe, he gave a shit about me?

I snorted at the ridiculousness of the thought. But he’d been right; I really would enjoy the first round.

Eighteen

Hayle

The instructors had opened up the training ring for the tournament, splitting it into six different rings. People sat on the post-and-rail fence that ran right around the edge, including Avalon. I was glad she wasn’t fighting. I would’ve laid down my sword and let her win if we’d ended up against each other, and if she’d been hurt?

Blood would’ve been spilled.

Besides, I kind of liked the idea of her watching me from the sidelines, making Eugene remember that he was nothing more than a shitstain on my boot. I looked around the rest of the ring, at all the other people prepping for their fights, stretching and warming up their muscles so they were limber.

Except Shay Vylan, who sat behind a table, looking annoyed. She'd gotten stuck hosting this thing rather than fighting too, and I knew she'd be annoyed by that. Strutting over, I smirked down at her. I liked Shay far better than her fuck of a cousin—she was mean as a war cat with its tail on fire, and she hated everyone equally, regardless of Line. I could get down with that.

“Shay, pushing pens for Vylan today, I see?”

She glared at me. “Fuck off, Taeme, before I have you neutered.”

I laughed, drawing the glare of others around the table. “I would just like to see the battle bracket, if I could.” It wasn't a question, but she was a haughty bitch, so she might make me beg.

The other thing I liked about Shay was that she never hit on me at the Upper Six parties. I'd fucked my way through most of the Upper Line conscripts, where social standing and politics didn't matter. But Shay was the only female in the First Line dorms, because unlike my Line who had warriors from all genders, the Vylans were patriarchal. They believed the daughters of the First Line were only good for marrying off and for political alliances. Boys got trained in the art of war at Boellium War College, and the girls got trained how to lie on their backs and produce Heirs. It had been that way forever—until Shay. I had a feeling Vox had something to do with that, given how close they were.

Not to aggrandize my own desirability, but I was fairly sure that Shay wasn't interested in me, not due to Line loyalty, but because she wasn't interested in dick at

all.

Some of the other conscripts had suggested that she and Vox fucked to keep the Line pure, but those were just rumors, and I highly doubted they were true. Vox and Shay were close, in the same way Lucio and I were close. I trusted that man with my back, but I didn't want to fuck him.

"Do you want me to read it to you like a fairytale your mama would tell you at night, or are you going to fucking take it and read it like you have two braincells to knock together? You can read, right?" Shay snarked while I was lost in my thoughts.

"I think so. Does this word here say boobies?" I pointed to the word battle at the top of the handwritten sheet. Shay actually picked up her dagger, and I danced away, laughing. "Sorry, sorry!"

Looking over the sheet, I noticed that Vox was against Lucio in the second round. That would be a good match to watch; I hoped my own battle was done by then. I'd duelled Vylan a few times since we were both conscripted, and while I wanted to blame his powers for his battle prowess, it wasn't true. He was highly trained in several different weapons, as well as hand-to-hand combat.

But the Third Line was made for battle. We were warriors by blood and by code.

Yeah, Lucio and Vylan would definitely be a good battle to watch.

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Handing back the schedule to Shay, I winked and sauntered back to my Soul Tie. I'd wanted so badly to bond her during our sexfest. I wanted to explain to her that she was mine, that my life was hers, why we felt what we did.

But I couldn't, not yet. She needed time to learn that my feelings for her were genuine. That I wasn't going anywhere, and she never needed to go back to those mountains to that drunk old fuck she called a father. I would introduce her to my family, to my Line, and they'd accept her. She'd have a family who loved her, who would have her back at all times against any foe.

Avalon smiled down at me from the top rail of the fence, and at that height, my shoulders fit perfectly between her thighs. "You know, this is quite a good height," I mumbled and bit the inside of her thigh.

"Hayle!" she squealed, her cheeks flushing that pretty shade of pink that I adored. She slammed her thighs around my shoulders, burying her fingers in my hair and pulling my head up until I climbed the rails, making us face to face.

