



Daughter of the Ninth Line: Part Two

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Description: 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.

Avalon Halhed was the sacrificial lamb for the Ninth Line, but walking through the gates of Boellium felt wrong, and she couldn't put her finger on the reason why.

It was more than her instant attraction to an Heir of the First Line, who was so far above her station he may as walk among the stars while she scrabbled in the dirt.

It wasn't even the face that looking at the Hayle Taeme inexplicably made her heart seize in her chest like it had beat its last beat either. She was out of her depth, and it was more than just the gruelling training and marathon lectures. She'd captured the attention of the two most powerful people inside the walls of Boellium, and not everyone was happy about it. It didn't matter that she'd been keeping her head down, determined to get through her conscription and return back to the Ninth Line Barony to live out her life in solitude. She'd upset the careful balance, and now they were out for blood.

This is Part Two in an ongoing novella series. Reading Daughter Of The Ninth Line : Part One is strongly advised.

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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 farmer's 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'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 leapt 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 in 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.

Two

Avalon

Getting out of the atrium was harder than I thought. Beside the door was a giant war cat that had something pinned in the corner. It looked like a small purple stolt, and the sight of its pitiful, shaking body pulled at my heartstrings.

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I felt some kind of kinship to the pathetic creature, and despite my thoughts only moments earlier, I couldn't let it be eaten.

But getting between a war cat and its prey was a recipe for a mauling that I was in no hurry to experience. I looked at the door behind the big cat, then back at the stolt. You weren't supposed to run from predators, but right now, I wasn't its prey.

Tightening the straps of my pack on my arms, I sucked in several deep breaths. If I died on the first day of my conscription at Boellium War College, so be it. It would hardly be a record for the school, or for my Line.

If I was lucky, the door would open outwards. If I was unlucky, I'd be eaten. Surely Boellium wouldn't let its conscripts be eaten by the animals of the Third Line? There had to be rules and order of some kind here.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I sucked in one last long breath and sprinted toward the door. I raced around the groups of people, other conscripts and members of the other Lines, heading straight for the purple stolt. I kept my eyes on it, leaning down and grabbing it by the scruff of its neck as I darted past the war cat and straight at the door. I hit it with all the force of my full body weight, and it flung open, slamming backwards against the wall in a way that would have smashed the glass of a normal door. Spinning quickly, I grabbed the handle and slammed it shut in the face of an annoyed war cat.

Fuck, that was not something I wanted to do again. Leaning back against the door, I dropped the stolt on the ground. "Off you go. You're on your own now."

It looked up at me, blinking slowly, then ran up my leg and into the pocket of my oversized skirt. I tried to empty it, but the angry call of, “Next!” from the office in front of me had me giving up.

“Uh, okay. I guess you’re coming with me.” I pushed into the administration office, where the woman behind the desk was glaring up at me.

“About fucking time. You must be from the Ninth Line?” She had one arm and a wicked scar that ran across her upper lip, making her look fierce. Her head was also shaved close to the scalp, but somehow, none of those things detracted from her femininity. It was like looking at a warrior elf from one of my childhood storybooks. “Name?”

“Oh, Avalon Halhed, fifth child of the Baron of the Ninth Line.”

She eyed me sternly, her gaze too knowing. Did she know of me? Had she heard the rumors too? “Fancy fucking title. Your dorm is three floors down. There’s no one else from your Line here, so it might be a bit quiet.” She handed me a folder of paperwork. “Your timetable. Be early.” Or else hung between us.

I stepped out of the office and straight into someone. Looking up, and up again, I found myself nose to chest with Hayle Taeme. My breath caught in my lungs until they felt like they were on fire. I scooted backwards, away from him as fast as I could. “Sorry.”

His hand snapped out and gripped my arm. “Who are you?”

My eyes felt like they might pop out of my skull. “No one.” When he didn’t let me go, I swallowed down the lump in my throat that threatened to choke me. Why was I reacting this way? Was it the sheer power that emanated from him? Finally, I found my voice. “Avalon Halhed, from the Ninth Line.”

Listening to the warnings banging around inside my skull, I dragged my arm from his grasp and sprinted to the stairs, barrelling down them so fast that if I'd tripped, I'd be dead. My head was screaming at me to stay as far away from Hayle Taeme and the Third Line as I could. That in that direction lay only incredible pain.

Could I sense that he was a predator? Was it my hindbrain taking over due to my obvious lack of self-preservation?

Stepping into the Ninth Line dorm, I noted that dust covered everything. Someone had stacked a bunch of chairs in the room, which looked like it had been long uninhabited. There were still dirty plates in the sink, and I tried not to think about why. Tried not to think about the fact that most of my Line had died here before they could graduate.

You only had to be a conscript for two years, and then if we went to war, you got called up to fight. But we hadn't been to war in so long that I doubted there were people alive who remembered the last time. Even longer since we'd been to war with anyone but the other Lines of Ebrus.

I moved some boxes and chairs to the far wall and picked the furthest dorm room from the entrance. Putting my bag down, I worked at stripping the sheets and blankets. Who knew what was living in these things after all this time? Piling the linens on the floor, I was surprised when the stolt leapt from my pocket and curled up on top.

Laughing at the small purple animal, I nudged the nest of linen with my foot. "You aren't very smart. Are you someone's pet? Someone from the Third Line, maybe?" It just yawned and blinked jewel-colored purple eyes at me. "Well, if someone comes to beat me up for stealing their pet, I'll tell them I tried to get rid of you twice. Stubborn creature." I reached down and scratched its head, and it leaned into the touch. Definitely tamed. "Should I name you? Calling you Stupid seems a little

counterproductive.”

His color reminded me of the purple epsirialle flowers at home. That was a long name for such a tiny creature, though.

“What about Epsy? Do you like that?” It booped my hand with his face, either agreeing or asking for more head scratches. Or both. “Epsy it is.” I didn’t know why; it just felt right.

My stomach rumbled angrily, reminding me I hadn’t eaten in twenty-four hours. I wanted to change out of my traveling clothes, but I was a little worried that I might pass out from hunger in the shower. Food, then a bath. And then sleep for at least twelve hours.

Walking to the dorm entrance, I looked up at the stairs and rethought my plan, but I’d thrown up the whole way over to Boemouthe on the ferry, and I was starving. I’d start stockpiling food down here as soon as I could, because although the trek down here might’ve been hard, Boellium War College wasn’t going to be any easier. If the accounts I’d read were correct, it would be the most difficult training of my life.

So I grabbed the handrail and pulled myself up to the main floor of the atrium. I looked around for Hayle Taeme, because if he was up here, I would be tempted to head back down to my dorm. But there were just crowds of people milling around, most of them heading in one direction. The sun was setting, and I’d bet my non-existent dowry that they were heading to the dining hall.

I walked behind them, just going with the crowd. There weren’t as many people in all of my hometown of Rewill as there were in the atrium right now. Not even in our Keep, at least not outside celebrations. Father hadn’t had any celebrations in the Keep, however, since I’d murdered my mother.

Pushing the thought away, I stepped into the huge stone building. I noticed immediately that the long dining tables were segregated by Line, which meant finding mine was easy. It sat toward the back, like a desolate tribute to the fact this whole place was a death trap.

I headed over to the food line and grabbed a plate. I really was starving, with my head now beginning to throb. Still, I straightened my spine and slowly loaded my plate. The only thing more embarrassing than inhaling a mountain of food would be eating so much that I puked all over the table.

The other tables were filled to capacity with people, and while most of the Lines were hard to distinguish from one another, one table was so overfilled that there were people sitting on the tabletop, as well as squished down the long benches.

“Twelfth Line. They’re having a famine, so they’re sending as many teens as they can to Boellium,” the girl behind me murmured, probably because I was staring. She nudged me further down the row, and I ladled a heaping spoonful of some kind of stew into the deep well of my Falain plate. I placed two bread rolls in another section, with some form of dried meat in the third. In the last section, I placed an apple.

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A little foil-wrapped packet was at the end of the row of food, and my eyes went wide. It couldn't be, right? Picking it up, I found it was heavy in my hand. It was.

Chocolate.

Just sitting there at the end of a buffet, like it was nothing. I forced myself to only take one packet, not even putting it on my tray, in case it somehow fell in my stew. Not that it would stop me from eating it.

We never had chocolate in Rewill. My father had banned its import, stating that it was a luxury our Line couldn't afford. But Kian said it was because it had been Mother's favorite food. It had been Kian who'd gotten me some for my twelfth birthday and who, along with my siblings, had sat around and shared it with me, hidden in the turret at the top of the fort so Father couldn't find us.

Suppressing the thoughts of my father, of my life before this moment, I walked toward the back of the room. I'd made it halfway there when a giant hound appeared in front of me, its head cocked to the side. I knew this hound from my arrival earlier, so I knew it was from the Third Line. It was looking at me with large, intelligent eyes, the tilt of its head making it look like it was trying to figure out if I was edible or not.

When it curled its lip up, I realized I was frozen. I stared at it, not looking away, making myself bigger, like they'd taught me back home. We had huge mountain wolves, but even they weren't as big as this hound. I stared it down until it turned away with a huff.

Sidestepping it with caution, I didn't take my eyes from its face. Which only meant that I wasn't watching what I was doing and tripped over the edge of my skirt. Falling backwards, I watched in depressingly slow motion as my tray went up, while I went down.

Fuck. This was almost more embarrassing than throwing up my food across the table. I braced myself for impact, but it never came.

Instead, I felt myself wrapped in ropes of air, my tray equally as suspended mid-motion. Not even a drop of stew had overflowed.

I turned my head and realized I was right beside the First Line table. Holding my breath, my eyes connected immediately with the sparkling blue ones of Vox Vylan. I'd almost thrown my food all over the Heir to the First Line.

So much for lying low.

The sheer strength of his magic had me dumbfounded, especially as his air pushed me back to my feet. I reached up and grabbed my tray from midair, feeling the moment that it was once again subject to the laws of gravity.

Clearing my throat, I turned and nodded my head respectfully. "Thank you."

He flicked his fingers, a clear dismissal, and I took that one small gesture for the escape it was.

Three

Vox

The conscript from the Ninth Line stuck out like a fly in the soup. It was more than

the near-ethereal paleness of her skin, indicative of her Line, or the fact she scowled at everyone who moved. I couldn't put my finger on what it was yet, but the fact that one of Taeme's damn hounds had cornered her last night had to mean something. I trusted my instincts, and whatever was bugging me about the girl from the Ninth needed investigating.

I turned to Shay, my cousin, who was also my second. "What do we know about the Ninth Line conscript?"

We were walking into the training ring, even though I had more swordwork experience than most of the instructors here. Back home, I'd been given a sword as soon as I could be trusted not to poke myself in the eye with it, and sent to train for at least an hour a day.

Shay shrugged, loosening up her muscles so she could do her formwork. "No more than you; only what's in the ledgers. Avalon Halhed, fifth child, and youngest daughter of the Baron of the Ninth Line."

I rifled through my memory, trying to pinpoint what I knew of the Baron of the Ninth Line, and mentally thanked my tutors for drilling this bullshit into my brain along with my ABCs. Roman Halhed was in his mid-sixties, a craggy-looking figure who spent far too often in the drink—to the detriment of his Line's coffers, if my father's sources were to be believed. It had made the whole Line weak, though there wasn't a lot they could have offered the rest of Ebrus anyway. They had weak foresight magic, barely more than a gut feeling. They had no good farmland to barter with—nothing but inhospitable mountains and livestock as tough as the people who tended them.

"Find out more," I instructed Shay.

She raised an eyebrow at me, but didn't negate the order. She just disappeared, and I knew she'd know everything there was to know about the Halhed girl and her whole

Goddess-forsaken Line before the end of the day.

“Lift your fucking sword higher, Ninth, or your enemy will chop off your fucking head!” Instructor Yarlow yelled at her. He was right; her form was sloppy. She wouldn’t last a day walking through Fortaare like that, let alone on the front lines of a war. I could see her arm shaking and knew she’d hit muscle fatigue. But the punishment for dropping your sword was missing three full meals in the food hall, and that was a powerful motivator.

She was gaunt, but not as bad as the Twelfth Line conscripts, who looked like too-tight flesh walking around on a skeleton when they arrived, especially if they were from villages on the outer rims of Ebrus. No, she looked like she’d missed more than a few meals, but wasn’t starved. Nothing that wouldn’t be solved by the regular meals offered at Boellium.

But her muscles were obviously weak, and for reasons I didn’t understand, I slipped a small cushion of air beneath the point of her sword. Barely more than a whisper, and only those highly skilled in elemental magic would even know it was there.

When Instructor Yarlow blew the whistle to signify the end of the session, I allowed the air to dissipate and watched her swordtip lurch to the sand. She glared at her hand, and I realized she’d locked her muscles around the hilt.

Unable to help myself, I walked over to her. “Do you need assistance?”

Her eyes flew to mine, wide and worried. I watched as she swallowed hard, shaking her head. She met my gaze with her own darker blue ones. “I’m fine, thank you.”

I couldn’t remember the last time anyone who wasn’t in my inner circle had met my eyes. Usually, it was beaten out of them by etiquette instructors and courtly manners. Guess they didn’t have either of those things up in the wilds. Or maybe...

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“Do you know who I am?” I asked her, my voice in its usual bored superiority.

She nodded, something like defiance edging back into her expression.

“Then why do you meet my eyes so freely?” I took the bite out of the words, softening my tone from the harsh one I’d usually employ to ensure people knew their place.

She dropped her eyes to her feet. “Would you believe insanity runs in my family?” she said softly, and I laughed. It was almost involuntary, and several eyes turned toward me. I pushed the sound away, folding my face back into its proper mask.

Reaching out, I tilted her chin up so her eyes were back on me. “Yes, I would.”

I could feel the intensity of someone’s stare on my face, and I turned, knowing who it would be before my eyes even met his forest-green ones. Hayle Taeme was glaring at me and the way my hands rested on this girl from the Ninth.

“What’s your name?” I asked her softly. I already knew it, but wanted to hear it from her own lips.

“Avalon Halhed.”

“And how do you know Hayle Taeme?” Was she a little spy? It was a good ruse; I’d never expect her.

But the incredulity on her face scrapped that idea almost immediately. “I don’t know

anyone from the Third Line, let alone an Heir.”

I believed her. “Then why is he staring at me touching you, like he wants to rip each of my fingers off and shove them up my a—nose?” I corrected myself.

She shrugged, switching her sword to the other hand. “I don’t know. I think perhaps I might have accidentally stolen one of his animal familiars.”

I raised an eyebrow, because I doubted that. If Hayle’s hounds were anything to go by, they would rather tear you to pieces than be kept from their master. In fact, they’d shredded a conscript yesterday. The Third Line were wild and uncouth, but their pets were loyal.

Whatever it was, Taeme’s interest in her just made her even more of an enigma. A mystery I was going to solve. I leaned forward, and she stared up at me.

Where was her self-preservation? Maybe she was like all the rest, just here to make a good impression on one of the Upper Lines and marry out of the hellhole she called her Line’s territory.

Disappointment flowed through me. That was all this was. A tale I was all too familiar with.

But that didn’t mean I couldn’t play with her a little. Leaning even further forward, I watched her stop breathing. Our lips were close, and I was almost excited to kiss her. How long had it been since I’d been excited about anything, let alone some little Line jumper?

A low growl beside me had me stiffening. I looked down at the hound baring its teeth at me, or perhaps at Avalon Halhed. “Fuck off, Taeme, or I’ll make a rug out of your pet,” I growled back. I knew he could see through the eyes of that fucking mutt, and

he'd get the message loud and clear.

It was pure politics that I didn't strangle the thing with my air right now. Perhaps one day I would, just to prove a point. My father would have, without hesitation.

"Maybe it can smell its little stolt friend on me," Avalon murmured, seemingly frozen in fear. She looked down at the hound, and her body slowly relaxed. "I swear, I keep setting him free, but he keeps coming back. Have you ever tried to keep a stolt out of a room? It turns into a freaking liquid and just slides back under the door. Tell your master I didn't mean it." As if she'd come to her senses and realized how close we were, she stepped back, hefting her sword to her chest like it was a shield. "I should..." She turned and ran, and I watched her go.

What the fuck was it about that girl? I wasn't like the men in my family. I didn't fuck everything that moved, just because I could. Not that I was a monk, obviously, but this was odd even for me.

I needed a shower; sweat was making my skin itch. I strode toward the atrium, people immediately moving out of my way, as if I was a single moment from losing it and exsanguinating them all. Yesterday's little exhibition probably hadn't helped that notion, but the kid from the Eighth Line had been seen stealing from my dorm. If you were stupid enough to steal from the First Line, you could suffer the consequences. He was lucky I hadn't taken his hands with my sword.

When I was finally back in my dorm, I moved through the space that housed the rest of the First Line conscripts, and over to a set of private stairs. Climbing them slowly, I emerged into what was known as the Dome.

My suite was made of the same glass that enclosed the atrium, glass that had been made impenetrable by magic that was long lost to us. It also protected from the harsh sun of the Ebrus summers, and blocked out the chill of the sea breeze in the winter. I

wished I knew what magic had created this place, so I could learn to replicate it. From the Dome, I could see 360 degrees around the college.

I could see Hayle watching the girl, who was now standing by a tree with her face tilted to the sun. I could see the Upper Lines surrounding a person, and judging by the slight build, it was probably someone from the Eleventh or Twelfth Lines. I could see Headmaster Proxius talking to Svenna, who'd once been a feared warrior, but had been demoted to administrator of Boellium after the battle that took her arm. Whatever they were talking about, Svenna was gesturing angrily with her remaining limb. I wondered if I could get some ears down there to listen in on that conversation.

My eyes drifted back to Avalon Halhed. She looked almost ethereal, with her pale skin glowing in the hot Southern sun. She would burn if she wasn't careful. Once again, I tried to figure out why I even cared.

Sighing, I stepped into my private bathroom and turned on the large shower. Using my elemental abilities, I swirled the water around me until it cleaned and caressed every inch of my dirty skin. I could control all four elements, unlike most of the people in the First Line outside my immediate family. Most were Goddess-blessed with one or two elemental affinities, but the men in my family controlled all four, and my mother controlled three, which was why she'd been chosen to wed my father.

I'd also have to wed someone with at least two elemental powers, preferably three.

My eyes stayed fixed to the conscript from the Ninth Line. Girls from the Lower Six weren't even well-bred enough to fuck. Yet, even knowing that, I had still wanted to kiss Avalon Halhed.

Four

Avalon

I'd never known exhaustion like this. All of my limbs ached in a way that made me want to vomit, but still, I had to keep going. They'd been testing our skills and fitness for the last two days, and it became blindingly obvious that I lacked both.

I was becoming helpless, and I hated it. Struggling with the tongs in the lunch line, my fingers lacked the strength needed to close them after pulling back a bowstring for seven solid hours. I couldn't even feel my fingertips, and there was a place on my cheek that was burned raw from the amount of times the fletching had hit my cheek as I loosed the arrow.

I was seriously contemplating using my fingers, but a girl behind me from the Twelfth Line came to my rescue. "If you grab the meat with your hands, the Upper Six will cry. Goddess forbid you sully their food with your watered-down bloodline," she muttered, picking up a slab of meat easily and putting it on my plate. "What else do you want?" She nudged me down the line, since we were blocking the flow of the dinner service.

I wanted to protest. No connections. No friends. In and out—that was the aim. But starvation wasn't the aim, and that was a very real possibility right now.

"Vegetables, please?" I asked pathetically, and the girl smiled. Her cheeks were little round apples, and her clothes fit her well, those bright, ornate colors associated with the Twelfth Line. Clearly, she wasn't a new conscript, because she'd had time to fill out after starvation.

“Yes, good choice. Filled with nutrients. You’ll need those to survive.” She put some on my tray, followed by her own. Then she grabbed a couple of pieces of dried meat and dropped them into my pocket. “For later. More than vegetables, you’ll need meat. Otherwise, your muscles will ache something fierce tomorrow.” She did the same with bread rolls. One went on each of our trays and one into my pocket, though it bulged a bit more than the jerky.

Finally, we reached the fruit and some kind of frozen dessert. We both stared at it, like it was something poisonous.

“The Upper Lines call it ice cream. They have a special elemental-magicked container to keep it like that.”

I grabbed a little bowl of it for my tray. It looked like snow.

“Look at them, staring at ice cream like it’s going to attack them,” someone snickered, and I looked over my shoulder to see a girl from the Fifth Line—Effie or Emilee or something. I ignored her, but the girl beside me turned and glared.

“When they told me it was kept in cold storage, no one told me it was your frigid vagina, Ephily. It does smell a little sour. Better put it back,” she quipped, pulling it from my tray and putting it back on the table. I mourned the ice cream, but I could appreciate the stand.

The girl from the Twelfth hustled me to the back of the room, where their table sat, packed with smiling, laughing people from her Line. I went to veer off toward my table, but she shoved me in their direction.

“It’s unhealthy to be alone.” That’s all she said, the only warning I’d get that I was about to be adopted into the Twelfth Line.

There was a pretty girl sandwiched between two large guys. “Acacia, who did you find?”

“This is the Ninth conscript. She’s sitting with us,” Acacia said easily, like I’d had any choice whatsoever in the matter.

The sitting girl waved. “Viana.”

I gave her a tight smile. “Avalon.”

Viana gave me a big smile before looking down at the table. “Shove along, guys. We have a guest.”

No one seemed particularly perturbed that they were being squished to make way for an interloper. Viana climbed into the lap of the guy beside her, making room for both me and Acacia to slide onto the bench. They looked very friendly, and my cheeks flushed. The way his hand rested on her thigh, too high to be considered appropriate, let me know these two were clearly having sex.

Casual touching was definitely not allowed at home in Rewill. Not amongst spouses or lovers—hell, Father even discouraged hugging amongst his children. If he could have banned it altogether, he probably would have. If he was miserable, everyone had to be miserable.

I tried to act like I was unfazed by it, but I could feel how pink my cheeks were. I’d just blame sunstroke.

“So, what’s it like living up on the Ninth Line floor by yourself?” Viana asked. It was weird to consider it up. It felt like I had to descend into the depths of Hell every night to sleep.

“Uh, quiet?” I stabbed at my meat, resisting the urge to wince as I curled my fingers around my cutlery. With a tsk, Viana took my cutlery from me and cut my meat into tiny pieces like I was a toddler. The gesture was bossy, but undeniably sweet.

My throat felt thick with emotion, and when she handed me my fork back, I swallowed it down to say, “Thank you.” She waved a hand as if it was nothing, and maybe to her, it was.