I kissed her lips gently. "You ready to see me avenge your honor?"

She snorted. "I can avenge my own honor, Hayle Taeme. But I will enjoy watching you bloody up that smug asshole. Show him he just doesn't get to pick on those lower than him."

I tilted my face toward her. "Kiss me again for good luck?"

She wrapped her arms around my neck and leaned forward to kiss me in a way that I

felt in my soul. Fuck, she was everything. Four days of insanely amazing sex could make anyone smitten, but it had reinforced what I already knew. She was my Soul Tie. The constant connection had just reinforced the bond.

She pulled out the ribbon that was holding her hair back. “In the old days, you’d give a token to your champion, so if you’re going to avenge my honor, I guess I better pay you in fake lace ribbons.” She tied it around my wrist, tucking in the ends so they didn’t get caught during the fight.

Ha, little did she know she was never getting this back. I’d tell her later that in the Third Line, this basically made us married. It wasn’t true, but I’d enjoy watching her sweat about it for a bit.

Someone whistled. “A-Side, to your rings!” The shout was amplified by magic, and I kissed her once more with a bit of tongue, before jumping down.

“Cheer for me,” I said with a wink and swaggered to my ring. Eugene sneered at me, and I just smirked in his direction. I hoped he was about to piss his pants.

“You fuckers know the rules,” Shay yelled. “To first blood. If you aim to maim, I will personally shove an icicle up your ass until you get a brain freeze.” I laughed, swallowing it down as she glared in my direction. “If you aren’t in your ring when I let up the starting flare, you forfeit, so don’t be fucking late.”

Someone raised their hand, and she turned her eyes on them in a hard glare. It was one of the Tenth Line kids. He must have been all of seventeen. “The Upper Lines are all wearing armor, which is disadvantageous to the rest of us. If this is until first blood and based on skill, shouldn’t we be all equally armored?”

Shay raised a brow at him, then looked over at Vox. He shrugged and took off his armor. “Sounds fair.”

Whatever, I doubted Eugene was going to get the point of his sword anywhere near me, let alone draw blood. I tossed my armor over the rope designating our ring.

Holding her finger in the air, Shay gave us all the stink eye one more time. “Remember, no magic. Anyone using magic will instantly forfeit, so keep it in your pants, fuckers. Ready?”

I twirled my sword in my hand, and Eugene lifted his own. The point shook a little, making me grin at him maniacally. “I’m going to make this hurt, you fuck. You’ll never even look at my girl again without pissing your pants.”

He sneered at me. “Whatever you want to dip your disgusting dick in is between you and the rest of your flea-infested Line,” he snarked back.

“GO!” Shay yelled, shooting an explosion of ice in the air that probably would’ve been beautiful, if I could see it.

Instead, I advanced on Eugene immediately. He was the cerebral type of fighter, all memorized forms and patterns. I fought with my instincts and my senses, by reading body language and relying on muscle memory from years of sparring and fighting.

He was already on the back foot, but he recovered quickly, swinging his sword in a solid counterattack. Solid wasn’t going to win him this battle.

I parried again and again, pushing him around the ring like I was playing with him. A cat and a mouse. A wolf and its prey. He was going to know what pain was like before the end of this. There were a hundred ways I could make him hurt without drawing blood and ending the round.

First, I got close, blocking his swing with mine and kicking him in the knee. His yell echoed around the training ring, but there was no blood, just a lot of fucking hurt.

I smirked down at him. “Want to forfeit? No shame in being a little bitch.”

“The only bitch here is that whore from the Ninth.”

I shook my head and tsked. “If you liked pain so much, Eugene, you should have just gotten someone to spank you and call you a naughty boy. This is a little extreme.” I put my foot into his gut, sending him sprawling backwards across the ring. The instructor watching us for first blood raised an eyebrow, but didn’t stop the round. “Come on, Eugene. You’re Fourth Line, remember? Stop embarrassing the Upper Lines and get back on your feet to fight. Look, I’ll even go over here first.” I shuffled back toward the ropes.