When was the last time a person had ever helped me like that? My brothers, maybe, when they could get away with showing me any kind of softness.

“Sounds lonely.” My eyes shot to Viana, like she could read my mind, but I realized she was still talking about living alone in my dorm.

I shrugged. “I’m kind of used to it.”

Shaking her head, Acacia was chewing her food with relish beside me. “That would be miserable for someone from the Twelfth. We were made to be many parts of a whole. We like to say that our community, our family, is our magic.”

The Twelfth Line was magicless, the reason they were ridiculed amongst the other Lines of Ebrus. But there were a lot of them, and they stuck together. It made them fearsome fighters, I thought.

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I cleared my throat. “That sounds nice.”

Viana laughed. “I’m glad you think so, because I’ve decided to honorarily make you one of us, Avalon. The idea of you rattling around your dorm by yourself just breaks my heart.” She raised a perfect eyebrow. “Unless being seen with the Twelfth is too embarrassing for you?”

There was a challenge in her tone, but honestly, there was very little magic in the Ninth Line. It wasn’t like I was out here predicting horse races or visions of legendary battles. I wasn’t being invited to Upper Line soirées either, and I wasn’t here to make politically advantageous connections.

“Not to me. Have you seen me swing a sword? That’s embarrassing.”

The guy beneath Viana laughed, and got a whack on the chest for his effort. They fell back into conversation about people and things I was clueless about, but they filled me in like I was going to get a pop quiz on who was getting laid, who was going to need to work more with Acacia to get their battle knowledge up, whose grandmother made the best rock cakes, and why it was Viana’s grandmother and no other answer was acceptable.

It was... nice. This feeling of family that flowed so easily up and down the table, regardless of who came and went. They belonged, and it was such a foreign concept to me that I sat in awe long after my food was done.

Once Ephily and her cronies from the Fifth Line left, Acacia got up and got us two bowls of the ice cream. If I thought chocolate was a luxury, this frozen dessert was

beyond my imagination. I knew the kitchen here had a magicked box to keep things fresh, but wasting magic to keep something cold enough to be frozen seemed like an insane misuse of power.

I spooned some into my mouth and moaned. Holy Goddess. “Oh my,” I breathed, spooning in another mouthful. “This is...” It was smooth, cold, and creamy, sweetened by vanilla beans and sugar, neither of which were in abundant supply in our territory by the mountains.

Acacia was already on her fourth bite. “Fucking amazing.”

I laughed, but I was already putting another spoonful in my mouth. It was starting to melt a little, and I ate faster. Then I got a shooting pain in my forehead. I clenched my fingers on my temples, wincing against the ache. It was like a terrible headache, but as suddenly as it came, it disappeared.

Viana was laughing. “I heard the Upper Lines call it an iced headache; it happens when you eat it too fast.”

I frowned down at my bowl, betrayed by this deliciousness. Narrowing my eyes at it, I knew it was too good to throw out. So I ate slowly, giving it no chance to attack me again.

When I was done, I took my tray and Acacia’s over to the table where it would be collected by the kitchen staff. I slipped a small, foil-wrapped square of chocolate into my pocket as well. I was getting quite a sweet tooth.

Several of the Twelfth Line had stood by the time I returned to the table, including Viana and Acacia. “Why is Vox Vylan looking at you like he wants to split open your insides and see what makes you tick?” Acacia whispered, and I looked over at Vox. He was watching me and raised an eyebrow as our eyes met.

I whipped back around to the girls. “No idea.”

I definitely didn’t say I’d thought he was going to kiss me earlier. I didn’t tell them that I’d really wanted him to, which was so, so wrong. He was not for me. He was not for anyone, except one of the beautiful girls in the First Line.

“More to the point, why is Hayle Taeme looking at you like he wants to make the beast with two backs with you?”

The beast with two ba... Oh.

Oh.

Shaking my head, I didn’t turn to look at those forest-green eyes that sent panic and pain spiraling through my veins. “No idea. I’ve never even spoken to him. Maybe he doesn’t like my Line?” I wouldn’t put it past my father to have short-changed them out of something important.

“A man doesn’t look like that at a person he hates, Avalon.” Viana shook her head, throwing her arm around my shoulders. “You’re an interesting one. I don’t think being your friend will ever be boring.”

Was that what I was doing? Making friends? I hadn’t had any of those before.

It felt kinda nice.

Five

Hayle

For the last three nights, she’d haunted my dreams. I dreamed about kissing her,

tasting her, the way she would moan my name beneath me. It felt so real that I would wake up in a sweat, hard and aching, and have to head to the showers to cool off.

I didn't understand why she plagued me, and it was driving me crazy.

What was also driving me mad was the fact that if she saw me in the halls, she'd run the other way. The scent of her fear in my nose was like a knife to the heart. Lots of people smelled of fear when they were near me, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it.

But not her.

I needed to know more, and I found myself sneaking into Svéna's office after the dinner service, when I knew she'd be down in town, getting the cream for the scars on her arm. Easily unlocking the door, I made Braxus keep watch. The hounds had also been slightly poutier than normal since this last round of conscripts, and although they couldn't express to me why, I had a feeling it had something to do with the girl from the Ninth.

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Was she related to the Third Line? Did she have latent Third Line magic that I was reacting to? I needed more information. Slipping inside, I walked to the shelf where the admission ledgers were kept. I didn't need to turn on a light—the ability to see well at night was one of the boons of my Line.

Flipping it open on the table, I wondered if Svenna would know I'd been here. I wouldn't be surprised. She'd been both wily and fierce when she was in the Dawn Army, and if she hadn't lost her arm in a skirmish, then I had no doubt she'd have been high up the ranks.

Flipping open the ledger, I slid my finger down until I found the right entry. Avalon Halhed. Youngest child of the Baron Halhed of the Ninth Line, so nobility. Who sent their daughter to be a conscript when they had so many sons? Not that I didn't think women could be amazing warriors; Svenna and my mother were both proof of that. But I'd seen Avalon in training, and it was very obvious the only sharp instrument she'd ever held was probably an embroidery needle. Who sent a barely trained girl to be their Line's conscript, especially the daughter of the Baron? Was it because she was a spinster at the ripe old age of twenty-three?

I stalled on a brief line about her being present at her mother's death as a toddler, but I couldn't imagine why that would warrant an entry under physical fitness.

Closing the book, I sat back in Svenna's chair. That really hadn't shed any light on the mystery of Avalon Halhed, other than filling in a few small gaps. It didn't explain why I was so drawn to her. It didn't explain why she was tormenting me in my dreams.

With a sigh, I hefted the tome back onto its place on the shelf and slipped out of the office. Walking toward the stairs that led to the Upper Six dorms, I paused on the landing, seeing Svenna there, leaning against the wall.

“Find anything interesting?” she asked lightly.

Braxus weaved in front of my legs, but unlike most people, Svenna didn’t seem perturbed by his presence. It could be because she had at least six daggers on her body, despite only having one arm.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, pasting my usual charming grin on my face. It was the one my mother said could disarm even a burly warrior on the battlefield.

Svenna snorted. “Keep your charm for someone who gives a shit, Taeme. You were in my office, and I want to know why.”

Glancing down at Braxus, I sent him up the stairs to make sure no one was eavesdropping on our conversation. When he let out a short, subdued yip from the top of the stairs, I knew it was safe to talk.

“Nothing wild, Svenna. I just like to know who the new conscripts are.”

“Horseshit.” She stepped closer. “What were you looking for, Taeme?” There was something fervent in her gaze, the intensity making goosebumps spread across my skin. I didn’t know if I should tell her or not.

Hell, maybe she’d know more. I had a reputation, and hopefully, she’d just assume I wanted information because I wanted to screw Avalon Halhed.

So, clearing my throat, I gave her my best bashfulaw gosh, you caught meexpression.

“I was looking into the new girl from the Ninth Line. She won’t give me the time of day, and I wondered if she was already married, or you know, didn’t like men?”

Svenna continued to eye me, her hand on her hip. “You think those are the only reasons a girl wouldn’t want to climb into bed with you—if she was gay or married? You have quite the opinion of yourself.”

I smirked. “The theory hasn’t been disproven yet.”

Her eyes searched my face, but I’d been playing spy for a long time. I could hold my own under an appraising gaze. Finally, she straightened. “Well, I hope she holds out as long as possible, just to give you a taste of humility.” She stepped back and lifted her chin. “Back to your dorm before curfew.” She walked down several more steps before looking back up at me. “And Taeme, for future reference? If you want information about people, there is a thing called a library. Stay out of my damn office.”

I watched her go, then walked the rest of the way up the stairs. There was silence on the landing outside the Third Line dorm, but that wasn’t a surprise. Walking into the place was a madhouse. Animals and people littered every surface, and it had been so noisy in years gone by that someone had eventually forged a soundproof barrier around our dorm.

It was loud, but it felt like home. Lucio was having an arm wrestle with Oleg, and someone was cooking in the small kitchen, judging by the smell of it. We couldn’t be sustained by the three meals served in the dining hall. We needed twice as much food as every other Line, because our inner beast just burned through energy way too fast. It meant that someone was always cooking something, and we usually managed to snag extra rations from the kitchen.

I came to stand near Lucio, turning over the problem that was Avalon Halhed in my

head. Honestly, I probably would have written it off completely, but something about her put my animals offside too. Not because they disliked her; quite the opposite. They'd all instantly liked the girl, and that was unusual. They didn't like anyone but me most of the time.

Maybe she did have some Third Line blood in her somewhere. Maybe Svenna's quip about heading to the library was actually helpful. I'd check it out tomorrow.

Vox Vylan was watching the girl with nearly as much intensity as I was, which made the beast inside me bristle. The First Line was filled to the brim with the worst type of people in Ebrus: power-hungry and corrupt. The Baron of the First Line held control of Ebrus with immense power and more than a little ruthlessness—a trait passed down to his Heirs.

My interactions with Vox had been few and far between this year, which I appreciated, but perhaps it was time to ensure he knew that I was here, ready to be a thorn in his damn side.

Instructor Perot was also giving the girl a death glare, and I didn't understand that either. I really needed to know more about her. I put up a call, and a mouse ran up my pants leg. "Follow her."

Mice had small minds, mostly preoccupied with finding food, warmth and a warm female mouse to reproduce with before they were eaten either by Lucio's war cat or the castle cats. But they responded well enough to requests for information, and unlike Braxus and Alucis—who could almost analyse what they were seeing and decide what was relevant—a mouse just sent me snapshot after snapshot of what it saw. It wasn't efficient, and sometimes it could be exhausting, but mice went places larger animals couldn't.

Like the Ninth Floor dorm.

The mouse scurried down the stairs, until it froze, lifting in the air like a balloon. I climbed to my feet and glared at Vox, the only person who could use their elemental magic with that amount of precision. “Put him down.”

Vox raised an eyebrow. “No.”

My hounds came to my side as I stepped forward. “Now, Vylan, or else.”

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“Or else what, Taeme? You’ll send your puppies after me? They can’t take me. You can’t take me. And I’m sick of your little spies everywhere listening to fuck knows what. Maybe I should just take all this one’s air? It’s just a dirty mouse.”

A hand reached up and plucked the mouse from where it was suspended in ropes of air. I watched as Avalon Halhed put the mouse in her pocket and went back to looking at the instructor, like that hadn’t just happened.

She couldn’t have just stolen the mouse from Vox’s power unless he let her. What the fuck did that mean?

I stared Vox down once more, until Instructor Perot cleared his throat. “If you’re done, keep your squabbles out of my damn classroom. Inside is for learning, outside is for posturing. There’s an entire ring for you to flex at each other, and it’s a lot easier to clean blood from sand than from thousand-year-old parquetry.”

Sitting back down, I didn’t relax until the class was declared complete, then I walked out of the room with my head held high and my back turned to Vox Vylan, completely unbothered that he’d come for me like the coward he was.

I reached a room where the college staff kept cleaning products and stepped into it. Getting Quarry, my raven, to keep an eye out for the girl, I waited until she was in front of the door before I grabbed her and yanked her in.

The girl squeaked out a scream that I muffled with my palm. “We need to talk.”

Six

Avalon

I breathed heavily against the palm of Hayle Taeme. This close, the ache in my gut, that primal feeling of fear and pain, was nearly overwhelming. He removed his hand, and I glared at him.

“What is wrong with you? You don’t drag women into dark closets, you animal,” I hissed. All the while, my hand was searching for the doorknob behind me.

He leaned closer, inhaling deeply. “You’re right. I am an animal.” His tone strongly suggested that I was the prey.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the mouse. I hadn’t wanted to get between powerful Heirs, but I wasn’t going to let a defenseless mouse be hurt, just because they couldn’t keep their egos in check. I thrust the tiny creature out at him. It was curled in my palm, obviously having been napping in my pocket.

“Take better care of your pets. I can’t keep saving them for you.”

He glared at me, and honestly, the expression was terrifying. But he took the mouse with gentle fingers, releasing it up into the collar of his shirt. “I take excellent care of my animal companions, as do my whole Line. Their trust is our magic.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, well, what about the stolt that you keep stink-eyeing me about?”

Now it was his turn to look incredulous. “None of the Third Line here at Boellium have a stolt. I certainly don’t.” He raised an eyebrow. “That one is all you.”

Impossible, because Epsy was super tame. Last night, I’d caught him sleeping in my boot and chewing on the leather like it was his favorite pastime. Those were not the actions of a wild animal.

“Whatever,” I coughed out, because the scent of his skin was starting to whisper into my nose, and he smelled amazing. “What do you want, exactly?”

He looked down at me, his eyes stern. “Who are you, Avalon Halhed?”

Had this guy been dropped on his head as a baby? “You literally just said my name. Avalon Halhed. And in case you’ve been living under a rock and haven’t heard the whispers that echo around the hall, I’m the only conscript in the place from the Ninth Line. That’s all there is to know.”

He growled, and the noise was equal parts terrifying and arousing. Well, that was awkward.

“And your connection to the First Line?”

I frowned. I didn’t want to be some chew toy in inter-Line politics, but still, who did he think he was? “None of your fucking business.”

He leaned forward until his nose was brushing mine, those green eyes arresting. “What if I make it my business?”

I wanted to run away, or fall to my knees, and I didn’t like either option. Instead, I showed a little bit of spine. “Then I guess we’re both bound for disappointment.”

Finally finding the doorknob, I twisted it open and escaped before he could grab me and hold me hostage in that tiny room any longer. If anyone thought it was weird that I was in a cleaning closet, they minded their own business for once.

In the next class, we were scheduled for hand-to-hand combat, and the instructor was a hard-ass. He’d punish me just because I looked soft. My brother, Kian, had taught me a little self-defense, enough to escape my father if he ever managed to corner me

drunk and tried to beat me to death... again.

But being able to escape a drunk old man was very different to being able to best a trained soldier in combat. Or an untrained soldier, as I would later discover.

“Halhed, you are so weak and uncoordinated, I’m amazed you’ve never tripped over your own feet and been eaten by chickens. You’re that Goddess-cursed slow. Move. Jab, jab, turn, sweep. It’s not that hard. Think of it like a dance, if that helps with your courtly attitude.”

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I gritted my teeth. I'd never been to court in my life, and didn't know how to dance either. I didn't correct the instructor, though. Instead, I did what he said.

Jab. Jab. Turn. Sweep. Catch your own ankle. Fall on face in dirt.

This was ridiculous.

Viana from the Twelfth Line reached down and pulled me back to my feet. "I feel like I should apologize, but that was all you."

I huffed. "How are you so good at this?"

She shrugged and got back into a fighting stance. "Practice?"

I squinted at her. "I hate you a little right now."

Eugene from the Fourth Line, who I'd met a couple of times but avoided, strode over to me, a sneer on his face. "Lower Line scum. You're making us all look bad."

Viana pushed her shoulders back, stepping forward to make him eat his words, but I'd seen Eugene fight—he fought well, and he fought dirty. A bad combination. My hatred for Eugene was almost visceral, an on-sight loathing that I didn't really understand, but I trusted my gut. If it said that Eugene was a snake, I'd treat him as such.

Putting my hand out to stop Viana from taking a swing at him, I cocked my head like I was appraising him and found him wanting. "You make yourself look bad without

any assistance from us,” I told him coolly, then turned my back.

The crackle of the air around us told me that this was a poor decision, that turning your back on someone as powerful as a Fourth Line Heir was a good way to get dead quickly, but I didn’t let myself quake.

The sky went dark, the winds whipped up, and the fact that the Fourth Line power was weather control came flooding back into my brain from my tutoring. Extremely powerful Fourth Liners could target an enemy with a well-aimed hailstone, drown them in a flash flood, or strike them down with lightning.

Fear had me glancing up just in time to see hailstones hurtling toward me and Viana. “Look out!” I pushed her to the ground, covering her head with my body and protecting my own with my arms. Several small hailstones hit me before the storm just... stopped.

Glancing up, I realized it hadn’t stopped at all. Rather, an umbrella of air was flowing above my head. Vox Vylan walked toward me, his face impassive, but I could see his hand clenched into a fist by his side. Looking up, I watched the hail bouncing off the air canopy he’d created around Viana and I.

Vox didn’t even look at me as he walked over to Eugene. “What are you doing?”

Eugene smirked. “Teaching a lesson about the social hierarchy.”

Throwing back his head with a laugh, Vox slapped him on the back. “I didn’t realise they’d made you an instructor here. Should we start calling you Instructor Rován, instead of Eugene?”

I wanted to get out of here, but only the air umbrella was protecting me from getting pummeled. Everyone else was on the edge of the training ring, unable to move

through the hail toward us. We were trapped. Well, except for Vox.

All the Twelfth Line conscripts—including the guy whose lap Viana had been sitting on earlier in the week—looked terrified for their friend. No one would be terrified for me, which was a depressing thought.

Eugene was still laughing with Vox. “Maybe you should. It’s time the Lower Six learned that we’re their betters, don’t you think?” His eyes sparkled with the feverish shine of a zealot.

Vox’s expression was condescending before something shifted, his eyes reflecting pure danger. If Eugene had any sense, he’d run. But apparently, the pompous Heir didn’t.

“Maybe I should put all the Lower Lines in their place,” Vox murmured. “I’ll start with you.” His hand whipped out, and suddenly, Eugene was on his knees, gasping. “You need to learn your place, Eugene, and it isn’t tormenting the Lower Lines. It’s right here, on your knees, swearing fealty to your betters. Tome. You’re little better than the Twelfth Line with no magic. Weak. At least they find some nobility in it. You wouldn’t know nobility if it bit you in the ass, or in this case, was presented to you on a silver platter.”

Vox’s lip curled in disgust. “So while you’re down there, coming up with ways to make yourself feel larger, remember that there’s always someone stronger, who’ll relish doing the same to you.”

Eugene shouted, gritting his teeth as hail as big as cannonballs pelted against Vox’s air shield. The other members of the First Line stood just outside the fenced arena, and their faces looked stressed, but they were being held back by the instructors. There were rules in Boellium, of conduct and combat. Once you were in the middle of a battle, you couldn’t leave until one of you was declared the victor. No one else in

your Line could interfere either, not without great shame.

Viana screamed as hail pounded against the dome of protection, and we huddled together close to the ground. Thunder and lightning cracked the sky, and terror I hadn't ever felt before ran through my veins. Like an old fear that I couldn't quite remember.

Another flash, another crack, and I screamed. I'd never been scared of storms before, but something was whispering at the back of my brain. The echo of a nightmare.

One of the huge rounds of hail finally punctured the air dome, and I screeched as it barely missed me. Scrabbling away from the hole, I unfortunately crawled straight into the path of another chunk of hail piercing the veil. The ball of ice barrelled toward my face, and its icy kiss of pain was the last thing I felt before blackness swamped me.

Seven

Avalon

"Maybe we should take her to the healer again?"

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“He said she just needed to rest.”

“He was here, in our dorm. I almost pissed myself.”

The voices in the room were hushed, but frantic. I felt like my brain was mush in my skull, and the pain of it sloshing around in there was astronomical. I tried to drag my eyelids open, but they refused to cooperate.

“An Heir to the First Line, here, in the bowels of Boellium. I doubt that’s happened in a hundred years,” a familiar voice said, and the mention of the First Line had my eyes opening. There were five people in the room, all talking softly. They may as well have been shouting with a big brass band as background music, because it would make no difference to the pain in my head.

“Where am I?” I croaked out.

Viana was there immediately, staring down at me with worried eyes. “Hey there. You’re down in the Twelfth Line dorm. The healer said you had a concussion and had to be watched, but there was no one else on your floor, so we said we’d watch you. You know, because we unofficially adopted you.” Her face was smiling, but her eyes were worried. “How do you feel?”

I groaned. “Like someone dropped an anvil on my head.”

Someone snorted, “Close enough,” in the darkness of the room, but I couldn’t tell who it was. My vision felt off, and my thoughts were slow.

Someone appeared with a small bottle. Acacia. “A spoonful of this should help with the pain. The healer gave you something and said you’d be fine, but honestly, I’m fairly sure the guy learned to heal on horses or something. Even in your sleep, I could tell you were in pain. That’s what happens when you get your job through nepotism and not actual skill,” she muttered angrily, then held up the bottle. “This will definitely help.”

Fuck it. What did I have to lose? I opened my mouth, letting her spoon some foul-tasting elixir between my lips. I swallowed it down, and it tasted like an asshole, stuffed with rotten fruit and rancid meat. Someone poured a chaser of strong fruit juice down my throat directly after it, but still, I could taste the medicine on the back of my tongue. “Ugh, that’s fucking disg—” Almost instantly, the pain went away. “Ohhh...”

Someone laughed, but I didn’t care, because I didn’t even feel my body any more. I was a discombobulated consciousness, floating through the air. Huh. “I take it back. This is nice.”

Viana fixed something over my left eye, and I realized it was a bandage. “Yeah, I bet you do. We have a lot of good medicine out in the Twelfth Line. Acacia is learning from one of the elder healers, and she’ll continue to learn more when she goes back. We take care of our own out there.”

It felt nice, this care from other people. Foreign, like so many things, but the fact there were so many of them tending to me like I mattered? It made something ache in my chest.

Viana sat down beside me and grabbed my hand. “That was scary,” she whispered. “I thought we were going to die today.” I could see how pale she was, her eyes tight and worried.

Flashes of what had happened echoed in my brain. The hail. Eugene and Vox. But it was just that. Flashes. Any real memories seemed to have been knocked from my head and lost in the swirling darkness of pain. But I remembered the lightning. The fear.