Eugene, to his credit, struggled back to his feet, his face so red that it was almost purple. He charged at me then, his sword whirling in a wild and messy set of twirls that must have been hell to hold onto, but they were quite difficult to block. He was coming for my head now; shit had just gotten interesting.

I parried each blow, one after the other. He telegraphed his next move like he was shouting them at me, and it was easy enough to get him on the back foot again. One, two, three, and then I hooked my foot around his ankle, unbalancing him completely. He landed on his back, and I swung my sword down to point at his throat. The same place that Avalon had a small, pink mark from a healing wound that this asshole had put there.

I let all of the lighthearted fuckboy leave my face until he could see the monster underneath. “You hurt her, and that is unforgivable. Your days are numbered, Eugene Rován.” I pressed down harder, until blood trickled and pooled into the indentation.

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He snarled at me, his face full of hatred and malice. “Fuck you.”

Magic surged from him in a hot wave.

A deafening bang.

A blinding flash.

Searing pain.

Nothing.

Nineteen

Avalon

No.

Lightning struck at the ring where Hayle had stood. Three bolts in rapid succession.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

My ears rang, and my eyes burned, making seeing anything but black spots almost impossible, but still, I jumped down from the fence and ran. Bodies were strewn around, people covering their ears as blood leaked from their lobes like teardrop rubies.

Hayle.

No.

The hounds were yowling, and someone was screaming. I ran, hurtling people and bodies. I was there. So close. “Hayle!”

Eugene lay on the ground, uninjured. Beside him was scorched earth from the thunderous crack of lightning that had reverberated around the training ring.

The earth was still smoking. No, not the earth. Something.

Someone.

No.

“Hayle!” I screamed. I could hear it now, my voice echoing around my head. My pain spread down my limbs. I climbed under the rope, but others were arriving.

It wasn’t him. It couldn’t be him. I refused to believe it.

The charred lump was a person, I had to acknowledge that. It had arms and legs and a head, but everything else was black. But it couldn’t be Hayle. The smell of burned flesh made me want to vomit but still, I went closer. A flash of white on the charred wrist was like a razor blade to my heart. Burned at the edges, but achingly familiar.

“Hayle...” Pain ruptured in my chest. Pain like nothing I’d ever felt, or maybe I had. It felt like an old friend, but also like my mortal enemy.

Loneliness and pain. My heart splintering into a billion pieces.

Someone scooped me up and walked me away, but I was screaming, searching the crowd. Looking for Hayle, because that couldn't be him. Maybe he'd be okay. I should have checked if he was still alive.

I looked up into the pale face of Vox Vylan. "Take me back!" I screamed in his face, spittle flying from my lips. "This is your fault. Your fault." I slammed my hands against his chest, but he didn't put me down. "Your fault."

"I know." I felt the words more than heard them.

My scream got louder and louder until the world was spinning. I screamed until the man in front of me, his mouth wide with shock, flashed in and out of my vision. I screamed until shooting stars of burning light spun around me, like a cyclone of fire. The world was on fire. My chest was on fire. My heart was a charred, burning lump in the middle of the training ring.

No, there was no world without Hayle. No world in which I lost him so soon.

I screamed at the Goddess. I screamed at Vox Vylan. I screamed at fate and fear, and as I fell to my knees, I screamed even as the world disappeared.

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I screamed myself and everyone around me into oblivion.

Twenty

Avalon

Conscription Day - The First Day of Spring

There was blood pooling on the cobblestone entrance of the Boellium War College. I shouldn't be surprised, given the baying of the crowd jammed into the front courtyard, and the man suspended in the air, bleeding steadily from his nose. The ruby liquid fell in huge drops, splashing on the ground beneath him with a gruesome dripping sound. Once the puddle of blood became too much, someone with water abilities seemed to wash it away.

That would definitely explain the pink stones.