No, that felt wrong too. That hadn't happened, had it? It had been hail. And thunder.

Only one person could tell me for sure. "What happened?" I asked Viana, and her jaw went tight.

Face solemn, she cleared her throat. "Eugene was trying to make a statement, I guess, really throwing everything he had at Vox Vylan's defenses. The hail coming down was bigger than my head, Avalon! Vox must have lost concentration or something, because right at the end, they were piercing through the air veil. We dodged what we could, but it was too much. You shoved me out of the way, and one got you in the head and half your shoulder. Your collarbone is broken."

I looked down, and sure enough, my arm was strapped to my side. I just hadn't felt the pain of it over the absolute agony of my skull. I wiggled my fingers, relieved they were fine. However, it was like now that I could see the bandages, it unlocked the far-away ache in my shoulder. Damn, that was going to hurt later too.

Viana continued. "After you were injured, Vox stopped trying to flex, and instead kicked Eugene in the face and knocked him out. The hail dried up almost immediately, and the Heir himself scooped you up to take you to the healer, though I thought he and Hayle were going to throw down about it. Their argument looked intense." Her eyes glinted with intrigue. Viana loved to gossip. "Anyway, the rest of my Line brought me back down here to patch up my war wounds." She pointed to some scrapes of her own that were bandaged up. "And an hour later, Vylan reappeared with you still in his arms. He ordered us to take care of you, threw in a few threats about how painful our deaths would be if we let you die, then left again.

Honestly, it was kind of hot. Terrifying, but hot.”

I didn’t know why he would do any of that. Maybe he felt guilty or something. I was kind of glad I didn’t remember being cradled in his arms, though. How embarrassing.

“And Eugene?”

“Being punished for allowing his battle to spread outside the designated battle zone. He’ll get a slap on the wrist, even though you almost died,” she muttered angrily. “If it had been one of the Upper Lines getting clobbered with hailstones, he’d be expelled in disgrace or sent to the dungeon or something. But not someone from the Ninth and Twelfth.”

Yeah, I’d probably be pissed about that later too, but right now, I didn’t have it in me to do anything. The echo of the pain was there, but almost like it was happening to someone else.

I’d never been more thankful for Viana and Acacia. “I’m sorry you got caught up in this,” I told Viana softly, and she just shook her head.

“The vanity of the Upper Lines isn’t your fault, Avalon. We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he’s a petty little man who has to use his magic, because he has a tiny little dick.” She huffed. “I think Eugene might be a psychopath. There’s something definitely wrong with him. My money’s on too much inbreeding. Some of those Lines like to keep them pure, you know?”

Ew.

Was that what I was picking up from Eugene that made me hate him so thoroughly, without any real cause? Could I sense that he had some kind of mental malady? Well, I guess I had a real reason to hate him now, but I’d still do my best to avoid him for

the next two years.

Viana stroked my head in an almost maternal way, and I sighed. No one had touched me with care in so long. Maybe not since my sister was shipped off to be wed, back when I was a child? My brothers had been there for me, but displays of affection weren't permitted by the Ninth Line Baron.

It was... nice.

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“You should rest now,” she said softly. “You need sleep to heal.” She left, softly closing the door behind her.

I noticed that this room had two beds and was bursting with stuff, and I wondered who I’d displaced from their room. But I’d worry about that later, along with every other problem that seemed to be cropping up during my conscription. This was why I should’ve kept my head down and faded into the background. I’d forgotten what my purpose was: to be completely unremarkable.

But no one was going to forget what had happened today. Being in the gravitational pull of Vox wasn’t going to help my cause either.

A sudden scratching noise on the floor had me opening an eye. What was that?

I opened the other eye and watched a fuzzy blob appear in my vision. Shit, I’d forgotten about Epsy. Had he tracked me down because he was hungry? I wondered if I could push my friendship with Acacia and send her to feed him.

As the fuzzy blob got closer, I realized it was significantly smaller than my stolt. I mean, the stolt. He wasn’t my stolt.

Instead, it was a tiny mouse. Recognizing its speckled white-and-black coat, I gave him a sleepy smile. “Oh, it’s you.”

It came right up to my face, its whiskers twitching as it sniffed softly. I couldn’t even feel the weight of it on my chest, it was so small.

“Have you been sent to check up on me?” Its tiny ears swiveled around, listening. “You’re pretty cute, actually. You cantell your master I’m okay.” I scratched the little mouse between its ears with the hand strapped to my chest. “Actually, could you get him to feed my stolt?”

How much did a mouse understand? Could it understand my words, or could it just transmit images? I wished I knew how the Third Line’s powers worked. So I did my best stolt impression with one arm; I held up a hand like it was an ear, and maybe I cleaned myself with an imaginary paw while I mimed eating.

Hopefully, he got the point. Otherwise, the stolt was just going to have to wait until I was up and around tomorrow to eat. He’d be pissed, but I’d bring him some of the jerky he loved.

The little mouse scurried away. I hoped he’d gotten everything he needed, because my eyes felt like they were being dragged down by heavy weights. I was glad to be falling into the darkness, where I didn’t have to think about why Vox Vylan had personally carried me to the healers and stayed with me. Or why he’d ordered people to take care of me. Or why Hayle Taeme had sent one of his tiny, furred minions to check on me.

Just blissful silence, where I didn’t have to think how close I came to dying.

Eight

Vox

Idrummed my fingers on my desk, trying to shake the girl from my head. My powers had failed against Eugene, of all people, and the shame was entirely consuming. The fact that the girl was hurt was disconcerting. The fear I’d felt when she was injured was... perplexing.

I didn't know what to do about any of it.

Well, that was untrue. I knew what I was going to do about Eugene.

A small smirk curled my cheeks. He was a dead man and didn't even know it yet. No one defied me, especially not some Fourth Line weakling. If it had been anyone under my air shield but Avalon Halhed?—

No. If it had been anyone other than Avalon being tormented by Eugene, I wouldn't have even stepped in. I didn't interfere with the squabbles of the Lower Lines. However, when I'd stumbled on her and the girl from the Twelfth being pelted with hailstones, I hadn't even thought before acting. I'd protected her like she mattered, but she didn't. Not to me, not to Ebrus.

See. Perplexing. Even now, I had the urge to go and check on her wellbeing.

Sighing, I leaned back in my desk chair. I had to write a missive to my father about today's events, and I needed to get my shit together. Weakness was not something that I could let my father see. I might be his flesh and blood, but he wasn't above exploiting my emotions in the name of teaching me how to be a leader, despite the fact it was unlikely that I'd ever be the ruler. The title of Baron of the First Line would go to my brother, and I'd always been ecstatic to be the backup. May my brother live a long, miserable life.

Shay slid into my room silently, her brows drawn together. I wiped my expression from my face automatically, even though I trusted Shay with my life. She was my closest friend, advisor, and more of a sibling to me than my own. But she'd never had to stand against my father, and I would rather her be blissfully unaware of potential secrets, should that ever happen.

"Is it done?"

She nodded, her face twisting into a malicious grin. “Yep. It’s so cold in the dungeon tonight that if Eugene doesn’t have frostbitten balls by the morning, it would be a Goddess-granted miracle.”

It was just the first of many small ways I was going to make that fucker’s life a misery. He’d soon learn how insignificant he was in the hierarchy of true power, and he’d remember exactly who was in charge at Boellium.

I kept my voice light and my expression neutral. “And the injured conscripts?”

Shay gave me a look that said I was full of shit. “Both resting in the bowels of Boellium under the watchful eye of the Twelfth Line.” She sat on the edge of my desk. “What was that about, Vox? And before you give me some bullshit answer, remember I’ve known you since before you could shit in a toilet. I can tell when something’s more than a passing amusement to you. You carried that girl from the Ninth Line all the way to the infirmary. You sat with her while the healer tended to her, then you carried her down to the Lower Level dorms. Have you ever even been below the atrium before today?” I shook my head, and she gave me a hard look. “People will have noticed, Vox.”

The underlying warning was that if people had noticed, the information was bound to make its way back to my father, probably my brother too. Hell, I’d be surprised if my mother didn’t also have spies in Boellium.

“I was just angry that someone as insignificant as Eugene had bested me. Carrying the girl was my punishment.”

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“Oh, your punishment?” Shay sat back casually, uncaring that her hands were scattering my paperwork. She knew I hated that shit. “Is that why you stepped into their disagreement in the first place? Were you punishing yourself when you had me looking into her history?” Shay glared at me. “Is it a punishment to look at her with moon eyes all the time, watch her wherever she walks, when she eats, when she trains? Don’t insult my intelligence, Vox. We’re past all this. Your secrets are safe with me, cousin. They always have been.” She dropped her voice low. “My loyalty has always been—and always will be—to you. Not our Line, or our Baron, or even my own family. To you.”

I looked around, because her words were dangerous at best, treasonous at worst, and these walls had ears.

There was no love lost between Shay and the men in my family. They’d tried to force her into a political marriage with someone truly fucking awful but incredibly influential, and it was only my insistence that she needed to come to Boellium with me that had saved her from being married and probably pregnant right now. Completely against her will.

In my family, the will of women wasn’t something to be considered. They were property, something to be bartered with, used, discarded. Not to me, though. Shay was worth a thousand of my brother. A million of my father. I would always protect her to the best of my abilities.

“I know, Shay,” I told her softly. “I don’t know what’s going on yet or what it is about her, but it’s something and it’s tormenting me. It’s like a song you hear in your mind, but you just can’t quite remember the whole tune.”

Jaw tensing, she nodded. “Fine. But I’m getting you at that wards against psychic manipulation. She’s Ninth Line, after all.”

I snorted. “They have basic precognition, Shay, not mind control. Even then, there hasn’t been someone in their Line that could predict the future in nearly two hundred years. My thoughts are my own.” I slumped back. “Maybe it’s my dick being led astray. Maybe I just need to get laid. I’m sure Ephily would happily warm my bed. She’s been hinting at it for six months.”

“Probably. Want me to tell her that all her dreams have come true?” Shay’s voice was light as she slid from my desk, but something that looked like resentment flitted through her expression. A normal person might have missed it, but I’d been trained since I was a child to read micro-changes in body language.

“What?” I asked softly. She shook her head as she turned to leave, but I gripped her wrist. “Shay, after all that talk of honesty and trust, you don’t get to stomp out of here like the injured party. What is it?”

She sucked her teeth. “Ephily and I hooked up at one of the Line parties a few months ago.”

I blinked, a little shocked. Not that Shay had slept with a woman; I’d known she was gay since... forever. No, the real shock was that Ephily was her type. “Ephily from the Fifth Line, that Ephily? The one who offered to blow me on her first day?”

Scowling in my direction, she snapped, “Yes. There’s only one Ephily in this Goddess-forsaken shithole, Vox. It was only once, and when she got out of my bed the following morning, she told me that she’d had fun, but I was the wrong Vylan.”

My lip curled in anger on my cousin’s behalf. “Shay...” She’d suffered so much by being the wrong Vylan. The wrong gender. The wrong branch of the family tree. The

wrong orientation.

Shay shook her head. “Sometimes, I think perhaps the Twelfth Line has it right. A life of love and community, not this political backstabbing bullshit where everyone’s trying to climb over your corpse to the top. When you’re at the bottom and you can’t see the pinnacle for the clouds, you can just convince yourself that life on the ground is better. There’s something simple in it.”

She tugged lightly, and I let her arm go. “It won’t always be like this, Shay,” I promised.

The pity on her face made my chest feel tight. “Won’t it?” She strode toward my door, but paused at the threshold. “You should know that while I was in the library looking for information about Avalon Halhed, I wasn’t the only one.”

I stilled, my eyes snapping to hers. “Who?”

“Hayle Taeme.”

What the hell did Taeme want with a girl from the Ninth Line? He was no more likely to pursue her as anything more than a bedmate than I was; we were both manacled by our Line.

I thought about how he’d gotten in my face when I was carrying the girl to the infirmary, and while his words had been the normal goading bullshit, if I thought back on the moment, looked past my panic that the girl in my arms was maybe dying, he’d looked just as frantic. His eyes had drifted to her repeatedly, like he cared if she lived or died.

What the hell did that mean? Was she a spy?

So many fucking questions without answers.

Pulling out a sheet of the official First Line monogrammed paper, I wrote a brief account of the events of today for my father, from Eugene's insubordination to my plans for his comeuppance. I only put a brief note about two conscripts from the Lower Lines being injured, as dismissive of them as I could make it, without mentioning them altogether. I put in a little lament for my failure, in case anyone else snitched about how I'd carried the injured girl to the infirmary personally. A throwaway sentence about good optics to build better bonds with the Lower Lines, should I need them.

Anything but the truth I couldn't face. There was something about Avalon Halhed that spoke to my soul. She was a weakness that I had to exorcise immediately for both of our sakes. There was one sure way to do that, and it would kill two birds with one hailstone.

"Elliott!" I yelled, and the most personable of the First Line conscripts appeared. He wasn't from the Vylan line, merely a kid with big ambitions who'd volunteered so he could raise his station through the Dawn Army. He didn't have a lot of magic, but enough to enhance some pretty impressive weaponry skills.

"Yes, sir?" he said.

"We're going to have the first Upper Line party of the new conscript year. I want to have it tomorrow night. Make it happen."

He grinned at me. Fucking kid hadn't had the joy beaten out of him yet, but I found him kind of endearing, like a big, dumb dog who just wanted to please. "Yes, sir!"

A party would help two-fold. I could fuck away some of this tension that was riding my body and clouding my mind, and I could corner Hayle Taeme. He was overly

interested in someone who should be an inconsequential conscript, and I wanted to know why.

Nine

Avalon

It was not all that uncommon to see a conscript walking around with their arm in a sling. We were training to be soldiers, after all. However, the amount of stares I was garnering had little to do with the sling and everything to do with the Heir to the First Line having carried me through the halls of the War College like a damsel.

That was it—the only reason the event was worth the gossip. There was no mention of Eugene and his hissy fit. No talk of how I'd almost died. My only value to these people was as a focal point for speculation. There were two prevailing rumors.

One, which seemed to be the most obvious, was that Vox Vylan was fucking me and had grown attached. I almost snorted at this one. Unlikely.

The second rumor was that I was the Baron of the First Line's ill-begotten love child and that's why Vox—the normally cold-as-ice prince—gave a crap about me. Again, equally preposterous. Though, given the rumors I'd heard about the Baron of the First Line, it was likely that he did actually have more than a few affair children roaming around, but I wasn't one of them, for which I was eternally grateful. My father had made my life a misery, but I couldn't imagine having to live out that nightmare beneath the collective gaze of the Court of Fortaare and all the leeches who hung around Ebrus's seat of power.

No, the preposterous part of that rumor was that the Baron would give a fuck about the wellbeing of any of his illegitimate children.

In all of the speculation, however, no one had suggested that perhaps it was just

because Vox was a kind person. That he'd carried me to the healer out of the goodness of his heart. That made me kind of sad for the Heir to the First Line.

On the plus side, my instructors had excused me from combat training for a whole week. I felt like I should send Eugene a thank-you card for that unexpected boon. It was like a holiday from life. I still had to attend battle strategy and history lectures, though, attempting to make notes with my left hand. I'd have to commit most of it to memory, because the notes were illegible.

At the moment, I was trying not to fall asleep as Instructor Tryelle told us about the history of Ebrus before the Line segregation, back when we'd been warring tribe factions rather than a united country.

The feeling of tiny nails against my socks was all too familiar now. Dropping my pen as an excuse, I reached down and held out my hand for my little black-and-white mouse friend. It had been my almost constant companion since I was injured, hanging out in either my collar beneath my hair, or in one of my pockets, unless it was off doing... whatever mice did.

Epsy liked the mouse too, which was a relief. I was fairly sure rodents were Epsy's main food source, though the other day I'd caught him eating a head of lettuce, so maybe I knew nothing about what stoltz ate.

But the mouse in my collar and the stolt in my pocket seemed to have an understanding. Although I was fairly sure that Epsy would've eaten at least a hundred of the mouse's family line, they seemed to have come to some kind of truce.

Or maybe it was just wishful thinking, and Epsy would feel like a midnight snack one day and I'd wake up to no more mouse friend.

No, not a friend. A spy. I had to remember that this mouse was one of Hayle Taeme's

animal companions. However, as far as spies went, this one was freaking adorable.

Instructor Tryelle was looking at us with something that might be aggrieved disappointment. “I know you’re out here living your best life, swinging your swords like the past doesn’t matter, but just know that we do have a library where you could do your own research. There is a lot to learn from the past that could help you well into your future.”

I was probably guilty of this. I knew we had a library here in Boellium, and normally, that would be the first place I’d go, but I hadn’t managed to do anything except eat, sleep and train in the few weeks since I’d arrived. I’d barely gained my footing, and I expected that until I was a lot stronger, I wouldn’t feel anything but perpetually exhausted. Maybe my forced combat training hiatus meant I could check out the rest of the campus, including the library.

The instructor excused us, and it was time for my favorite part of the day: dinner. I’d never been so hungry as I had in my time at Boellium, the extra physical exertion making me constantly starving. But that was only a small part of why I loved the food here.

The college didn’t differentiate between the different Lines when serving the meals, and the tastes of the Upper Lines were far more finicky than the Lower Lines, which meant I was trying foods I would never have tasted back home. Like ice cream and pistachios. Like cuts of venison so tender, they melted as they hit my tongue.

The spoiled Upper Line conscripts complained if the same thing was served more than twice in the space of a month, so it was also varied. I wasn’t the only person who enjoyed the easy access to food, even if it did come with a side of snide humiliation from the Upper Liners like Ephily.

I was disheartened to see that today’s meal was some kind of soup; not the easiest

thing to eat with my non-dominant hand, but I'd just get an extra bread roll and soak it up.

As soon as I stood in the food line, Epsy disappeared into the kitchen. "Epsy!" I hissed, but the damn stolt didn't even look back. He was going to end up at the business end of a cleaver, if the cooks caught him. He wasn't a very smart creature, and I could only hope that the kitchen staff thought he was part of the Third Line and would be too scared to throw him in tomorrow night's stew.

The mouse in my collar had more sense, just burrowing in deeper so no one could see it. I slid my tray along the smooth bench, using my good hand to shakily ladle soup into the deep well carved into it. I would be glad when the sling came off, even if my collarbone still ached. Tonight's dinner was going to be messy; I could predict it now.

None of my Twelfth Line friends had appeared at their table yet, since they were probably still at combat training. Putting two bread rolls onto my tray, I ignored the jibes of the girl from the Sixth Line, calling me a fat ass. I doubted they'd say that to the guy in front of me, who had two bowls of soup and three damn bread rolls, even though we were all working just as hard in battle training.

No, the real reason was that a fraction of the women in the college weren't here to be soldiers—they were here to create alliances, preferably of the marital variety. Where better to get close to the Heirs and Upper Lines than in this microcosm of our society?

Those conscripts were all thin, svelte, ball ready at any moment. Fuck that. I wanted to not pass out during training, which meant I was going to eat two bread rolls and probably come back for some of that cake sitting at the end of the long benches.

I looked over my shoulder and smiled at the Sixth Line girl with far more teeth than would be considered polite as I added a third bread roll to my tray. I would just take it

down to my dorm later if I didn't eat it. Making the point was more important.

Heading over to my empty table, I balanced the tray precariously with one hand and breathed a sigh of relief when I didn't drop it all over myself. My good arm was now aching from taking on the bulk of today's tasks, and as I lifted my spoon to my lips, I shook, spilling most of it off the side.

Dammit. This was going to be slow.

Scooping up another spoonful, I lifted it again to my lips, but this time, I felt something cool wrap around my wrist, a band of air that I felt as physically as if someone had grabbed me with their hand. The air gently maneuvered my wrist toward my mouth, and the spoon sat there at my lips, waiting for me to sip the soup from it.

I didn't spill a single drop.

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I slurped it down, and the air on my wrist pulled my hand back down, back to my bowl. I scooped up more, and this time, it merely steadied my hand as I ate my soup. Who had that kind of precision—and would give a damn—if I could eat my soup without making a mess?

There was only one person I knew for a fact who had that skill. My eyes wandered across the room, but Vox Vylan wasn't paying attention to me. The spoon tapped gently against my lips, and I opened them almost on instinct. It had to be him, right? No one else was that powerful.

Again and again, he fed me, or at least aided me in feeding myself. It was oddly caring, and what the hell did I make of that?

Vox continued to carry on conversation with the others at his table, and I noticed Shay, his second-in-command, watching me closely. Maybe it wasn't Vox doing it, but Shay? However, judging by the way her lips tightened as she turned away, probably not.

Finally, the soup was done, and the air around my wrist loosened, sliding down my arm and off the tips of my fingers in almost a sucking motion. I gasped in a breath as the sensation went straight to my core. My eyes flew back across the room, and this time, they clashed with Vox's icy blue ones.

But they weren't so icy right now. No, they were filled with heat, like he could sense my thoughts, or taste the desire that had shot through my veins. I was trapped in the snare of his gaze, helpless to escape.

Not when the sucking air trailed down my throat like hungry kisses. Not when it slipped below the billowing V of my shirt and between my breasts. Not when it brushed across the curve of my flesh, wrapped around my nipple, and sucked.

“Fuck!” I squawked loudly, making everyone in the room turn in my direction. My cheeks flushed hot and red as I dragged my gaze up to the ceiling. If I wasn’t looking at him, he wouldn’t be able to see the sheer need in my expression. I scrambled from my table, not even bussing my tray as I hightailed it out of the room.

But not before I met Vox’s blue eyes once more, finding them filled with molten desire, the small smirk on his face promising access to untold secrets, untold pleasure. My feet tripped over themselves, but I kept going, out of the dining hall, across the courtyard, down to the beach.

I need to climb into the waves and cool down my overheated skin. Needed the water to wash away the visions of Vox Vylandoing even more depraved things to me with his elemental abilities.

I was all the way to the shoreline when I realized I wasn’t alone on the beach. Hayle Taeme was sitting on a large, flat stone, his hounds at his feet, his intense gaze watching me as I stood with the waves splashing up to my knees.

The last thing I wanted was to be in the path of another powerful man who made me feel things I didn’t understand. Turning, I sprinted back up the rocky path toward the walls of Boellium, but the hounds blocked my way.

“Stay,” Hayle commanded, and I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or the hounds, at least until he tacked on, “Please.”

I turned slowly, my heart thundering in my chest, and tried not to feel as if I was walking to my doom as my feet moved toward Hayle.

Ten

Hayle

I didn't know what I was doing. Braxus heaved an annoyed sigh and lay down at my feet, but I ignored him and his insinuation that I found Avalon Halhed to be a tempting rutting partner. Alucius had snapped her teeth at him about it, but I didn't understand that either. Some of their conversations were just for them, not meant for human understanding.

Avalon walked over to me slowly, almost like she was worried I'd tear her throat out. Had I given her any reason to believe that was something I wanted?

I shuffled over on the flat rock, inviting her to sit beside me. She perched right on the edge, like she was ready to sprint at any moment. She should know better than to run from a hunter. It just invited us to chase.

A mouse peeked out from her collar, and I found myself smiling as I put out my hand and he launched himself off her shoulder, into my palm.

"Such a traitor," Avalon mumbled, and the mouse's whiskers twitched. He bombarded me with images of everything that had happened since I'd last seen him, including the taste of magic while she'd been trying to eat earlier. Vox was more than interested in her; that was becoming obvious. In all the years I'd known him, he'd never shown softness toward anyone, except maybe his cousin, Shay.

I stroked the mouse's head in thanks and fed him one of the nuts I kept in my pocket for Quarry. "It's not his fault. It's nice to be seen, especially when you're so small," I told her softly. Once the nut was clenched firmly between his teeth, I lifted him back up to Avalon's shoulder, where he returned to his place under her collar. "Besides, he likes you. I relieved him of his duties days ago, and he chooses to stay with you."

She gave me a crooked grin. “I have a way with rodents, I guess.”

“Must be why Vox Vylan is so enamored with you then.”

She slid her eyes to me, but said nothing. I watched the waves again, the seabirds swirling, sending me images of a great school of fish just off the shore.

“I’ve been looking into you and your family,” I said casually, and I didn’t imagine the way her body froze. I wanted to know her secrets. “There’s a lot of literature about them in the library.”

“Oh?” she asked with forced lightness. “Must have been a pretty boring read. Besides, you don’t really strike me as the studious library type.”

I gave her a toothy grin. “Are you saying I look stupid?”

Her cheeks flushed pink, and she shook her head so vigorously, it was a wonder she didn’t knock off the mouse in her collar. “No? I mean, definitely not.”

Probing a little more, I tuned into her scent. She smelled... stressed. Interesting. Was she a spy? There was always a chance here, and I had no doubt that more than one of the Lines had installed people in Boellium just to see the way the winds of power were turning.

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“As I was saying, there was a lot of literature about your family. They were once revered seers, did you know that?”

Now she was looking at me like I was stupid. “Of course I knew that. I lived up north, not in a cave on the side of a mountain. I can even read,” she said with mock amazement. I tried not to grin at her sarcasm. She was kind of cute when her heart wasn’t beating out of her chest like a scared bunny.

“As I was saying, people would come from all over Ebrus, putting aside decades of feuds, to talk to members of your family. To get their predictions.” I sucked on my back teeth thoughtfully. “Then somewhere around ten generations ago, the power started to dwindle.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Really? Do tell me more about my own family history.”

I smirked. “Don’t you wonder why?”

She shook her head. “No. Every Line’s power has been dwindling over the last few centuries, and I wonder how much of the original reports of our powers were just exaggerations for the history books anyway.”

I didn’t tell her that the Third Line’s powers hadn’t dwindled at all. That perhaps my brothers and I were the strongest direct descendents of the Line in... well, ever. I also didn’t mention that Vox’s abilities were just as impressive, and if my brothers were to be believed, Yaron Vylan’s powers were equally as strong.

No, it seemed only the powers of the Lower Lines were dwindling, and I was neither

the researcher nor the historian needed to figure out the whys and hows of that. That was for minds more academic than my own.

Turning to face her, I stared into her eyes. “Why are you here, Avalon Halhed?”

She raised an eyebrow at me like I was stupid. With any other person, I would’ve flexed my powers until they cowered under my domination, but I found the bravado hiding under Avalon’s soft exterior kind of endearing.

“The same reason we’re all here, Hayle Taeme.” Was she mocking me right now? “Ebrus’s conscription laws mean each Line has to send at least one conscript every year.”

That was true, but what made a man send his youngest daughter to Boellium War College? “But why you? If it was about training a fighter or garnering political influence, I know you have several older brothers. If it was just about sending a warm body to fulfil the conscript quota, I assume you have several dozen farm boys up in the wilds who’d like a chance to prove themselves in the Dawn Army. So why you? Why the youngest daughter of the Baron?”

Her jaw was tense, and I knew I’d struck a nerve. “What you don’t know—and can’t discover in the library’s history books—is that my father hates me. Sending me to Boellium was probably the happiest he’s been in decades.”

I hadn’t spent much time with Avalon, but even I knew that she was a kind person. She’d saved my damn mouse, after all. “I’m sure that’s not true. Maybe it feels like it right now because he sent you here, but I can’t imagine anyone hating you for no reason.”

She frowned at me, pain in her eyes. “Is murdering my mother a good enough reason?” she snapped, and with that, she slid from the rock beside me and marched

back toward the college while I stared after her, dumbfounded.

She'd murdered her mother?

There had to be more to it than that, because unless she had an evil twin, there was a better chance of me being one of Baron Vylan's illegitimate children than her being a murderer. Standing, I brushed the sand from my trousers. Something was not right with the Ninth Line, and I was going to figure out what it was.

The last thing I wanted to do tonight was go up to the First Line dorm for an Upper Lines party, but I was basically duty-bound to attend. If I didn't go, the delicate balance of power in Boellium could shift.

Right now, Vox and I stood almost at an equilibrium. We both had enough people on our sides that we could go about our days without any kind of power struggle. But an entire party, this early in the year, with no Third Line representation? Well, Vox Vylan could whisper all sorts of lies in the ears of the new Upper Six conscripts, and the hierarchy could be redrawn overnight. It was an exhausting, petty juggling act that I loathed with my entire being.

Lucio was already dressed like he was planning to get laid and was waiting by the door when I emerged from my own room, proof of how long I'd been dragging my feet getting ready. Lucio tended to take forever to get his hair perfect in the mirror.

"Brother, we're going to a party, not your execution. Cheer up," he teased, slapping me on the back. I rolled my eyes and whistled for Braxus. While it was generally accepted that we wouldn't bring our creature familiars to parties, no one was stopping me from bringing at least one of my hounds. They were as much a part of me as my own hand.

Braxus groaned, and I caught a smug emotion from Alucius, who was still curled up

in front of the fireplace. “Sorry, Brax. If they weren’t such fucks, you could stay home and snuggle in front of the fire too. Unfortunately, I need you to watch my back.”

He sighed heavily, plodding toward the dorm door before me. However, as soon as he crossed the threshold, he was immediately on alert. Forever my bodyguard.

We walked up the stairs to the top floor, past the permanently locked and barred Second Line dorm. Even from the landing, I could tell the party was already in full swing. While the First Line dorm didn’t have the same level of soundproofing as ours, the pounding music was still muffled pretty well.

It was the first party of the new conscript year, so the First Line appeared to have gone all out. There was alcohol flowing freely, and Lines mingling, and already, there were people fucking in the corners of the room.

The party had only been going for an hour.

The conscripts of Boellium worked hard, but they also played hard. For some, it was the first time they’d ever been outside their Line’s territory. I guess there was something to be said for extensive “networking,” especially the naked kind.

Lucio sniffed the drink he was handed by someone in the Fourth Line before handing it to me. I sniffed it too, our heightened senses able to pick up any note that wasn’t meant to be in the burning liquor.

“I’m going to see if I can convince Shay to dance with me.” Lucio wandered toward the enigmatic second-in-command for the First Line. He liked trying his luck with her, because for each other, they were both safe.

The Third Line had enough spies to know that Shay had absolutely no interest in

Lucio romantically. He did not possess the right parts. But no one said it out loud, and Lucio didn't want to get caught in the sticky tendrils of some scheming Upper Line female who wanted to marry their way into clout. So he made it known that he was only interested in Shay, and she played along, for whatever her reasons were.

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I sipped my drink, enjoying the burn, with Braxus sitting in front of my legs giving enough of afuck-offvibe that I didn't have to worry about dealing with pandering or political maneuvering.

At least, I didn't, until Vylan appeared in my personal bubble. "Taeme."

"Vylan."

"I would like to talk." He always sounded like he had a stick up his ass. Like he hadn't felt a single moment of passion in his short, obnoxious life.

"Perhaps you should try one of the healers. They'll give a shit about your problems."

Rolling his eyes at me, he didn't leave, nor rise to the bait. He must be serious. "It's about the girl."

I stiffened. There was only one girl who'd piqued our collective interest, and I had no urge to share what I knew with this pompous douchebag. "Which girl?" I said lazily, sipping my drink like we weren't seconds from throwing down.

He gave me his normal bored, impassive expression, but I saw the subtle tightening of his jaw. "Avalon Halhed, the one from the Ninth Line."

I shrugged. "What about her?"

Vox stepped into my space, making Braxus bare his teeth. I sent him a reassurance through our bond that I had this, and to stand down, but he didn't like it.

“Stay away from her. If you have an interest in her, I suggest you forget it. She’s mine.”

Well, fuck me. I hadn’t seen that coming. Was Avalon thawing the ice prince? I’d believe it when I saw it. It was more likely that he just didn’t want me playing with his toys.

“Says who? I think that’s for Avalon to decide, don’t you?” I buried my fingers in Braxus’s fur. “A little healthy competition might be just what the healer ordered. May the best man win, Vylan.” I laughed at the sour expression on his face. “And no one would ever consider you the best man.”

He straightened, his eyes turning frigid. “At least I’m a man and not a beast. Stay away from her, Taeme. I won’t warn you again.”

He may as well have put a giant X on her head, because now she was a treasure at the end of a hunt, and I was going to have her for myself.

Eleven

Avalon

Something had changed, and it felt big. I didn’t notice for a week or two, just going about my days in blissful ignorance until Shay from the First Line appeared in front of me on a random Wednesday. I was finally out of my sling and back on the training field, swinging a slightly lighter sword.

“I’m Shay.” That was all she said, like it should explain everything. And in her defense, it kind of did. She was the second-in-command of the First Line here at Boellium War College. Everyone knew that.

“Uh, I’m Avalon.” I wasn’t sure why we were doing introductions, but I was polite, if nothing else.

She looked at me as if I were a bug under a looking glass. She eyed me a little longer, then turned on her heel and left. That was it.

I looked over at Viana and Acacia. “What the fuck was that?”

Viana snorted a laugh. “That was Vox Vylan’s cousin trying to work out why her Heir is panting after some nobody from the Ninth Line. No offense.”

I rolled my eyes. “None taken.” I truly meant it, because it had been really weird. An anomaly. “And Vox is not panting after me.”

Acacia and Viana did that annoying silent conversation thing that came from knowing someone inside and out for a long period of time. Finally, Acacia shook her head. “She must know.”

Viana raised an eyebrow. “How could she? You know what she’s like.” They both turned toward me, so there was no doubt I was the “she” to which they were referring.

“You know, right?” Acacia asked.

Quite frankly, they were talking in riddles and giving me a headache. “Know what?” I shouted a little louder than necessary.

Viana looked triumphant. “I told you she had no idea.” She gripped my hands. “Vox Vylan wants to fuck the brains right out of your head. He wants to use his dick to reshape your insides until they’re cock-embossed. He wants you to ride him like a magic carpet.”

Magic carpets didn't exist anymore, since the First Line had evolved beyond using them as transportation. That wasn't important, though.

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I blinked at Viana. “No, he doesn’t.”

She gripped my chin and turned my face toward the other side of the training ring where Vox was shirtless, his pale skin flashing under the harsh sun as he downed water from a glass bottle. He’d been training one-on-one with one of the instructors. Not that he needed any instruction, as his fluid movements were graceful and mesmerizing.

Though, at this moment, he was watching me with eyes that made my skin tingle and my body feel hot. I tried to intellectualize the sensation away; it was probably the sun, combined with the fact that I was out of shape after resting for two weeks. It definitely didn’t have anything to do with the way his piercing blue gaze was burning against my skin.

Viana let go of my chin, but she stayed close. “See that expression? That is the look of a man who wants to lay you down in the sand right here, and fuck you where everyone can see. That’s the expression of a man who desperately wants to know what you look like as you orgasm.”

My mouth suddenly felt bone dry, and I wet my lips without dragging my eyes from his.

Acacia snorted. “He’s eyefucking you like you’re the last pussy on earth, Avalon Halhed, and I can’t believe you’ve never noticed. I bet you don’t even realize that him and Hayle Taeme are about to come to blows, because Taeme also wants to make the beast with two backs with you. I don’t know what kind of vagina magic you possess, but I’m here for it. It’s about time that some of the Upper Lines realize the

quality of partners available in the Lower Six.”

At her words, my gaze shot to Hayle, who was lazily sparring with his cousin, Lucio, but mostly watching the intense interaction between Vox and I.

“What the fuck?” I breathed again, but I didn’t get a chance to think about it too hard because Vox was striding across the training ring toward me. I wanted to run away, like he was a mountain lion and not an Heir to the First Line. Honestly, I might be better off taking my chances with the mountain lion.

He stopped in front of me, and my two friends took up positions behind me. They had my back, and honestly, it felt kind of nice to know that someone would be there to witness my inevitable destruction at the hands of Vox Vylan.

“Your arm is better.” It was a statement, not a question, so I just stared up at him dumbly. “Your presence is required tonight in the First Line dorm.”

Honestly, I’d have been less surprised if he’d asked me to strip down and do a traditional Ebrian moon dance with him right out here in the open. “What?”

He didn’t repeat himself, just raised an eyebrow.

I cleared my throat, Viana’s words echoing around in my brain. The audacity of this guy to just order me to his dormroom, as if I was some kind of cheap prostitute. He hadn’t even tried to word it like it was a request. So I held his eyes as I said, “No, thank you.”

The look of shock on Vox’s face would have been amusing in any other situation. “Excuse me?”

“No.” I mimicked his eyebrow raise. “You do know the meaning of the word, right?”

It's like the opposite of 'Yes, Sir.' I don't like being ordered up to your ivory tower, Vox Vylan." His incredulity was making me feel even more irate.

I heard Acacia gasp, and I suddenly remembered the guy who'd been hanging suspended in the courtyard of Boellium the day I arrived. I wondered what he'd done, and if it was remotely as bad as insulting the second in line to Ebrus's throne of power.

He stepped closer, bending down until his nose was mere inches from mine. "My apologies, Avalon. Would you please accompany me in my dorm room on the First floor tonight? There is a meteor shower predicted, and I would like to share it with you, if you are at all interested?" How could he make such an innocent invitation sound like an all-access pass to a First Line orgy?

Did I want to go and see a meteor shower? Yes. It was common knowledge that Vox's room was in the glass dome at the very top of the atrium's tower.

Did I also want to have sex with Vox Vylan? Well, that was a secret I was even keeping from myself.

I licked my lips again, and he followed the action with his eyes. "Just the meteor shower? No sex?"

Viana snorted, but held her tongue. Vox's gaze briefly flicked to the two women behind me, then back down to my face. "Your virtue is safe with me, Ninth." He leaned closer, which seemed impossible, considering his breath was already misting against my lips. "But is my virtue safe with you?" he asked lightly. Straightening, he turned away and strode back across the practice ring, falling into the fighter's stance opposite the instructor once more.

I sucked in oxygen like he'd stolen it all. Looking over at Acacia and Viana, I gave

them a wide-eyed look of panic. “That just happened, right? I didn’t have a fever dream?”

Acacia shook her head. “No, girl. You didn’t.” She tugged at my arm. “When we’re done here, we need to head down to the bowels. I have a sneaking suspicion that there’s not a single thing in your wardrobe that’s appropriate to wear ‘star watching’ with an Heir to the First Line.” She said “star watching” the way some people would say “flying pigs.” With a heavy dose of skepticism.

She was right, of course. I had my brother’s pants and my traveling skirt, which had as many holes as pockets. I needed to mend it, but there really hadn’t been time. Neither of those were respectable enough to even be in the First Line dorm, let alone Vox Vylan’s living quarters.

“I’d be grateful. Thank you.”

I’d been to the bowels of Boellium—the colloquial name for the Twelfth Line dorm, as it was at the very bottom of the main building—a few times now, and I envied the camaraderie they all had together. The community they’d somehow adopted me into.

When Acacia and Viana arrived with me in tow, I was greeted like a long-lost sibling. Someone thrust a bowl of stew in my hand, someone else grilled me about how my collarbone was healing, and others asked after my stolt. They all cared. It was like a bandage around my stone-cold heart, and I didn’t know what to do with the emotions it evoked.

“Our friend from the Ninth has a date with none other than Vox Vylan, and has a truly abysmal wardrobe. Does anyone have anything they’d think is appropriate?” Viana asked.

Someone whistled low, and there was a lot of elbow nudging and banter, but at least

six people ran off into their dorm rooms, including Acacia. I sat in the middle of their common room, eating stew like a fool, while Viana gave them all a blow-by-blow of what had happened in the training ring.

“Then he leaned in, and I swear, I thought he was going to either headbutt her or kiss her, but instead, he said please. Vox Vylan said please.” They all went wide-eyed, like he’d fought and defeated a three-headed dragon, instead of using good manners.

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Acacia rushed out of her room holding a red dress, roughly the same color as the sun-scorched earth of her home territory. “Come on, Avalon. We only have four hours until you have to meet Vox Vylan in his bedroom, and you smell like the ass end of a beast of burden.”

I sniffed my armpit and winced. She wasn’t wrong. She herded me into the big copper bathtub, filled with some kind of fragrant herbs and murky white water. I didn’t even have time to be embarrassed as she undressed me, and three of them scrubbed me down, even cleaning the dirt beneath my fingernails.

By the end, I was in fact several shades lighter. Here I thought I’d been getting a tan in the harsher Southern sun. Turns out, it was just caked-on dirt.

They preened me until the clock read 8:55pm, and I was standing at the door of the bowels, the whole floor hovering around, as if I was off to my first ball rather than some guy’s dorm room. Viana had her arms wrapped around the waists of both Polus and Link—her boyfriends—and they were all looking at me like I was a miracle.

Acacia chewed her lip. “You should see if you can get him to do something about the famine in the Eleventh and Twelfth Baronies while he’s buried between your thighs.”

Viana hushed her. “We aren’t pimping her out for humanitarian aid, Acacia. The Upper Lines don’t care, and we shouldn’t ruin Avalon’s chances of a better future by making her a political spy.” She grinned and hugged me tightly. “You look beautiful, though, so if anyone could make a man like Vox Vylan spontaneously grow a heart, it’d be you. Remember, if you start to gag, just force yourself to swallow.” She pushed me out onto the dorm landing.

I frowned at her parting words, and the way Polus was laughing. “What?”

“She means have fun,” Acacia answered, then closed the door.

Sucking in a deep breath, I made the climb to the top floor of Boellium, and the elite of all of Ebrus’s Lines.

Twelve

Vox

I’d cleared out the dorm, because I could. Not because I was embarrassed that I’d invited her here, but because I didn’t think she’d enjoy being stared at like some sort of freak. Ridiculous, really. I hadn’t been living like a monk in this hellhole for the last year; I’d had lovers. Many, in fact, because I couldn’t fuck anyone twice without them getting stars in their eyes and dreaming of crowns on their heads. Figurative crowns, of course. Ebrus didn’t actually have royalty.

Though the First Line would be as close as you could get. At least, that’s how everyone had always treated us, and my father would be the first to expect their reverence. I hated it. Always had, even when I was a child. The stares and expectations were the heaviest mantle.

Displacement in my air barrier told me that Avalon had arrived. I stood and straightened my clothes, still unsure why I was doing this.

There’d been a small seed of feeling that had been sown upon seeing her, and it compelled me to dig at it, whether I understood it or not.

Walking down the spiral staircase to the common room, I strode confidently toward the door. Straightening my face into its normal stately mask, I opened it. And my jaw

immediately slackened.

With the lights of the landing behind her, she looked almost ethereal. I cleared my throat. “You look nice.”

That was bullshit. She looked more than nice. She looked beautiful. Her skin was glowing, her hair falling in beautiful waves over her shoulders. She was in a dress that I knew was of the Twelfth Line style, a fitted bodice that hugged her curves right down over her hips, before flaring into a full skirt.

She looked like a goddess. That small seed of feeling began to sprout into something else. Something that I wasn’t sure would get enough light to bloom into anything more.

Mentally shaking myself, I stood to the side and indicated she should enter. She gave me a tight smile, stepping across the threshold. She was possibly the first Ninth Line conscript to step foot on this floor in a hundred years.

“Where is everyone?” she asked softly, like she was worried about being shushed by a librarian. I shut the door behind her, and she briefly looked panicked.

Well, that was good sense, I guess. I hadn’t thought about how it would seem, just her and I in a deserted dorm, with the door locked.

“Everyone is out, but if you’re uncomfortable, I could get Shay or someone else to come back?”

I was a fool. When was the last time I’d made an effort with a woman? Normally, they crawled into my lap with little effort on my part. I didn’t do anything as basic as trying.

Shay, while she didn't pretend to understand my fascination with the girl from the Ninth Line, had insisted this kind of effort was good for me, even if it couldn't go anywhere. That I should consider it training for whatever bride my father inevitably picked out for me. Or my mother, I guess. I wasn't sure which option was more terrifying.

Shay might've been right. I knew that I didn't want a loveless, messy marriage—the kind my parents had, fuelled by rage, gossip, and illicit affairs. It was the most toxic environment I'd ever witnessed... and I'd grown up in court.

Avalon canted her head toward me appraisingly, then shook it. “No, it's fine. I can always stab you if you get too handsy.”

I choked back the laugh that threatened to burst out. “That's treasonous talk, Ninth. Don't you know the walls have ears?” Not in here, though. This dorm was my domain, and there were no spies here right now. Nothing but the sphere of silence that I meticulously maintained and the girl across from me. “Let's go up to my suite. The meteor shower is estimated to begin within the next hour.”

She followed me obediently up the spiral stairs, and when we stepped into the Dome, she sucked in a small gasp. I resisted the urge to preen, like I'd had anything to do with the beauty of this room. It had been here for longer than I could comprehend. The large diamond panes of glass managed to be both beautiful and unobtrusive, a frame for a breathtaking view of the stars. The moon was thin and dark, making it the perfect night for the meteor shower.

She spun around, taking in my suite with wide eyes. I tried to see it the way she did: the large bed covered in the finest blankets, the ornate desk and chair that overlooked the courtyard. Intricate rugs, sculptures, and swords all sat side by side. A low bookshelf ran right around the room, filled with numerous tomes that varied in rarity and boringness.