The guy in the air, bound with invisible ropes, looked at me imploringly. "Help me," he gasped weakly.

I met his eyes, keeping my face shuttered and neutral, then timed my steps to walk under his blood droplets so they didn't splatter on me.

Someone huffed a laugh, and someone else muttered, "That's cold," but I ignored them all. I wasn't here to be someone's savior. I wasn't here to change the status quo.

I was here because I was the useless daughter.

Every one of the Twelve Lines had to enrol a child into the Boellium War College every year, and once a decade, it had to send a young person from the leading family of that Line. If I had to guess at their reasoning, I'd say it was so they didn't all send simple farmers' sons and create an army of uneducated cannon fodder.

Some Lines sent their most gifted children, either physically or mentally, in the hopes they could make advantageous connections or better still, marriages.

But that was for the Upper Six Lines. I was the youngest daughter of the current Baron of the Ninth Line. I was barely better than pond scum to these people. The only thing worse would be if I was from the Twelfth.

So I didn't care who was hanging up there dripping blood for the cause; I couldn't help them. I didn't want to help them. I wanted to learn to fight and go home to where there were fewer people and smaller egos.

I'd spent hours reading journal accounts of prestigious Ninth Line warriors, who talked about coming to Boellium War College like it was the best and worst time of their life, so I knew what to expect. I knew this was part of the hazing, helping to sift the weak of stomach and will from the strong contenders.

I knew that a little blood was going to become an everyday occurrence for me. That was why I kept walking. It's why I avoided the eyes of the milling crowd, and closed my ears to their muttered commentary.

I wasn't cold. I was realistic. A tender heart in Boellium would soon bleed out, and then it would be their blood painting the courtyard's cobblestones red. That wouldn't be me.

I'd walked here all the way from my home in Rewill, and I was exhausted. As the conscript for the Ninth Line, I wasn't given any aid; even the clothes on my back had been stolen from my brothers. This hazing was the final hurdle before I could sign

myself into the college's ledgers, then collapse on a bed somewhere and sleep for a week.

Eyes on my face had me looking across the courtyard, and when I met some glacial blue irises, I quickly turned my sights back to Boellium War College's fabled atrium.

I knew who it was. I might have lived in the mountains, far away from the glittering courts, but I knew Vox Vylan. The second son of the current Baron of the First Line. I'd heard he was powerful, but the way he held that person suspended in the air effortlessly was definitely a telling example. I didn't want to meet the Heir. I didn't want to be in his sights at all. I wanted to do my time and leave again.

Walking through the atrium quickly, I knew this was the part where the Third Line hazed the incoming conscripts. It was a madhouse of screams and animal sounds so loud that it hurt my ears. Known for their beast magic, the Third Line were as scary as the First. Their hazing wouldn't be as easy to ignore as the First Line.

As if to prove my point, two giant hounds leaped in front of me, their eyes intent on my face, like they were contemplating what I tasted like.

I stared them down, my heart hammering. You weren't supposed to run from predators; that's what I told myself over and over as I held my ground. Finally, someone whistled, and the hounds retreated.

Unable to stop myself, I turned toward the sound, meeting a pair of golden orbs so transfixing that they stole the air from my lungs. I knew enough about current affairs to know this was Hayle Taeme, third son of the Taeme family, leaders of the Third Line.

Staring into those eyes made my heart beat so hard, it felt like it was seizing in my chest. Pain spread down through my limbs, and I urged myself to move. Whatever he was doing to me was dangerous. I knew they had beast powers, but what if he could

literally reach into my chest and crush my heart as well?

We all had powers we had to keep a secret. Something tickled in the back of my brain, a secret that I denied even to myself, but I shut it down. I wasn't here to uncover any secrets, about myself or anyone else.

I vowed to myself I would stay far, far away from Hayle Taeme. I would also stay away from Vox Vylan.

I was going to do my time and get the hell out of Boellium War College, safe and whole, and I would never look back.