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Along the wall that faced back to the vast openness of the sea was my telescope. My one little vice. My father thought it made me a dreamer, looking for answers out among the stars, but my mother—for the first and only time in her life—had argued that it was an educated field of study that would be well respected by the other Lines.

You know, because I was the spare Heir. The one they didn't really need, unless my brother got himself stabbed by the husband of one of the many married women he debauched.

Finally, Avalon looked at the soft couch in the middle of the room and moved toward it, a confidence in the sway of her hips that hadn't been there before, though I could still see the wariness in her face. She paused, looking around her once more. "This is weird. I should go," she said quietly.

"I swear, my intentions are honorable." And they had been, until I'd seen her in that dress. Now, I just wanted to peel it off her and taste every inch of milky skin that was glowing warmly in the soft lights dotted around my room.

This had started out as a point of interest, and maybe Taeme had turned it into a competition, but something about Avalon Halhed was dangerous. My interest in her was walking a knife's edge between curiosity and obsession.

She looked away, and I could've sworn I heard her mutter, "Maybe mine are not."

My mind had wandered so far that it took me a moment to realize she meant her intentions. I must have misheard, but her cheeks were pink, though even that might have been a trick of the light.

“Would you like a drink? To calm whatever thoughts are obviously racing through your mind right now.”

She rolled her eyes, but eventually nodded. I went to the small tray of liquor that I kept off to the side of the room, pouring us both a small glass. It was strong, especially if you weren't used to it.

She took a small sip, and her eyes went comically wide. “Holy Goddess, are you sure you aren't trying to get me drunk, so you can take advantage of me?”

I almost laughed. “No, Miss Halhed. When I take you to bed, it will be because you're on your knees, begging me to please you. Not because you're three cups deep in the honey wine the Seventh Line makes down in their dorm room.”

There was no doubting the pink cheeks this time. Grabbing the ice cream from the small cabinet I kept frozen, I transferred it to a bowl that wouldn't give her frostbite and stuck a spoon in it. “This might be so I can get you into bed, though.”

“It's brown.” She frowned at the bowl, like I'd just handed her spoiled food.

“It's chocolate flavored, and now for my next trick,” I muttered, as I grabbed a small chocolate from the pile on the side table and hovered it over the bowl of ice cream. Drawing warm air from around the fireplace, I gently melted the chocolate until it poured over the ice cream.

Avalon Halhed looked at me, then the ice cream that was now covered in melted chocolate, then back at me. Her amazement was like a balm on my soul.

She handed me the bowl back and stood. I frowned. Had I read her wrong? She'd seemed to enjoy ice cream when it was served the other day, and I often saw her pocketing little pieces of foil-wrapped chocolate left out as a treat for the conscripts.

“Do you not like it?”

Shaking her head, she stared down at me, her eyes sparkling in the soft lights. “I’m taking off my clothes. If you were trying to get under my skirts, ice cream coated in chocolate is a surefire way to do it. Congratulations.”

I looked up at her, shocked, and she burst out laughing, sitting back beside me and taking the bowl back, shoveling a mouthful past her lips and sighing happily.

“Goddess, I don’t think anything else in all of Ebrus could taste this good.” She smiled, and there was a smear of chocolate on her lip. “You should see your face right now. You look like the Heir to the Fish Kingdom or something.”

I snapped my jaw closed as I realized she was teasing me. Me, of all people. And instead of irritating me, I found it was refreshing. Fuck me, they mustn’t have taught her any etiquette up there in the wilds of the Ninth Line, but I was enjoying it. I gave her a mock-annoyed look, which made her giggle into her bowl a little more, before she single-mindedly devoured the dessert with soft little moans I wasn’t sure she even knew she was making.

She didn’t eat it demurely, or make polite conversation, though she thanked me at least twice. “Would you like some?” she asked softly, and I couldn’t tell if she was hoping I’d say yes or no. I couldn’t resist the urge to share something she enjoyed so much, though.

“Yes.”

Instead of handing me the bowl and the spoon, she scooped up the perfect mouthful and held it out to me, like I was a child she had to feed. I found myself leaning forward, snagging her eyes as I did, wrapping my lips around the spoon. It was delicious, but I wanted to taste it from her tongue.

I pushed down the thought. For now, at least. “Very nice. The cooks did an excellent job.”

She finished off the bowl and leaned back with a sigh. “I didn’t realize it came in flavors. I thought it was just cream that had been frozen into ice. Like the name suggests.”

I licked my lips and pushed down the urge to get ice cream made in every flavor imaginable, just so I could watch her joyful wonder.

Someone would definitely report that to my parents.

“There are no limitations to the flavorings, though some would be terrible. I imagine a meat-flavored ice cream would be fairly unpleasant,” I informed her.

She grinned. “I bet the Third Line would love it, though.”

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I lifted an eyebrow and left it at that. She was right; they probably would, but I didn't want to give Taeme and his band of feral animals any more enjoyment than they deserved. Which was none.

I stood and went to the telescope, adjusting it to point at the darkest part of the sky. The air around her seemed to shimmer as she stood, setting the bowl on the side table and walking toward me. "It surprises me that you're a stargazer, Vox."

"Oh? Why is that?"

She shrugged, her warmth beside mine as we stood shoulder to shoulder. "Why would you be searching the stars when you have everything you need right here?"

I almost laughed at her words. She would see it like that, I guess. I couldn't blame her for believing the visage I projected to everyone. "The sky shows us that there is more than Ebrus, more than the Lines. More to the Goddess's plan than this. It's humbling."

I waited for her to quip something back, but instead, she tipped her head back and watched the sky. "Do you ever feel like there's something planned for you out there, and you aren't sure what it is yet, and all the trials are just leading you to where you have to go?"

Every single day. There had to be more to life than what I'd experienced so far: political jockeying, familial expectations, and finally, death. That couldn't be the sum total of our lives, right? Sometimes, when I looked at the stars, I wondered if we'd done all this before. That yearning in my chest had to be for something.

Instead of telling her all that, I simply said, “Yes.”

She sighed softly. “Me too.”

We were silent for a long time, and then a flash of light across the sky heralded something special. Something that was as rare as the woman beside me. Wrapping my hand in hers, I tugged her over to the telescope, where she stood on her tiptoes to see in the eyepiece. She let out soft, sweet noises as she saw shooting star after shooting star, pieces of meteor raining down.

As I stared at her while she watched the sky, I was suddenly very aware that she hadn’t let go of my hand.

Thirteen

Avalon

This had been the most confusing night of my life, but also one of the best. Vox Vylan was surprisingly good company, once we’d settled on how we were supposed to act around each other. If he wanted me to fawn over him like his biggest fan, he was probably going to be disappointed, but he seemed happy with comfortable silence.

Was it depressing that I could be so easily won over with ice cream and chocolate? Absolutely. Even now, I could remember the creaminess on my tongue, the sweetness still clinging to my lips. The pure pleasure of a mouthful. Fickle I might be, but I had no regrets.

He was a surprisingly knowledgeable guide about the stars. Passionate, even. His face lit up as he explained that this meteor shower was caused by debris left behind by a larger comet, which had been a huge rock hurtling across the stars last week. What

we'd see were tiny bits of rock caught in the sky and burning up, making it look like it was showering shooting stars.

The comet that had left behind this meteor shower was called Sucreid, and it moved across the sky only once every hundred and seventy-three years. Some of the Lines' magic users believed that the comet itself heralded a time of great change, and a lot of superstitions were born from its appearance in the sky.

I didn't think we had any superstitions about them up in the Ninth Line, though our library was depressingly grim. There was very little about anyone further back than my father's grandfather. The histories of my ancestors before that were all gone, lost in a fire long before I was born.

Now, I lay on Vox Vylan's bed, watching the stars streak across the sky through the giant glass dome that he had instead of a ceiling. There were so many shooting stars now that we didn't even need his telescope to see. It was magical.

He lay beside me, on the other side of the bed, an appropriate amount of mattress between us, and watched it just as intently. We didn't need to speak. Words would ruin the moment.

Finally, the meteor shower lessened, and my eyelids began to droop. It was time to leave, even though I was almost sad to do so. Last week, I would've been desperate to get out of a space occupied by Vox. Now, I found myself dragging my feet.

I raised myself up on my elbows. "I should go. It's late, and I'm sure your dorm mates would like to return to their beds."

He shrugged. "They'll return when I tell them they can." His nonchalance really was abrasive sometimes, and I wondered if he knew how pompous that sounded.

I chewed my lip. “Even so, it’s time for me to go.”

He rolled onto his side and watched me with those ice-blue eyes. I felt their weight on my face like a physical touch. His shoulders were broad, and his chest was muscular from the amount of swordwork he did. He might be a rich, bored Heir, but I couldn’t say he didn’t work as hard as the rest of us—harder than some, even—though there was never any chance of him failing. Of going home in disgrace, broken and useless. Or worse, dead.

His dark hair fell across his forehead, and I wanted to reach out and rub the silky-looking tresses between my fingertips. Wanted to bury my fingertips against his scalp. And more.

So, so, so much more.

They were dangerous thoughts that couldn’t lead anywhere good, but my brain and my lady parts were very much in disagreement about what we should do right now. My brain said to get up, walk to the door, and thank him for a very pleasant evening. Then run all the way back to my dorm room, like the coward that I was.

My lower parts—the ones that clenched when he spoke in that deep, husky voice close to my ear while explaining about the meteor shower—said I should push him onto his back, throw a leg over his hips, pin him to his bed, and kiss the hell out of him. Then fuck him. They were pretty adamant about that last part.

“Your words say one thing, Avalon, but your body is saying something very different.”

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Ugh, those husky words again. I sucked in a calming breath, trying not to pant, and clinging to my higher reasoning by my fingernails. I shook my head. “My body doesn’t know what’s good for me.”

He smiled at me. A wide, beautiful smile that lit up his whole face and made my own go slack. Had I ever seen him smile? I mustn’t have, because it would have been burned onto my retinas.

“Maybe your body knows exactly what you need.” He sat up. “But don’t worry. I can wait for your mind to catch up.” He rolled off the bed and got to his feet in a lithe manner that I could only dream of replicating. I climbed off his bed like a drunken fawn and followed him to the stairs that led down to the dorms.

I couldn’t believe I’d been in Vox Vylan’s bed. I took one last look around, committing everything to memory so I could tell Viana and Acacia about it.

Vox looked amused. “Don’t worry, Avalon, you can come back and climb into my bed as often as you like. I promise you an enjoyable time.” He leaned closer so his breath feathered across my cheek. “I’ll make you scream my name so loudly, even the stars will hear it.”

My breath stuttered in my throat, and I turned toward him. His face was so close to mine, his lips just there, tilted down toward me. Unable to resist, I lifted up on my toes and brushed my lips across his. They were softer than I’d imagined, and tasted a little like the chocolate we’d shared. He remained still, and I lowered myself back to my heels, sucking in a breath and fixating on the top button of his shirt so I didn’t have to meet his eyes.

A finger tucked under my chin, tilting my head back. His hands gripped my hips, then he kissed me. Not a peck, like I'd given him.

No, he owned my mouth, taking and taking and taking until I was breathless and my whole body tingled. Only his strong hands on my hips, holding me close to his torso, kept me from falling down the stairs on rubber legs. He pressed himself closer, and I chased his warmth like he was an inferno I wanted to perish within.

When he finally pulled away, my heart was thundering so loudly, it was like I'd just run a hundred laps of the training ring. My eyes felt too wide, and my hands were trembling softly where they hung at my sides. His normally icy eyes were simmering with desire, and it felt warmer in the Dome than it had all night. Even the fire looked larger.

"Goddess," I muttered beneath my breath, my brain synapses glitching inside my skull. I needed a healer, or maybe some serious alone time in the dorm showers.

Vox grinned, making my knees go weak once more.

"Put that away," I mock chastised.

"Put what away?"

"That smile. It's dangerous. Represses every single responsible thought I've ever had."

He laughed and wrapped a band of air around my ribs, holding me steady as he led me down the spiral staircase. It was still as quiet in the common room as it had been when I arrived, even though it was close to midnight.

"I'll walk you back to your dorm," he told me softly.

My first instinct was to tell him no. He didn't need to trouble himself by walking me through the perfectly safe halls of the college. But I stilled my tongue, because despite my earlier statement, I wasn't really ready for the night to end.

He led me out of the dorm and onto the landing, and once again, I felt the subtle brush of whatever element he used to keep the dorm secure. Air, I guessed, but it felt more charged.

Almost as charged as whatever was happening between the two of us. It could all be in my head, though. What experience did I have with flirting and sex and making moves on Heirs?

The silence stretched between us as we made our way down the six flights of stairs. It had never occurred to me that it took the same amount of effort to get to the Dome as it did to the bowels.

We hit the atrium, and Vox moved toward the stairs that went down to the Lower Line levels. "Have you ever been down here?" I asked, and he shook his head.

"Only once. There hasn't been any other good reason to visit."

He meant when he'd carried me down to the Twelfth Line dorm. I'd forgotten, with all the healing and crap that came afterwards. I didn't know how to feel about that. On one hand, I preened, because apparently I was a good enough reason, but on the other, it made it blindingly clear that we were from two separate worlds that could never meet in the middle.

Was that something that mattered to me, though? I didn't have dreams of power and privilege. I'd hate living in Fortaare, always under the eyes of others. I wanted a quiet life somewhere out of the way, preferably by myself. I guess I'd take Epsy, my stolt, with me too now, but that was it. A simple life for a simple person, away from my

father and politics, Heirs and the war college.

“What are you thinking about?” Vox asked quietly as we descended past the Sixth, then Seventh Line floors.

I chewed my lip, trying to decide how honest to be. Fuck it. I hadn’t made it this far by being a sycophant who spared his feelings. “I was thinking how terrible it would be to be your wife.”

His feet stilled, and he stared down at me, shock written all over his face. “I don’t disagree, but I’m not going to lie and say that doesn’t prick at my pride.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “I think your ego will be fine, Vox Vylan.”

We moved past the Eighth Line’s landing, until finally, we were standing outside my door. He paused, and I turned toward him. He was looking down at me as if I was a problem he couldn’t quite solve. Some part of me knew that if he ever did solve the riddle of me, he would move onto the next puzzle or woman or problem.

“Out of interest, why would it be so terrible to be my wife? I promise, my wife will have all the pleasures I could offer her.”

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I gave him a crooked smile. “I bet.” There was something about the way Vox carried himself that told me he knew what to do between the bedsheets. But that wasn’t the aspect of being his wife that I meant. “Your life is right there under the spotlight, all light and heat and eyes on you. That’s the exact opposite of the person I am. I’d melt under that kind of scrutiny.”

He was silent for a long time, and I wondered once again if I’d offended him. Finally, he sighed. “I don’t like it either. But it is the life the Goddess gifted me, even if sometimes it feels more like a prison than a present.” He lifted a hand and stroked a thumb across my bottom lip. “It’s a shame, though. Tonight has been surprisingly not tedious. I would have liked to do it again sometime.”

Snorting, I shook my head. “High praise from Your Highness,” I mocked. “I said I didn’t want to be your wife, Vox. Not that I didn’t want to do... other things.”

That cocky smirk was back. “What things?”

Instead of telling him, I launched myself at him, kissing him hard on the lips with more enthusiasm than finesse. He kissed me back, holding me easily against his body. Despite the fact the skirts of my dress kept me hogtied, my legs were desperate to wrap around his hips.

He took easy control of the kiss, and soon enough, I was pressed against my door. His hands hiked up my dress, and he hissed into my mouth when his calloused palms reached the warm skin of my thigh. He squeezed the flesh hard, then dragged himself away.

“Fuck, you feel and taste too tempting, Avalon Halhed.” He looked disheveled. I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen him look anything but calmly in control. “I have to go to Fortaare for a few days. When I get back...” He trailed off, like he was trying to find the words to explain all the terrible, debauched things he’d like to do to me. “Think about where you would like this to progress, because Avalon?” He leaned closer to me, until our lips were almost touching again. “I can’t wait to taste your pleasure on my tongue. Can’t wait until you’re screaming my name so every single person in Boellium will know that I am fucking you so good, I’ll be branded on your soul forever.” He brushed his lips lightly across mine. “See you in a few days.”

Then he turned and began the long climb back to his glass tower, while I was left panting at the door to my abandoned dorm.

Goddess, what have I done?

Fourteen

Hayle

It was good to be back with my father. My Line. My clan. Someone with more dominance than me, so I could just relax for once and hand off the mantle of responsibility to him, even if it was only for the duration of this tedious Conclave.

It was custom for the Barons of the Lines to bring their spare Heirs to these things. Firstly, to preserve the Lines, should anything underhanded happen, and secondly, in case something happened to the first Heir and we were stuck in the position of taking over the Barony of our Line.

The only silver lining to this was that if I had to be here, so did Vox Vylan, so he wasn’t back at Boellium, making moon eyes at Avalon Halhed.

“How is Boellium?” Father asked, leading me through the ostentatious walkways of the Hall of Ebrus in Fortaare. It had been completed by Vox’s forefathers and was as cold and barren as its creators.

I shrugged. “It’s the same as ever, I guess. Political ass-kissing and Vylan being an asshole.”

A small smile quirked his lips. “That does sound about right.”

Up ahead, I could see a small gathering of the other Barons and Heirs. “Who called the meeting today?” I asked quietly.

Father’s jaw flexed. “A joint request by the Eleventh and Twelfth Lines.”

Interesting. Joint requests were unusual, but it didn’t take a genius to figure out what the purpose of the meeting was. The record high number of Lower Line conscripts, especially from the Eleventh and Twelfth Lines, due to the drought, spoke volumes of what was happening over there in the Western parts of Ebrus.

Standing in front of the doorway was someone who was far more interesting to me than he’d been at the previous sixteen of these tedious Conclaves I’d had to attend. The Baron of the Ninth Line looked nothing like his daughter. He held none of her light; instead, he seemed almost drab in comparison. It could be because Avalon shone brightly, or it could be because Baron Halhed was famously a drunkard and had the gray pallor to match. His hair was unkempt, and although he held himself tall—perhaps a throwback to the man he’d once been—his clothes hung off him in an ill-fitting way, the smell of stale liquor making my nose scrunch.

Beneath even that scent was the taint of illness. Probably something from drinking himself into a grave, but if he did die soon, I could only imagine his Barony would benefit from his Heir stepping into his shoes.

Hell, the Conclave as a whole would benefit from some younger blood in its ranks. So far, only Baron Zier Tarrin of the Eighth Line was younger than fifty.

My father greeted the other Barons, and I watched Roman Halhed out of the corner of my eye. The way he moved, the way he spoke, the things he said were all more interesting to me this time.

It irked me that Vox Vylan seemed to be watching him intently too.

Finally, Feodore Vylan, the Baron of the First Line and our official ruler, appeared. “Barons, thank you for gathering. Shall we begin? There is a feast to be had after this.”

The subtle jibe at the Eleventh and Twelfth Lines landed squarely, and I watched the way their jaws tensed.

My father hated Feodore Vylan, and I understood why. Vox was a high-handed, pompous asshole, but there was something truly predatory about the Baron of the First Line. A power that was insidious and unchecked, because there was no one in Ebrus who could stand against him outside of his own children, and they weren’t about to give up their power anytime soon.

Once everyone was seated at the long table—with Vylan at the head, of course—Baron Abaster of the Eleventh Line stood. “The Eleventh and Twelfth Lines request aid from the Capital. Our people are starving, due to consecutive years of drought conditions. We have reached a crisis point, and if nothing is done within the next six months, our people will begin to perish. Our numbers will dwindle, and those who remain will become environmental refugees.”

Feodore Vylan waved a hand. “I understand you’re facing hardships, Baron Abaster, but we govern our own Baronies...” I watched the faces of the rest of the Barons firm

up at his words, and I knew that was it for the Eleventh and Twelfth Lines. Vylan had just declared it not their problem, absolving them of any need to concern themselves with the Lower Lines.

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The Eleventh and Twelfth Lines would not get their aid. As we stood at the end of the meeting, I watched Ingrid Ulsen—the only Baroness in the Conclave and leader of the Twelfth Line—storm out of the room, closely followed by Baron Abaster. I raged inside at the weakness of the Barons. My father had argued for official aid, but he'd been voted against pretty quickly.

Feodore Vylan leaned back in his chair at the head of the table. “Women. This is why they shouldn't lead Baronies. Too emotional.”

Too emotional? Her people weredying. He wouldn't understand, though; I doubted the Vylans cared if their own people lived or died, as long as they remained at the top of the power structure.

My father rose, not even hiding his sneer, and I stood with him. Vox looked... uncomfortable. There was something in the way his eyes were shuttered, the way he was holding himself stiff, the way the blood rushed through his veins as his heart thumped hard in his chest that told me that perhaps he didn't agree with his father.

My father turned. “If you'll excuse us, we must freshen up before the banquet.” His tone was disdainful, and we left. I heard the footsteps of Zier Tarrin behind us, and the door slammed closed with a little more force than necessary.

“Baron Taeme,” Baron Tarrin called softly, and my father slowed his steps. “Can we speak?” Nodding once, my father waited until he caught up. “Thank you for your cooperation. It's unfortunate that more of the Upper Lines didn't follow suit.”

“Let's walk. This building has ears and eyes, and it is harder to catch a moving

target.” We walked in silence for a little longer, until my father was happy there were no other ears listening. “Unfortunately, not many of the others have the balls to go against the First Line. Preservation of their own power is the first in their minds.”

Tarrin shook his head. “The Eleventh and Twelfth Lines will not survive another year, unless something is done. I’m doing what I can, but my Line is also feeling the strain of consecutive droughts. At this rate, the only survivors of the Lowest Lines will be the ones that they’ve shipped off to Boellium War College.”

Father nodded. “I understand. I will try to talk to Lunderov and see if he’s open to at least assisting us with passage through his island, rather than sending it all the way down through Boemouthe. If we can figure out a quicker passage so the food doesn’t spoil on the way, the Third Line will send aid to the West.”

Tarrin’s face flashed briefly with relief. “Thank you, Taeme. It’s hard to watch them wither and die on our doorstep, but so many see them as expendable.”

Father clapped him on the shoulder. “Not the Third Line, son. We’ll do what we can.”

Tarrin’s face got solemn. “I fear the very foundations of Ebrus rest on it. We are a tinderbox, ready to explode.”

I tilted my head at him. When his eyes met mine, I saw a very real fire there. I couldn’t help but wonder if he would be the one to strike the match.

Excusing myself from my father as he talked to another one of the Barons, I slipped out of the banquet room and moved down the darkened hallway toward the library. You’d be excused for thinking I’d all of a sudden become a studious pupil, but in reality, there was something niggling at my brain, a mystery I needed to solve, and I knew it centered around Avalon and the Ninth Line.

The library here at the Hall of Ebrus was second to no other. It contained generations of knowledge. Pushing open the large, ornate doors, I stepped inside. It was quiet, but lights still burned in the sconces.

“Hello?”

A small woman, younger than I imagined the Librarian to be, appeared. “Hello there, Heir Taeme. Can I help you?” She was kind of plain, with a deep line between her eyebrows that told me that she spent a lot of time reading small, indecipherable text. She would have been in her thirties, maybe a little older, but not by much.

“Librarian, I’m after books on?—”

“The Ninth Line. I’m aware, Mr. Taeme. We librarians have quite the network all over Ebrus. Knowing the Conclave was being called, I gathered all the information we had on the shelves regarding the Line and their powers. That was what Librarian Enora suggested you were looking into?”

I hadn’t even realized that was the Librarian’s name at Boellium. I’d just kind of thought of all Librarians as, well, Librarian.

My mouth was hanging open, and I snapped it shut. “Uh, yeah. I am. Thank you, Librarian.”

She waved a hand, like it was nothing. “Come, I’ve placed them all in the reading room. If you’re going to look at all the material tonight, you might need to get started now. I expected you earlier.” Was there light censure in her tone?

“Apologies for keeping you from your bed.”

“I’m the night Librarian, Heir Taeme. I would have been here among the books,

whether you arrived or not.” She stepped up to a door and unlocked it. “I don’t need to tell you that some of these books are very old and need to be handled with care. Also, none of them may leave this room.”

“Of course, Librarian.”

Her eyes were knowledgeable, like I was just a babe in the woods who needed to learn to find my own way home. “You’re welcome here. The library holds the answers to many questions, if you just know where to look.”

With that, she was gone, and I dived into the huge pile of books in front of me. It was going to be a long night.

Fifteen

Avalon

Boellium without both Vox and Hayle was a different beast. Simultaneously more volatile and relaxed. No matter what happened while the cats were away, the mice could never rise up and change the system in which they lived. But there were more parties, and more fights, and nothing felt as serious.

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To me, however, it felt wrong. I wouldn't tell anyone else, but I was looking forward to them returning. I was excited to see Vox again. The memory of his kiss was never far from my mind, and I found myself daydreaming in class about the taste of his lips. I'd thought of hardly anything else, because I knew even if nothing else could come of it, I wanted more. I wanted to taste his skin, feel his lips on mine again, watch his eyelids close heavily in pleasure. I just wanted.

I wasn't a fool. It couldn't go anywhere, and I couldn't be more than a notch in what I was sure was an impressive bedpost, but I didn't care. I was so tired of being alone. If I could have him even for a moment, I was going to take it.

He'd been gone five days, and I found myself watching the horizon for the ferry from the mainland. I chastised myself for acting like a lovesick cat. I needed to cultivate a more worldly persona. Mature. Aloof, even. The last thing I wanted to do was throw myself into his arms like some desperate clinger.

It didn't help that every night I was having filthy fantasies. The dirty dreams were getting intense, and I felt needy. Those dreams sometimes featured more than Vox, though.

Last night, I'd dreamt of making love to Hayle, and it had felt so real, I'd woken up sweaty and aching. It was like I could smell his woody scent, taste the salt of his sweat on my tongue. It was the most vivid dream I'd ever had, and left me feeling riled up.

Hayle Taeme was off limits. There was no way I could trust the way my heart raced like it was going to beat out of my chest, or the panic in my veins whenever I was

near him. I didn't understand it, but I trusted my gut. Hayle Taeme meant pain. I knew that in my soul.

So I'd wait for Vox to arrive, then I'd tell him exactly what I wanted.

Someone whacked me in the shoulder with one of the training blades. "Girl, you better concentrate, or Instructor Wallred is going to beat your ass," Shay hissed, and I looked over at the First Line's second-in-command. She was beautiful, in the same haughty, cold way as Vox. It left very little doubt that they were related.

"Uh, thanks." I went back to forms, hoping not to draw the ire of the instructor. They said his last name came from the time he'd taken on a battalion of rebels and painted the walls red with their blood. It sounded like a rumor you'd perpetuate just to ensure new conscripts were terrified of you, but I applauded the creativity.

Another whack to my shoulder. "Fucking hell, Ninth. You have to be the most addle-brained conscript I've ever had the misfortune to meet. It's like you want to get the shit beaten out of you." She grumbled something about Vox and duty.

I frowned at her. "Why do you care?" I remembered her from the first day here at Boellium, and now that I had a better handle on the strength of people, I knew it had to have been either her or Vox suspending that guy, letting him bleed out on the cobblestones.

Shay ran her tongue over her teeth. "Because my Heir told me to watch you. He's never asked that of me before, and I'm not about to fuck it up." She paused, stepping closer. "Because he's never looked at anyone the way he looks at you. He deserves this small taste of happiness, before the rest of his life becomes a jail cell. You wouldn't understand, but his life isn't gilded thrones and grand banquets."

I raised an eyebrow at her. "You know jack shit about my life."

She shrugged. “And I don’t want to. He deserves his happiness, but anyone with half a brain knows that this will end in disaster. I don’t want to get attached to you, but I can ensure that you keep your head on your shoulders until Vox returns to do it himself—or he gets sick of you, whichever comes first.”

Damn. She didn’t hold back, but I could respect that. In Boellium, the cloying fakeness was everywhere. “Fair enough.”

I returned to my forms, Shay continuing her own beside me. She moved like liquid, and I was so jealous, I could actually spit. She must’ve had the same tutor as Vox, because they had that same smooth style. I could only dream of being that lithe and deadly.

Huffing an annoyed sigh, she turned to me. “He returns on today’s ferry. I’ll be glad to be off babysitting duty.”

Honestly, I hadn’t known she was on babysitting duty, so either she was a terrible babysitter or a scarily good spy. Nodding, I tried to concentrate on the rest of the forms, and not what I’d do once Vox was back in the grounds of Boellium.

I’d wait for him to find me—that much was clear, because there was always the chance that I was reading too much into this. Maybe he’d gone back to Fortaare and realized that I was some rough-hewn rock next to all those glittering diamonds.

Yeah, I’d wait for him to track me down first.

It wasn’t Vox who found me first, though. It was Hayle Taeme’s hounds. Everyone was scared of those giant dogs, but not me. I felt we had an understanding, and whenever they came up to me, I always gave them a little bit of my pilfered jerky.

I wasn’t above bribing them to like me.

However, it was odd for me to see both of them at the same time. Usually, one was always with Hayle. Braxus came over, and I squatted down on my haunches. “Hey, handsome, how was Fortaare?”

Braxus huffed a disgruntled noise, and I laughed. Yeah, that was pretty clear.

“I think I’d feel the same way about that place. Give me wide-open spaces and clear blue skies any day.” I stood and went to walk away, but Braxus gripped my fingers in his mouth. Not hard, but he definitely wasn’t letting go. “Uh, I don’t have any more jerky, big guy.”

The other hound, Alucius, nudged my butt with her snout, and I realized they wanted me to go with them.

“I get the point. You can stop slobbering on my hand now,” I said to Braxus, who gave me an unamused glare, but let go of my fingers and trotted ahead of me. Following him through the halls, I ignored the wary looks of the other conscripts. They looked at me like I was walking to the gallows.

We ended up in the library, and I was embarrassed that I still hadn’t been here in the months that I’d been in Boellium. In a past life, it would have been the first place I’d have visited. Even now, the sweet smell of old books and leather was like a warm hug.

I saw Hayle over in the corner of the reading room and walked toward him. The hounds stopped by the door, taking up guard positions. That seemed kind of ominous.

“You know how weird it is to be fetched like a stick?” I asked Hayle, who grinned at me. Fuck, he was so handsome, it was like a punch in the gut.

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“The Third Line are beastmasters. I absolutely know what it’s like to be fetched like a stick.” He snorted loudly, and it echoed around the library. “My father has a lion companion, and once, when I went out in the woods without telling my mother, Lazlo came and collected me, carrying me by the scruff of my neck like an errant cub.”

I shuddered. That would’ve been horrifying. “Fair.” I looked over at the hounds. “You guys are terrifying enough, but I’m glad you aren’t lions.” I pulled out a chair and sat across from him. “What can I do for you, Hayle?”

His lids dropped, and he looked at me with so much heat, my body flushed. It was the exact same expression as he’d had on his face in my dream last night. My mouth went dry, and I crossed my legs, pressing my thighs together.

Sucking in a deep breath, he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the heat was gone, and he cleared his throat. “While I was in Fortaare, I found myself in the library at the Hall of Ebrus.”

I’d heard about the library at the Hall of Ebrus. It was a giant, cavernous space, with shelves that went right to the ceiling and endless rooms of knowledge. I dreamed of going there one day, just to soak in the knowledge, right down into my bones. “Well, I’m jealous, but I’m not sure what that has to do with me.”

Hayle’s jaw clenched. “While I was researching, I found the account about your mother’s death.”

My blood froze in my veins. I waited for the disdain, the hatred, that had poured from my father all these years to spill out from between Hayle’s lips. I tried not to flinch as

he covered my hand with his own.

“Avalon, you were three. There is no way that was your fault. It was a terrible accident, and the word of a distraught lady’s maid trying to save her own skin shouldn’t cloak you with such sadness. You were a baby. It was not your fault. Do you hear me? No matter what anyone else has told you, it was not your fault.”

I was shaking my head, but he squeezed my hand. She’d just fallen off the cliff. My brother Kian had told me that over and over as I’d grown up, but the insidious words of my father were strong. When your only remaining parent hated you so much that he did terrible things to you, you tended to believe his words.

I cleared my throat. “Thank you for your kind words?—”

Hayle shook his head. “Not kind words. The truth. Not the venom of a grieving family, or a distraught husband, or a scared servant. The words of an impartial party. It was not your fault.”

Nodding, I stood. “Thank you. I should go.” My words were rushed, but my heart was pounding.

But Hayle didn’t let me go. “We aren’t done, Avalon. Sit down.” He tugged my hand, but his voice softened. “Please. I won’t mention your mother again.”

Sucking in oxygen until my lungs felt like they’d explode, I sat down again.

Hayle didn’t wait, nor apologize. “I’d been thinking about your words, about the powers of the Lower Lines dwindling. Did you know that until five generations ago, your family never gave birth to female children? They were notoriously all males, and it was a sign of a strong bloodline. Then Ellanora Halhed was born. They treated her like a jewel in their crown, and by all accounts, she was beautiful.”

I snorted. Apparently, it wasn't only our powers that had dwindled then.

Hayle continued. "She was also extremely powerful. She saw visions—more than just immediate futures, far into the unknown. She was revered and coveted. She had requests for her hand in marriage from the First Line all the way down to the Twelfth. Everyone wanted her in their Line."

Ellanora was barely a scratched name in our family bible. I'd never heard all this before.

"Then she disappeared. They investigated, assuming a spurned consort captured her and murdered her in a fit of jealousy, or that her visions sent her crazy and she threw herself from a cliff." He winced. "Her body was never found. A month later, there was the First Line uprising, and they killed off the Second Line, and a missing woman from the Ninth Line got lost in the insanity that followed."

What did that even mean? This was centuries ago—what did it even matter anymore?

Hayle grabbed a folder from in front of him. "From that point on, the Ninth Line continued to have sons, but they were interspersed with daughters. Their powers dwindled, but as you said, so did a lot of the Lower Lines, and it was so gradual, no one really noticed. They likely believed the old accounts were exaggerated, until your magic is as it stands now."

He meant almost non-existent.

"But while I was researching, I found this. It had been sent directly to the Hall of Ebrus library, and they figured it had gotten caught up in the uprising chaos and was sent before Ellanora went missing. I'm not so sure."

He pushed a piece of parchment over to me. On it was beautiful, flowing

handwriting.

The Ninth. The Ninth. The Ninth.

Well, that made no sense. “So she did actually go insane?”

Hayle shrugged. “Perhaps. But look at the date.”

Up in the corner, in a tiny, neat script, was the very date of the uprising. She’d sent this letter on the day that the First Line murdered the Second Line and secured their power. She had to have been alive then.

I shook my head. “It’s nonsense, Hayle. It means nothing. She could have just picked that day and dated it wrong.”

He grabbed another book and dragged it between us. “This is your official Ancestral Lineage. This is Ellanora Halhed.” He pointed to the middle of the parchment. “Let’s call her the First Daughter of the Ninth Line.” He pointed down to the next row. “Her brother’s daughter would be the Second.”

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He pointed down, down, down. Third, Fourth, Fifth were all in one family. My great-grandfather had a bastard, also a daughter, who was Sixth. My aunt, who'd died when she was twelve from the fever, would be the Seventh. My sister was Eighth.

Lastly, Hayle pointed to my name. "Avalon Halhed, Ninth Daughter of the Ninth Line." He looked at me like I was suddenly meant to sprout another head and start breathing fire or something.

"It means nothing, Hayle. She'd obviously lost her grasp on reality." Even as I said the words, something niggled in my chest. "Thank you for researching this. It's more than I've ever known about my Line. But it means nothing to me."

I stood and moved away from the table before he said anything else, backing toward the door of the library. Past the hounds. Past the Librarian, who was looking at me with a blank face behind thick glasses.

"Avalon!" Hayle called, and I paused. "I think it means something."

I fled the room before he could say anything else that would alter my life.

The Ninth. The Ninth. The Ninth.

Sixteen

Vox

I was looking for Avalon's face in the crowd, even as I half-listened to Shay's

updates. Apparently, much of a nothingness had occurred while I was away—the same jockeying for power, just on a different day. We walked back from the docks, and the others who'd been on the ferry with me gave us a wide berth. I had a small dome of silence around us, because Boellium had eyes and ears everywhere.

Taeme and those damn hounds raced in front of us, and I scowled at his retreating back. I hated the derision in his expression when he looked at my father, but worse than that, I hated the pity in his eyes when he looked at me and compared our relationships with our respective paternal figures.

Feodore Vylan ruled with absolute authority; his family was no exception. I was to be seen and not heard, especially as the spare Heir. Here, at Boellium, I had the semblance of control, even if it was just in this tiny microcosm. Taeme and I were not equals anywhere, but least of all here. I didn't need or want his pity, even if I did slightly envy the way his father looked at him with pride.

Pathetic.

“Are you even listening to me right now, or should I just go and shout my update at the sea? Maybe the mermaids will give a fuck what I have to say,” Shay grumbled.

I tightened my lips, giving her an apologetic nudge with my shoulder. “Sorry, Shay. I know you took care of business while I was away. I have absolute faith you could organize this rabble like a General in the Dawn Army, with or without my presence.” It was entirely true. “The Conclave is playing on my mind. It was called because of the drought over in the West of Ebrus. The Eleventh and Twelfth Lines are going to face mass starvation if something isn't done, and my father wasn't interested in my opinion on the matter.”

My back still ached from the air-lashes he'd given me for talking out of turn. I was a figurehead, and that was the box I should stay in. It didn't help that my brother didn't

give a damn about anyone but himself and his own power, much like Father. All of Ebrus could starve, as long as they took the knee before us as they died.

Shay gritted her teeth. “He would rather they were gone. In fact, I’m fairly sure he’d be content if everyone below the Sixth no longer existed.” Her voice was pitched low, so even if my privacy dome fell, people would struggle to hear her words. Because what she said was inflammatory at best, treasonous at worst. “What was the Conclave’s verdict?”

I snorted. We were a false democracy, and once my father declared it not their problem, the spineless Barons had been all too happy to wash their hands of the whole problem.

“They’re on their own. I overheard Baron Taeme conversing with the Tenth Line to send aid, though, so perhaps they’ll circumvent the Conclave altogether.”

Shay raised a brow. “Will you tell your father?” Working outside the Conclave was frowned upon.

“And stray outside my predetermined role of seen and not heard? No. My father made my role clear before the banquet—it’s to be an example of his virility and not much more. The humanitarian efforts of the Third Line are outside my purview.” Frowning hard, my cousin checked me over, patting me down until I moved away. “What are you doing?”

“Checking for atalthat might have stolen all your common sense.” We both knew there was no talisman that could do that. She was just ribbing me.

I shooed her hands away. “I care about the people of Ebrus, Shay. That’s not a new thing.”

“But defying your father is,” she hissed. “It’s the girl, isn’t it?”

I kept my face blank. “What girl?”

The droll look she gave me was perfectly Shay. “You know who. Does your sudden interest in the welfare of the Lower Lines have something to do with Avalon Halhed, who happens to be an Heir of the Ninth Line, as well as have great boobs?”

Now it was my turn to frown. “Don’t look at her boobs.”

“Why? Do you have a vested interest in her chest?”

I ignored her completely as we stepped into the atrium, feeling satisfied as people scurried away. I wanted to find Avalon and not get dragged down into social bullshit. I just had to drop my bags in my rooms, then I’d head down to see if she was in her dorm, or perhaps the dining hall.

“She missed you, you know.” Shay sounded way too smug, like she knew that would make me stop and give up the pretense.

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Sighing heavily, because she wasn't going to let this go, I looked over at her. "What makes you say that?"

"She watched the ocean horizon like a married fisherwoman waiting for her husband to return." She snorted derisively. "Honestly, I'm surprised she didn't lose her head during some of the combat classes." The mirth left her face, consumed by something more solemn. "It's a dangerous game you're playing, Vox. It can't go anywhere, and you might have everyone else convinced you have a lump of ice in your chest rather than a heart, but I know better. You have to guard yourself."

I strode through the dorm room, inexplicably happy that most of my Line brethren were either in class or in the food hall. I didn't want them here for this conversation, even if they couldn't hear me. Shay was the one person who I could be open and honest with, and I knew, even under the penalty of torture, she would hold my secrets close to her chest the way I held so many of hers.

"Something about her speaks to my soul," I mumbled, frightened of the words, as if speaking them out loud would make them even more true. "I can't help but be drawn to her, even if logic tells me that this can't be anything more than a fleeting pleasure."

Shay stared at me, her gaze roaming over my face, like she could see the truth written on my skin. Finally, she sighed. "I told her as much. Here, give me your bag and go find her. Maybe get laid. It's been too damn long."

I screwed up my nose. "Stop thinking about my sex life; it's weird." But I still handed her my bag and kissed her temple. "Thanks, Shay. You're the best thing ever produced by the First Line."

She muttered something that was probably an agreement, but I was already out the door on my way down the stairs. I made myself walk slowly, nodding but being unapproachable to the rest of the college. When I reached the atrium, I straightened my spine, ignoring the stares of the other conscripts as I descended the stairs to the lower levels. I didn't even get offended when the Lower Lines stared, rather than offering the respectful acknowledgement they were supposed to give me. I just didn't care.

Finally, I made it to the Ninth Line dorm. I sent a tendril of air under the door, searching for life inside the room, and I smiled as it found the displacement of air indicating a person was wandering around in there.

Knocking softly, I waited. There was stomping, and then Avalon was there, wrenching open the door. "Look, Hayle, I don't want to— Oh, Vox. You're back!"

She seemed genuinely happy to see me. Not the Heir of the First Line. Not someone who could help them climb the social ladder. Me.

"I am. Is Taeme giving you a hard time?"

She stepped back, inviting me into her dorm, and fuck, she smelled so good. She must've just showered, because her hair was damp, and the scent of flowers and sunshine curled around her. "No, he's fine. He was just trying to give me a family history lesson that I don't want or need. The less I have to do with my Line once this is all over, the better."

I knew so little about her, and she knew so little about me, but I didn't care. I had time to learn. "I want to know more about that," I promised her. "But first, I need to kiss you again, because I haven't been able to get the feel of your lips from my mind. Have you decided, Avalon?"

Her tongue dipped out to wet her lips, the same lips that I was desperate to taste. “Decided what?”

“Where you want this to go,” I murmured, stepping closer to her, crowding her back toward the wall of her dorm room.

“Yes,” she breathed.

Finally, her delicious ass hit the wall, and I lifted my hands so they rested on either side of her head. She was caged between my body and the stone walls of this ancient fortress. “And where is that?” I asked, so close to her lips.

“To my bedroom.” The husky sound of her voice undid me, and I couldn’t take it anymore. I leaned down and captured her lips with mine, sucking them between my teeth and scraping them gently, desperate to hear her tiny gasps of shocked pleasure. I was going to ruin her in the best possible way.

Sliding my hands down her hips, I grabbed a handful of her ass and lifted her into my arms. “Your bedroom it is.” I traced the line of her neck with my tongue. “And then your shower, the dorm couch, the kitchen, the floor in front of the fireplace.” She held my hair tightly as I bit the soft curve at the top of her breast. “There is no place in all of Boellium that I don’t want to fuck you senseless, just so every soul in the college knows you’re mine.”

I was dying, because all the blood in my body was now in my cock, and when her thighs tightened around my hips, rubbing the hot center of her body against me, I mentally cursed. I needed to be inside her, or I was going to come before I even got my pants off.

I strode into the first dorm room, immediately knowing it wasn’t her room. It was barren and empty, but that was okay. We were going to fill it so full of life that every

conscript who entered the room afterward would get inexplicably hard as the stone walls of the college itself.

Seventeen

Avalon

There wasn't a single atom in my soul that didn't feel the effects of Vox's kiss. It tingled in my fingertips, burned through my blood, and clouded my brain. He was everywhere, yet not where I wanted him. My body ached for him, and it was such a foreign feeling—like I was being possessed by some sex-obsessed demoness—that it was momentarily disconcerting.

Not disconcerting enough to stop, though. Not even the college itself falling in around our heads could make me tell him to stop. He continued to kiss me as he laid me down on the bed, his body poised between my thighs, and I hooked my ankles around his hips, trapping him to me.

I didn't have to worry about him leaving, because his mouth devoured me, kissing and nibbling his way over my skin as he peeled my shirt from my body. He kissed down my neck, then further south, between the valley of my breasts and over to one of my pink nipples. When he sucked it hard, I moaned. When he blew a freezing cold breath across the peaked bud, I squealed and wiggled beneath him, pleasure shooting straight to my clit.

A little voice in the back of my head told me I was far too out of my depth to be doing this with Vox, a man who'd probably had more lovers than I'd had hot meals, but again, I didn't care. We had nothing but this moment. I wasn't trying to woo him; we were just two souls, coming together to find pleasure where we could.

He tugged at the waistband of my pants, and I used my legs to lift myself so he could

tug them down over my ample ass. Time at Boellium, with its unlimited rich food and rigorous exercise, had given me curves that weren't soft, but were definitely a little too steep to be considered fashionably beautiful. Especially not in the Court of Fortaare, and the women Vox must have slept with before.

As he moved down my body, over the soft roundness of my stomach and the harsh curve of my hips, I tried to drag him back up to my face. Away from the parts of me that made me feel insecure.

I should have known better, though, because Vox Vylan didn't do anything he didn't want to do. Air curled around my wrists and dragged my arms upwards until they were above my head, my fingertips touching the cool bars of the metal bedframe.

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“I’ve been dreaming about this for too long, Ninth, to half-ass it just because you can’t get out of your head. Lie back and let me feast,” he murmured. I should’ve been pissed at him calling me Ninth, but the way he crooned it, like a pet name and not a curse, made me keep my mouth closed.

Well, for a moment anyway, because my lips parted as his mouth found my core, and he sucked my clit between his lips without warning.

“Goddess!” I yelled, my abs contracting. I would have jack-knifed into a sitting position if those bands of air hadn’t been holding me still. Vox chuckled around the sensitive bud, making my eyes roll back in my head. No wonder people were sex-obsessed. Nothing I’d ever done to myself had ever felt this good. This kind of pleasure was only ever felt in my dreams. I hadn’t thought it could be real.

“Such a pretty pussy, all hot and wet just for me,” he groaned, and I tightened my thighs around his shoulders. More air captured my ankles, holding them still. His power was immense, and to be honest, hot as hell. “Maybe I need to cool it down a little, hmm?” he breathed. As he pushed a finger inside my aching core, it was so cold that I gasped.

Fucking Goddess, his fingers were like icicles. The combination of the heat of his mouth and tongue, and the coldness of his fingers sliding in and out of my body, had me coming so hard, the edges of my vision went spotty.

“Vox!”

He hummed a happy noise around my clit again, pulling away as he stroked me

through my orgasm. “That’s it. Scream my name. I want everyone to hear it and know you’re mine.”

He didn’t stop thrusting his fingers in and out of me, but he warmed them back up, and the heat of them after the chill was... I had no words. I climbed higher and higher, and he watched my face, like he was collecting my orgasms, stacking them together like blocks until I was so high, I had nowhere to go but down into the messy abyss of mindless pleasure.

I gave him another orgasm, his crooned words senseless to me. But when he stood and removed his clothes, my breath stilled in my chest. Clarity crashed down around me like a bucket of ice water.

He was fucking beautiful, a work of art so glorious, it took my breath away. Strong and broad, he reminded me of the white marble cliffs near my home, hard and cutting and breathtaking. His cock jutted out from his body, and my eyes bulged.

Holy shit. Was that supposed to go inside me? Because it looked big and unyielding, and I wasn’t sure there was enough space in my body to take that without perforating something important.

He chuckled low. “I don’t know if I should be honored or insulted that you’re looking at my cock like it’s a deadly weapon.”

I didn’t know either. “I feel like this is probably the time to tell you that I’m a virgin and I’ve never done this before and that thing is scary.”

His whole body went still, looking like the marble statue I’d just imagined him as. “Never?”

I shook my head, my face probably as red as a beet. “If you want to change your

mind, it's okay. I probably should have told you earlier."

"Fuck," he breathed softly, coming back down between my thighs, his whole body pressed tightly to mine. "A better man would stop. Your first time should be with someone who can give you a future," he mumbled against the skin of my shoulder. "Not the stolen moments I can give you."

Wrapping my fingers in his dark hair, I pulled his head back so he was forced to look at me. "Lucky for us both that this isn't just your decision to make. I choose you, Vox Vylan. Now, fuck me—gently—until I can't help but remember the feel of you inside me for the rest of my life."

He groaned, but palmed his cock, lining it up with my entrance. "I'll go slow." Then he was pushing inside me, with calm precision that was in direct contrast to the tenseness of his jaw. He felt too big, too much, too painful. His cock was as cold as ice, numbing the pain until he was seated all the way inside me.

I felt like I could feel him everywhere. "Handy trick," I breathed, and he grunted, his eyes closed like he was physically in pain. Slowly, his cock returned to normal temperature again. Pulling out excruciatingly slowly, he was gentle as he pushed back in again, and every thought I'd ever had about anything at all disappeared from my head.

There was just Vox, and me, and this moment.

"You feel so fucking perfect." He kissed the corner of my mouth and down my throat, his body trembling from holding himself so tightly. "You fit around me like we were made for each other by some divine fate." Raising himself up on his arms, he looked down at my expression. "Are you okay?"

"Yes!" I gasped out. "Please, Vox. More."

He grinned, and it was a devastating expression. One I knew would be imprinted on my heart forever. It left me feeling dazed, but I didn't have time to focus on it, because he was pushing himself up on his knees. Holding me by my hips, he pulled back and snapped them forward again, and a whole new type of pleasure made my skin feel too hot, too tight, too much as it coursed through my muscles and bones.

He made love to me. We could call it fucking, I guess, but the care he showed, the tenderness, it was something more. I knew it deep in my chest.

"You don't know..." He shook his head, like he was as lost in this moment as I was. "Anything you want is yours. Avalon, my Avalon," he groaned, and an echo of the words rang around my head. A different voice. A whisper from my dreams.

I didn't have time to dwell on the sensation of déjà vu, because pleasure was hurtling through me. I clenched around Vox, my whole body arching upwards as I was consumed.

"Fuck," he cursed, gripping me even harder until I knew I'd have fingertip-shaped bruises on my flesh. He fucked me with single-minded focus, riding out my orgasm before he pounded into me like a man possessed. He came hard, and I felt the hot splash inside me. It was a sensation that I wouldn't forget anytime soon.

He collapsed against me, his body a heavy blanket over mine. I ran my hands up his spine, then out over the hard lines of his shoulders, until my fingers grazed large, raised welts. Had I done that with my nails? It was almost impossible, given that my nails were little more than chewed-down nubs. Having long nails and doing sword work didn't really go hand in hand, not without a lot of time and energy, or a heavy dose of magic.

So what were those welts on his back?

I looked up into his face and noticed his eyes had gone blank, his body tense. “I didn’t do that, did I?” I asked softly, and he shook his head.

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There were only two people in all of Ebrus capable of inflicting harm on Vox, and I could stand against neither of them. Moving my fingers away from the painful, raised skin, I wrapped my arms around his waist and held him tightly to me. I didn't say I was sorry, didn't offer him empty platitudes.

I'd been where he had, at the hands of a man who shared my blood and was meant to love and protect me, but didn't. "I know this feeling," I told him simply. "It's their failing, not yours."

Vox's body went taut again, his eyes running over my face, finding the secrets that I was laying bare before him but was too cowardly to say out loud. He knew, though. I could see his understanding in the way his jaw tensed. "I'll kill him," he growled.

I couldn't help but laugh. He absolutely could, but not today. "Okay, my Ice Prince. But do it later. I want to cuddle first."

Huffing a small laugh, he rolled onto his back and gathered me up against his chest. That had to hurt the lash wounds on his back, but he didn't seem to mind. Acacia had given me a poultice to put on my injuries after the Eugene incident, so later, I'd use some of that on Vox's lashes to help ease the pain. Hopefully by tomorrow, they'd be gone.

But right now? I would just lay here and hope that this moment was enough to heal the wounds that no one else could see.

Eighteen

Hayle

She smelled like him. It riled the beast that lived inside me, until I swore he was about to rip out of my skin. They weren't even trying to hide it, not really. Anyone with eyes could see the way their gazes lingered on each other, the small touches, the way he was protective of the Ninth Line conscript.

It meant people gave her a wide berth, almost as wide as the one she gave me. If she saw me coming, she turned and went the other way. If I was in the same class as her, she'd sit on the other side of the room. She was avoiding me, and it made me both angry and despondent—a completely unreasonable response. She didn't owe me anything. I barely knew her. I knew more about her family history than I did about Avalon herself.

Braxus growled beside me, but it wasn't an alert to tell me of a threat. It was the kind of growl he aimed at pups who were doing stupid things that were going to get them hurt, or who needed to be corrected. It was his annoyed sound.

"What?" I snapped at him, and he clacked his teeth back at me. He might be considered my hound, but no one owned Braxus. We were partners, up until the time he decided he was done with me. "Sorry, Braxus."

Sighing heavily, he cast an annoyed expression at Alucius, which was how I knew the message they wanted to impart was going to be about feelings. Braxus tore apart my enemies, but Alucius helped me navigate the beast within.

She sent me an image of her and Braxus snuggling. They were a mated pair; it's why they were so good at their job. Then she sent me an image of me and Avalon snuggling too.

I looked down at her. "I know that I want her, but I can't just steal her from the First

Line Heir. She has free will.”

Alucius huffed and looked at Braxus, who nipped my fingers, no doubt on her command.

“Ouch. That was out of line,” I grumbled down at them both. It didn’t really hurt, but I was beginning to get the impression that they were frustrated.

Alucius sent me another image, this time of her and Braxus standing side by side, strong and united, followed by a similar image of Avalon and I, shoulder to shoulder, with me looking down at her adoringly. That had definitely never happened, so she wasn’t sending me something she’d seen in the past.

Walking around me, Alucius licked at Braxus’s muzzle. They were mates.

Oh.

Ohhh.

“You think she’s my mate?”

Alucius nudged my hand anxiously.

More? I blinked down at my loyal companion, and she gave a look that very clearly expressed that I was being a silly pup. “No, I understand, but also, it can’t be. You think she’s my soulmate? My Soul Tie?”

She licked my hand with her long tongue, the same way she’d congratulated her puppies when they learned a new trick.

I shook my head. “I can’t be her Soul Tie.” I thought about the pulling in my chest

that had almost been instantaneous. Like my soul knew hers and wanted her more than anything. “She basically runs the other way anytime she sees me. Also, she’s with Vox, and while I find that aggravating, I don’t want to rip his face off the way a soulmate would, if they saw another male with his hands all over his Soul Tie.”

I mean, I’d been tempted to tear his face off more than a time or two, and since Avalon had arrived, that impulse had basically doubled. But not enough. I’d heard stories about Soul Ties, about the way their bodies had found each other in each life—sometimes as lovers, sometimes as adversaries, but forever twined together. My grandparents had been a Soul Tie, and my grandfather had once ripped the arms of a man who’d thought to touch my grandmother without her permission.

Braxus tilted his head, the universal hound gesture for I don’t know or possibly did someone drop you on your head as a pup?

I shrugged. “She would make a fine mate; no one’s arguing that. She’s beautiful, and like...” I struggled to explain how my heart felt when I was near her. “Like that feeling you get after a long run in woods you know like the back of your hand.” Like home.

Alucius huffed and trotted away, her tail high, so I knew just how annoyed she was with me. Braxus stayed by my side as I made my way toward our battle history class, thinking about what the hounds believed. I trusted them in all things. Well, almost all things—Braxus had once let me chase a polecat as a kid, knowing I’d get sprayed. It had been a valuable lesson, I guess, but I’d stunk for a week afterwards.

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The hounds had been with me so long that I could hardly remember a time when they weren't by my side. If they believed that Avalon was my Soul Tie, I owed it to them to try, right? Owed it to myself?

I stepped into the auditorium and looked around at the other seated conscripts. This was my last year, as well as Vox's, and eventually, there would be a new wave of conscripts, who'd take over the mantle of the Kings of Boellium. It was a quirk of fate that both Vox and I—Heirs to the two most powerful Lines in Ebrus—were both in attendance at the same time, starting in the same year. When we left, there would be a power vacuum that I didn't envy, and I hated the idea that Avalon would be caught up in it. That she would be unprotected.

She didn't realize that the closer she got to the Heir of the First Line, the more jealousy and political bullshit would put her life in jeopardy. And she'd be alone.

Lucio had one more year, and I trusted him to watch her. My other cousin, Carell, would arrive next year, but she wasn't as strong as Lucio, let alone me. There was a chance that the First Line conscripts would walk all over them. Hell, there was a chance that someone truly powerful from the Fourth Line would rise up and take control of the whole school. Unlikely, but still a possibility.

"Take a seat already," the instructor snapped, and I moved toward my family, my Line. I searched the rest of the room for Avalon, though, but she didn't seem to be here yet.

The instructor stood behind the lectern to start his presentation, when she stumbled in, her face red and her lips puffy, her hair looking freshly fucked.

When Vox walked in moments after her with a smirk on his face, it didn't take a genius to know that they'd been together, fucking, only moments earlier. It didn't matter that they pointedly didn't look at each other. It didn't matter that they sat on opposite sides of the room. If I sucked in a lungful of air, I could pick up her scent, and it contained traces of Vox's. He'd come inside her, and his seed was still leaking out down her thighs.

I growled long and low, and it echoed around the room. I could swallow it back, but I didn't want to. I wanted to howl in pain at the fact that she was with someone else. Braxus eyeballed me, before his gaze landed on Vox, like he was contemplating ripping his throat out for me.

He must be communicating with Alucius too, because I suddenly got an image of her looking insanely self-satisfied. She'd been right. Avalon Halhed was my Soul Tie, but she also wanted nothing to do with me.

So what the fuck did I do with that?

I felt her eyes on my face, and I could almost hear her heartbeat from across the room. I stared at my feet, trying to calm my raging beast. This wasn't the time or the place to lay bare my Line's secrets. Breathing out through my nose, I waited until I had a firm hold on myself to look back up.

Vox Vylan was looking at me, and the triumph on his face made me want to rip his throat out. It was going to be a long class.

Two torturous hours later, Lucio followed me out of the auditorium. He had a frown on his face that meant he was going to try and have a heart to heart, but honestly, I had no idea what to say to him. How did I tell him that I'd found something so revered by our people, but that my Soul Tie was fucking someone else? That she didn't feel the same pull as I did?

So I didn't say anything. I gave orders. "I want to have a party. Make it bigger than the First Line's. Actually, let's have it on the beach. I don't want it restricted to the Upper Lines either. Invite everyone." I didn't want to have to be in close quarters and smell his scent on her skin. It had been fine when she'd just hated me and felt nothing for Vox, but I wasn't sure I could cope with the idea of them having sex now. Of him fucking my Soul Tie.

Shaking my head, I pushed the thought down. "Make it a party no one will forget."

"Fuck yeah," Lucio hooted and ran off, properly distracted. If there was anything Lucio loved more than fighting and fucking, it was a good party. It would keep the whole Line distracted, and that meant no one would be looking too closely at the fact I was about to have a meltdown.

Why would the Goddess give me a Soul Tie from another Line? Someone who had no chance of understanding that for me, she was it. She was the only person I would ever love, the only person I could ever fuck again, without the beast inside me trying to rip out from my flesh?

I needed to run. I needed to let the beast free and speed through the woods of my home. I needed to talk to my mother.

Instead of any of those things, I turned back toward Boellium's library. I couldn't have the girl—not yet, anyway, though I wasn't about to give up—but I could get to the bottom of the mystery of her family. The mystery of her.

The Ninth Daughter of the Ninth Line. She didn't think it meant anything, but in my soul, I knew it was important. I didn't know how, and I didn't know why, but I would.

Nineteen

Avalon

The buzz around the Third Line's party consumed most of Boellium for the next week. Viana and Acacia were giddy with excitement, as were the rest of the Twelfth Line. From what I could gather, the Upper Lines held parties regularly, but the Lower Lines were never invited. Forever separated by not just the social divide, but the main landing of the atrium.

I'd been down in the bowels at least three times this week, just so they could try and dress me up like a child's doll. Not just Viana and Acacia either—the whole Twelfth Line seemed to be invested in what I should wear. However, the party was tonight, so it was decision time.

"The blue. It brings out her eyes," Elkie insisted, holding a dress up in front of her. Not for my approval, despite the fact I would be wearing it, though I definitely had a vote. They were a democracy through and through, especially once they'd decided I was a helpless lamb when it came to fashion. Honestly, they might be right.

"The purple—it's the color of royalty, which she might eventually be if she gets it on with Vox Vylan," someone called from behind me, I flushed red. I was already getting it on with Vox Vylan, but there was very little chance of me ever becoming his wife.

"We're just friends," I told them all for the thousandth time, but Elkie just gave me a knowing look and patted me on the head like I was some sweet summer child.

Someone was holding the purple dress in front of me, switching between that and the blue, when there was a knock at the door. Acacia strode over to answer it, then took a quick step back.

Standing stiffly at the door was Vox's cousin, Shay. There was something inherently

edgy, maybe a little wary about Shay, like she was always waiting for the next attack. She looked around the dorm room, but waited patiently over the threshold.

“May I come in?” she asked, unable to keep the haughtiness from her voice. There was no doubt that in every way, the First Line and the Twelfth Line were different. Their social standing, their hold on their magic, their community—it was all in stark contrast.

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But while a conscript from the Twelfth Line at the door of the First Line dorm would have been turned away immediately, maybe even ridiculed, Acacia welcomed Shay into the dorm. “Sure. Want a drink?” Acacia’s voice was warm, almost a purr, and I frowned at her. That was weird.

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that.” The rigid formality in Shay’s tone sounded wrong down here.

Acacia laughed. “No worries.” As my friend walked toward the kitchen, I noted the way that Shay’s gaze ran over the other woman’s curves, before they shot back to my face.

I raised an eyebrow, but didn’t say anything. Instead, I gave her a warm smile. “I don’t want to be presumptuous, but I assume you’re down here for me?”

It was then that I noticed the black cardboard box suspended in the air beside her. Shay heaved an annoyed groan. “I’ve been sent as an errand girl, yet again. This is from Vox.” She floated the box to me, and as I took it from the air, she dropped her magic’s hold on it. It fell lightly into my arms.

I placed it on the long, communal table, and the rest of the Twelfth gathered around, like this was a present for us all, rather than just for me. Instead of feeling annoyed, I felt... loved.

Shifting off the lid, I separated the folds of tissue paper. Inside was a dress. Not just any dress, though. It was the most beautiful dress I’d ever seen. A midnight-blue gown in a fabric so light, it felt almost unreal. It had a bodice that threaded at the

back with silky ribbon, and a knee-length skirt that defied gravity, pooling like mist.

“Wow,” I breathed, and Viana gripped my arm.

“Do you know what that is?”

I slid my eyes to her. “A dress?”

She shook me gently. “Not just any dress. That’s a Liliana Ingmire original. She creates the fabric herself from some plant that’s a giant secret. That dress is so expensive, it could feed my entire village for a year.” She fingered the skirt, her eyes wide. “Maybe two years. It’s so beautiful.”

Acacia snorted. “Did I just watch Viana fall in love?” she teased, coming to stand beside Shay and handing her a glass of their homebrewed liquor. It was so strong that it put me on my ass every time I drank a single glass. “It is very pretty.” She seemed almost disapproving, with none of the awe that was in Viana’s expression. I understood her reaction; it was a flagrant excess when they could barely eat, which was a little tone-deaf.

“Liliana is a bitch, but she makes pretty clothes, I guess,” Shay agreed. “I’d rather a set of daggers from the metalsmiths of the Eleventh Line, though.”

Acacia raised a brow. “You don’t think the First Line smiths could do better?”

The staring match between them was intense. “It has nothing to do with Line and everything to do with skill. Metalworking is in the bones of the Eleventh Line.”

They continued to stare at each other, and I realized that they weren’t antagonizing each other at all. They were... flirting? I mean, it was a weird form of flirting, but it seemed to work for them.

Viana smirked in their direction, but then her eyes caught on the dress again. “Go and try it on! I need to see how it looks on you before I go crazy.” She shoved me toward her room, and I went, carefully carrying the dress. It was the nicest thing I’d ever owned, but what did it mean?

Quickly shedding my own clothes, I held my breath as I pulled the dress up over my ass and hips. It seemed to defy gravity, floating around me. There were no sleeves, but I couldn’t pull the ribbons tight at the back.

“Viana?” I called, and she burst in before I’d even finished her name. She’d definitely been standing just on the other side of the door. She slammed it as she strode into the room, a gasp on her lips.

“You look like a queen,” she breathed, then came around behind me, gripping the ribbon laces. “Now breathe in, Your Majesty, because you’re about to bring the entire kingdom to their knees with this waistline.”

An hour later, Viana had strapped me into the dress and used little rods warmed on the stovetop to curl my hair. Acacia had dragged me out to the main room and done my makeup with an artful hand, and I’d been surprised to see Shay still there. Her eyes ran over me, and she gave a satisfied nod.

“Okay, maybe I see it. You look good, Ninth.” High praise from the surly First Liner indeed.

I grinned at her. “Thanks, Shay.”

She climbed from the couch, walking over to place her glass in the sink like she’d been to the bowels a hundred times before. “Thank you for your hospitality,” she said politely, but she wasn’t looking at Viana or the others. Her eyes were snagged on Acacia.

“Visit anytime,” Acacia purred.

Shay dipped her chin. “I’ll see you on the beach.” Her gaze was on me now, but she was clearly talking to Acacia.

Oh, yeah. Definitely flirting.

Shay’s departure was like a kicked ant nest. People were running around everywhere. Acacia finished my makeup, then disappeared into her room to change. At some point during my grand makeover, the rest of the Twelfth Line had gotten ready for our first ever Line party and they looked festive in their brightly colored clothes, dyed with plants native to their region. Viana had told me what plants they used to make each color, but honestly, I had no clue what any of them were. Botany hadn’t been my forte during my tutelage back home.

I smiled at my new friends, these people who’d accepted me so easily. “You guys look great.”

Viana slung an arm around my shoulders, careful not to muss my hair. “Not as great as you do. Let’s go stun the heck out of a Heir or two, shall we?” She led us from the room, and as we climbed the stairs, more and more of the Lower Line conscripts joined us.

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The atrium was overflowing with people making their way down to the beach, and I could already hear music in the wind. Something smelled amazing, and I wondered if the Third Line had managed to convince the cooks to serve dinner down on the rocks. If anyone could convince the curmudgeonly kitchen staff to do something against the rules, it'd be Hayle.

"I can't wait to dance," Viana said, shimmying her way between her two boyfriends. I was beginning to think herboyfriends were also boyfriends with each other. I mean, it made sense, in a weird kind of way. At least then no one felt left out then, right?

As we walked, people's eyes lingered on me. I pushed my shoulders back, like wearing this beautiful dress was an everyday occurrence for me. I was the Heir to the Ninth Line. They couldn't know that our Barony was dirt poor from my father's excessive drinking and bad choices.

The dress itself floated around me like a midnight storm cloud, and I was truly in love. I mean, not as in love as Viana, but definitely in love.

There was a small line down to the beach as we all hurried, and we had the unfortunate luck to be behind Ephily from the Fifth Line. She took one look at my dress, her eyes narrowing. "I wonder if my cousin Liliana knows her creations are being put on a pig?"

That would have hurt once upon a time, but now, I just smiled at her with too many teeth. "Give her my compliments. This dress is beautiful."

She opened her mouth to say something cutting and cruel in return, but Vox

appeared, and his eyes were filled with equal amounts of wonder and lust. “Avalon, you look like a dream.” He leaned closer, until his lips were beside my ear. “A wet dream.” Standing back to his full height, he nodded respectfully to Viana and Acacia, then glared at the girl from the Fifth Line. “Ephily.”

Then he surprised the fuck out of me by gripping me around the waist and pulling me tightly to his body, kissing me with so much authority, there was no doubt it was a claiming. I kissed him back, clinging to his shoulders as warmth consumed me. It ran through my veins and burned in my chest.

Finally, when my lungs were on fire and my thighs felt like they were made of pudding, he pulled back. “The image of you in this dress is going to be etched in my mind forever. Every time I close my eyes, I’ll picture you this way,” he murmured against my lips. Then he uncurled to his full height and moved his hand down to grip mine.

As he dragged me down to the beach, I realized I was a fool of the worst kind.

I’d gone and fallen in love with Vox Vylan.

I was in love with the one person in this world I couldn’t ever have.

Twenty

Avalon

I’d never been to a real party before. When Father had banquets or balls, I’d been confined to my rooms. Sometimes, I’d sneak out to watch the men drink and the women flirt. No one danced in the North—it was a frivolity that we didn’t really ascribe to—but people knew how to get drunk and fuck in dark corners.

That seemed to be the version of partying that Boellium was fond of too, because in the short walk down the beach with Vox, Shay, Acacia, and Viana, I saw at least four couples fucking. Well, three couples and one quad. My feet stuttered as I watched the group have sex behind a large boulder that wasn't quite private enough, especially considering the sun had barely dipped below the horizon.

"Would you like a drink?" Vox asked, and I nodded as I dragged my eyes away. We walked to where a kid I vaguely recognized as being part of the Third Line was playing bartender. He was having a good time at least, mixing drinks and pouring them down someone's throat with a funnel.

Shay snorted. "Fucking Lucio."

The person drinking through the funnel was indeed Hayle's second-in-command. I snorted a laugh, but instinctively looked for the Heir of the Third Line. There were at least a hundred people on the beach, though I couldn't see him anywhere. Maybe he was in the shadows with someone else too?

The thought of Hayle with his body wrapped around some random Upper Sixer made my blood turn to ice in my veins, but I pushed the jealousy away. Who Hayle fucked, married, or loved had nothing to do with me. I had Vox, and he was all I needed.

Hell, he was more than I needed. And if I was honest with myself, Hayle was as out of reach to me as Vox was. No, I should be happy with what I had, and when it was all over, I'd be glad that I got to experience this freedom at all.

"What would you like?" Vox asked close to my ear so he could be heard over the band, which was playing something heavy and melodic and made me wish I really did dance.

I shrugged. "Whatever you suggest." I knew even less about fancy Upper Six alcohol

than I did about dancing.

Lucio slid close to Shay, already swaying slightly with a goofy grin on his face. “If it isn’t my favorite ball-crusher,” he teased, and she rolled her eyes.

“I stood on your balls once, Lucio. Get over it.” Her eyes shifted quickly to Acacia, then back to him, and Lucio tilted his head, his alcohol-hazed mind picking up the vibes of the group quickly. His grin got even wider, if possible, and something nearly imperceptible passed between them. An understanding, maybe.

He slung an arm around Shay’s shoulders. “You know, I’m okay if we make our little duo into a ménage, Shay-Shay.” I wished I understood the dynamic between those two, because his words were more teasing than lecherous. Almost like a performance, he seemed to be saying what he knew the people around him expected to hear, but didn’t actually want to follow through. Shay also didn’t move his arm from her shoulder, and Acacia was watching them shrewdly.

Finally, Acacia shrugged. “You’d both be so lucky,” she said snarkily, throwing them a wink and flouncing off into the crowd. Soon after, both Shay and Lucio disappeared, and Viana and her guys left to dance.

“Then there were two,” Vox murmured softly, leading me away from the bulk of the crowd. The liquor was sweet and high quality, and strong. So fucking strong. “Fuck, you look so beautiful tonight, Avalon.”

He stepped closer to me, out here in the open where anyone could see. While he’d never outright said we should keep our rendezvous secret, he hadn’t exactly walked me into the middle of the the atrium and announced he was fucking the nobody from the Ninth Line.

Right now, though, he may as well be shouting it to the rooftops. Especially when he

leaned down and kissed me softly, reverently, in front of hundreds of eyes.

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It was impossible not to lean into the kiss, not to kiss him back with the burning desire in my gut. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he gripped my hips with firm hands, holding me close enough that I could feel the hardening of his cock behind the laces of his pants.

I tore myself away before I lost all good sense and moved us toward one of the rocky crevices and demanded he fuck me. “You make me crazy,” I whispered against his lips, and he chuckled low.

“Not as crazy as you make me. Giving you up is going to be the hardest thing I’ll ever have to do.” The pain in his voice reflected the ache in my chest. But that was a problem for another day. A heartache for a future Avalon.

The drink was making me brave, and I leaned back so I could look at him properly. “Do you dance?”

He snorted, dropping his hands and leading me toward the dance floor. “Do I dance? Ninth, I was waltzing around a grandballroom with vapid nobility before I could even piss standing up.”

I laughed, even though that was a little sad. “I don’t really know...” I trailed off, because I didn’t want to admit that I was so uncultured, I couldn’t even do the casual swaying dance they were doing on the sand, let alone a waltz.

Vox grinned at me over his shoulder, and my heart stuttered in my chest. I memorized that expression, that moment, like I would one day try to recreate it in a painting. The light of torches stuck in the sand behind him bouncing off his dark

locks like a golden halo, those blue eyes darkened by the shadows, the glint of his white teeth, and his full lips stretched wide.

He was so perfect, so mesmerizing, that it took me a moment to realize he was saying something. “Don’t worry, I’ll teach you. It’s as natural as fucking, and I can promise you, you’re perfect at that.”

I slapped his shoulder, but followed him onto the dance floor and let him pull me closer. His knee slipped between my thighs, and I was so close to his body, it would be impossible to see the firelight between us.

He bent his head down toward mine. “You let me lead, sweetheart, and just enjoy yourself. Feel the music. Feel my body. Feel how connected we are.” Then he began to sway, and my body moved with his. It really did kind of feel like sex. The same connection, the same primal understanding of the rhythm and movement. He pulled me even closer, and the way his hard thigh rubbed my core made me wet.

Goddess, I wasn’t going to last an entire song at this rate.

“Why the change of heart?” I mumbled against his chest, and he dipped his face low.

“Hmm?” He rubbed his cheek on mine, making me sigh at the soft scrape.

“Why are you suddenly dancing with me in public? Kissing me in public?”

“I was standing at the end of the path as you walked toward the beach, and I saw the way everyone watched you. I knew they were seeing you as I do, rather than how they think you should be.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “What does that even mean?”

“It means you walked down here looking like a wet dream, and everyone noticed you. Desired you. Wanted to be you, or just worship at your feet. I’m a petty, jealous man. I don’t want to share you with these fuckers. I want everyone to know that you’re mine.” He leaned down and kissed me again, never stopping the gentle sway of our dance. “I want them to know that you’re only mine to kiss. To touch. To tease. To claim.” He bit my lip, dragging it through his teeth with an erotically painful scrape. “To fuck.”

“You’re a very bad influence, Vox Vylan,” I grumbled, lifting my face for more kisses. If he was claiming me, then I was going to claim him right back.

The night went on like that, with more songs, more drinks, more of... what could only be described as foreplay.

Sometime late in the night, Vox was dragged away by Shay, and I walked over to the bar again. I needed water; my body was overly warm from the dancing and the liquor. I watched all the Lines dancing and laughing, partying together like the divide between us and them didn’t exist. At least for tonight, anyway.

I was surprised to see Hayle beside the bar, Alucius at his feet. I reached down and scratched her ears, and she allowed it. She wasn’t so easily affectionate as her mate, but she sure was beautiful. And regal.

“Alucius. You’re looking radiant tonight,” I told her softly, and she turned her face to lick my hand softly. I tried not to melt on the spot, but I’d swear my heart grew three sizes in my chest.

“She thinks you look lovely too,” Hayle told me. His smile was soft, but something else tinged the edges. Something I couldn’t name. “I have to say, I agree. That dress is beautiful.” Pausing, his eyes meet mine. “You look beautiful.”

I blew out a quick breath, my heart thudding hard. It always felt like this, like something inside me was too big and was trying to break through the bones of my chest. I swallowed the lump that lodged in my throat. “Thank you. This is a great party. You should invite all the Lines more often. It’s good for Boellium.”

It would be good for Ebrus too, but I kept that to myself. My thoughts on the Upper Six and Lower Six divide bordered on treasonous.

“I think you’re right. Definitely better than some of the other Line parties, that’s for sure. Do you want another drink?”

For some reason, as he spoke, I was drifting closer. I couldn’t stop myself. “Just water, please. I think I’ve had enough of your expensive alcohol, though I’ve built up quite the tolerance after drinking the Twelfth Line’s moon water for a month. That stuff will melt your insides.”

Hayle laughed, grabbing me a jug of water from behind the bar. “I’ve heard of it. I should ask your friends for a sample. It’s very hard for the Third Line to get drunk, which is why we funnel-chug most of our drinks.”

I laughed. “Well, see Eliot over there?” I pointed across at a Twelfth Line conscript sipping from a secret flask he kept on his hip. “The still in the bowels is his baby. If you ask about it, he’ll talk to you for hours about batches and vintages and all sorts of stuff I don’t understand. Just don’t talk about his eyebrows... or lack thereof.”

Hayle chuckled. “What happened to his eyebrows?”

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I leaned toward him. I'd missed the sound of his laugh. "Word is that the alcohol percentage of the last batch was too high, and a small spark from the burner set it alight like a fireball. Blew off his eyebrows and his mustache. Well, his former mustache."

Hayle snorted, until he looked past me and frowned. I spun to see what he was frowning at. Maybe people had stopped trying to hide their fucking in dark corners and were just screwing on the dance floor now?

Instead, it was a man in a uniform walking in our direction. I was so surprised when he stopped in front of me, I didn't think to do anything but gape. I didn't recognize him, and he wasn't in the Boellium guard uniform.

The uniformed man looked me over once. "Avalon Halhed?"

I nodded. "Yes?"

He raised a gun I hadn't even seen and pointed it at my head. "The Baron sends his regards."

Twenty-One

Vox

Shay's whispered, "Stanlus is here", in my ear had me moving away from Avalon and excusing myself to disappear into the shadows of the party. My stomach soured at the thought of Stanlus here. He was my father's right-hand man, as brutal and

apathetic as his commander.

Him being here, at Boellium and at this party particularly, was bad news.

“Did he say what he was doing here?” I whispered to Shay, and she shook her head. Her jaw was tight, and while her face was neutral, there was fear in her eyes. Few people scared Shay; our fathers, of course, and Stanlus. Not even my brother scared Shay. But Stanlus was... cruel. Needlessly so.

He'd been given a free hand to ensure the kingdom ran smoothly on my father's behalf, with an army at his disposal, and he'd decided to do it in the most brutal way possible. There were rumors that he kept traitors alive in the dungeons of the Hall of Ebrus, going back periodically to torture them and then disappearing until they'd healed, only to return and start the cycle again.

The man was a monster in a uniform.

I straightened my shoulders, becoming the imperious Heir I was meant to be. He wouldn't hurt me, of that I was sure, but I didn't want Shay anywhere close to him. And I wanted him an entire continent from Avalon.

I leaned down closer to Shay, keeping the barrier around us so unwanted ears couldn't hear. “Leave. Go and keep an eye on Avalon from a distance. Be discreet.”

She hesitated, loath to leave me alone with him, but I shoved her back in the direction of the party. She went, but her shoulders were tense.

I steeled my spine and walked around the rocks to see Stanlus perched on a boulder, cleaning dirt from beneath his nails with his knife. At least, I hoped it was dirt. There were three other soldiers around him, each decked out in the uniform of the Baron's personal guard.

“Stanlus. This is an unfortunate surprise,” I said coolly. He might have strength, but magically speaking, I walked all over the older man. I was more powerful than him, and my brother too. I suspected I was even more powerful than my father, though I would never suggest that out loud. It would be a death sentence.

Stanlus’s shrewd gaze suggested he knew it, though. “Vox. Your father has sent me down here to investigate rumors of dissension.”

I actually raised my eyebrows at him. “Dissension? Here in Boellium?” The idea was impossible. Boellium War College was a tool of indoctrination. A gentle fist around the throats of the citizens of Ebrus. “I haven’t seen any behavior that would suggest anything but an adherence to the status quo.”

Stanlus snorted, like my opinion meant nothing. He walked toward me. “Haven’t you? No whispers? No little Lower Liners sneaking their way into your bed to infect your mind?”

My body went cold. That was a pointed barb. He knew about Avalon, which meant Father knew about Avalon. I didn’t let any of that show on my face; I had years of practice at this little push-and-pull routine.

I rolled my eyes at him and scoffed. “Please, Stanlus. We both know that if I fuck the Upper Line women, they get big ideas that they’ll be the next Heiress of the First Line. I find it cleaner to fuck among the Lower Lines—they know their place and they’re just so happy to get my dick, they spread their thighs. You need to stop listening to rumors.” I hated speaking of Avalon that way, but the last thing I wanted was for her to be on Stanlus’s radar, let alone my father’s. “Besides, the only thing they could infect me with is the pox, and luckily, the healer gave me medicine to fix that, should the need arise.” I gave him a lecherous wink straight from my brother’s playbook. Fuckboy extraordinaire.

Stanlus eyed me critically, and I kept my face imperious and cocky. It had been my former weapons master who'd told me quietly one day never to let Stanlus see your fear, because once he knew what you feared, he would have you forever. I'd taken that to heart.

The silence stretched on between us, and I knew he was waiting for me to break. Finally, he smiled, and it was the most unnerving expression on his harsh, craggy face. His many battles had left him scarred and ugly, though perhaps it had less to do with his war wounds and more to do with his inner ugliness seeping out onto his skin.

When he smiled, it turned your guts to water.

I almost collapsed with relief when Svenna appeared from the darkness. Her hair was gelled back, and she was wearing tight leather pants and a breastplate, like she was prepared for war. She always dressed like that. Even with one arm, she was one of the fiercest warriors Boellium had. She probably could have still been a Captain in the Dawn Army, even with one arm. But the Dawn Army accepted only perfection, and for the first and probably only time in my life, I was thankful that was the case, because it meant she was here.

She didn't seem surprised to see Stanlus or the other members of Father's guard. "Master Praxius is a little miffed you didn't stop and say hello before joining the party, Stanlus. Poor etiquette," she quipped, as if a monster such as Stanlus would give a shit about etiquette.

He snarled at Svenna. "Just here to talk to the Heir."

His tone was dismissive, but Svenna had huge brass balls. If there was anyone in the world who wasn't scared of Stanlus, it was Svenna. "You mean the conscript from the First Line? All conscripts are the same within the walls of Boellium, Stanlus. You remember that, right?"

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Judging by the way his face went a puce color, he did indeed remember, and whatever she was referring to wasn't a nostalgic memory. "It's so good to see you, Svenna. I'd forgotten you existed since you disappeared behind the walls of Boellium, nothing more than a useless cripple."

I didn't even see her move, but she had a knife under his chin before my eyes caught up. Holy fuck.

"Not so useless. Even with one arm, I'm a better warrior than you'll ever be. You're just a small man, with an even smaller dick, blessed with a big army."

I touched her elbow gently, a warning. I didn't want her to die just because she'd gotten into a pissing match with this psychopath.

Someone shouted down the beach, the partygoers oblivious to the battle of wills happening in the shadows.

Stanlus snorted at her, his eyes moving back to me, dismissing her like she hadn't nearly slit his throat. "Don't stress yourself. I've taken care of the problem that brought us here. We'll be on our way."

Svenna's head whipped down toward the beach, and I realized the shouting wasn't drunken conscripts. It was something more.

Every ounce of training I had disappeared, and I turned and started to run, ignoring Stanlus's cold laughter echoing behind me. The crowds were thick between me and the place I'd left Avalon. I tried to see her, my eyes running through groups of

people. I couldn't see her, or Shay, or even her friends from the Twelfth Line.

Where was she?

I wanted to shout for her. Call her back to me so I could see with my own eyes she was safe, but I couldn't. If Stanlus was full of shit, he would know for sure that she meant something to me and her life would be forfeit.

"Shay?" I shouted instead. She was meant to be watching her. "Shay!"

People were starting to run up the beach, back toward the dorms and away from whatever was causing their terror. I created a buffer of air around me and pushed through them. I needed to find Avalon; I needed to make sure she was okay.

When I broke through the crowd, my heart stopped beating in my chest. One of my father's guards stood there, his gun raised and pointed at Avalon as she stood, wide-eyed beside Hayle Taeme.

Guns were something used only by the First Line. Even the weakest of our Line could use air magic to propel a bullet from the chamber, aided by the mechanics of the weapon. It was how we'd held our power for so long against the other Lines, who didn't have elemental abilities and relied on swords and hand-to-hand combat.

Guns were effective killing devices from far away. As close as the guard was standing to Avalon? There would be nothing left of her head if he pulled the trigger.

"No!" I shouted, running, thrusting my power out, but I was too slow. The whistle of sound, the scrape of the bullet propelling through the chamber, the clap of its release echoing around the rocky outcropping, all screamed that I was too late.

I spotted Shay on the other side of the clearing, her own hand out to use her powers to

divert the bullet or create a barrier or something, but she stood even less of a chance of being fast enough.

What happened next occurred so slowly, it was like torture, even though in reality it was between one frantic beat of my heart and the next.

Hayle pushing Avalon.

The bullet lodging in his chest, exploding his flesh outwards like crushed fruit.

A knife lodging in the back of the guard's neck, severing his spine.

My air catching Hayle and lowering him gently to the ground.

Hayle's hands tearing the guard to pieces as he lay paralyzed and helpless.

The wailing sound of Avalon's cries as she climbed over Hayle's body.

He'd saved her. He'd saved her, and now he was dead.

Twenty-Two

Avalon

No.

Not again.

"Hayle!" I screamed, the world around me going hazy as I scrambled through the sand to him, my hands buried in the mess of bone and flesh in his chest, trying to hold him together. Trying to hold him here with me.

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Blood trickled down his face. “Glad you won’t know...” he gurgled. His eyes were trying to tell me something as they went blank. Lifeless.

My screams echoed around me. A memory flashed into my mind. Hayle charred on the sand.

Not again. Not again. Not again.

Arms wrapped around me, and I knew it was Vox. Knew the feel of his arms like my own. “I’m sorry. I owe him everything. I’m sorry. I love you.” He repeated the words over and over, but it couldn’t matter right now.

I screamed and screamed, hands grabbing at me, but it was too late. Too late for Hayle. Too late for them. For me.

I screamed and screamed as the burning torches flared and spread, as people melted into the darkness, fire and lightswirling around me like a tornado, my hands buried in what remained of Hayle’s chest.

I felt the hands on my arms tighten, and I looked over at the disappearing face of Vox, like he was being erased, like the world around me was being erased. I felt sadness as he disappeared, but there was no universe that existed without Hayle. No universe that could exist without both of them.

I would accept nothing else. I would burn it all to the ground every single time if I had to.

As reality faded, I could hear the soft voice of a woman, so familiar, whispering on the swirling tornado of emotion.

The Ninth. The Ninth. The Ninth.

Twenty-Three

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."

My steps faltered. I spun back around. I couldn't just leave him there, could I?

"Why are you up there?" I asked softly, and the whole courtyard held its breath.

The guy suspended in the air gurgled on his own blood. “I pissed off the wrong person.”

I looked past him, to a pair of ice-blue eyes that I had no trouble identifying. Vox Vylan, Heir to the First Line. I’d seen the portraits, and even if I hadn’t, I could feel his magic swirling around the courtyard even now. There were very few people in all of Ebrus who had that kind of power.

I was a bug to this man, insignificant in every way, but the way he watched me was unnerving. A shiver ran down my spine. I stood up on my toes and looked at the guy suspended upside-down in the eye. “I can’t help you, but even I know you need to watch yourself. We mean nothing to men as powerful as the Vylans. It’s a lesson you need to learn if you want to survive.”

I touched his arm, then leapt back as the guy fell from the air. He landed heavily on the ground, but I kept my eyes on Vox Vylan. Shit, is he going to think I did that?

Fuck him. Let him think I had almost break his elemental magic. I didn’t, of course, because talismans that powerful would cost more than all the money in the small coffers of my Line.

But I hadn’t come from being beaten down every day of my life to stand by and watch someone else bully those weaker than them. As soon as I’d stepped over the threshold of this college, the unwanted daughter of a heartless Baron, I knew this was my chance to change my fate. I would get what I wanted—my freedom—and if I had to go toe to toe with the Heir of the First Line to do it, I would.

I held his gaze, fully expecting to be the next person to be hung up in the courtyard as an example, but instead, the Heir to the First Line smiled at me. Or maybe he stole my air, because I forgot how to breathe.

“I’ll be seeing you, little dirt scrabbler.” It sounded like both a threat and a promise.

“Run along now.”

I didn't need to be told twice. As I opened the door of the atrium, my ears were immediately assaulted by a cacophony of animal sounds and the yelling of a rabble of conscripts. Two hounds had a man cornered, and I was watching them so intently, I didn't even see the man in front of me until I ran straight into his chest.

My heart climbed up my throat as he stared down at me, his wild golden eyes and square jaw so familiar to me. I knew his face like my own, even though I'd never met him before in my life.

“Excuse me,” I whispered, my bravado from the courtyard suddenly disappearing. I dipped around him, but he reached out insanely fast and grabbed my arm.

“Who are you?” he breathed, and my mind went blank. I had a name; I knew I did, I just couldn't remember it right at this particular moment.

He gave me a little shake, and words returned to my brain. “Avalon Halhed of the Ninth Line.”

“You,” he growled.

Oh fuck. I was dead.