



Earth Mover

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Category: Romance, Fantasy

Description: In a world where magic pulses through veins like blood, power is measured by the secrets one keeps—and Haron Val Toric has many to hide.

In the kingdom of Respar, the rules are clear: male spellcasters build and protect, while women heal and nurture. Yet Haron, the realm's most skilled necromancer, has never been one to conform.

When a noblewoman is discovered gruesomely murdered, Haron takes it upon herself to investigate, uncovering a conspiracy that threatens to tear Respar's fragile peace apart. Each revelation from the dead drags her deeper into a tangled web of long-buried secrets—secrets better left untouched.

Crown Prince Irin Gailish enlists Haron's formidable powers to solve the mysterious death of his father. Captivated by her sharp intellect and her refusal to bow to courtly pretensions, Irin finds himself torn between his duty to the kingdom and an attraction that could bring ruin. As their fates intertwine, so do the dark schemes of those who wish to see them both undone.

But Haron's greatest deception is the one hidden beneath her careful exterior. She is far more than she appears—more dangerous, more powerful, and more hunted.

May the Old Gods have mercy on any soul who rips away her mask, for there are fangs hidden beneath it.

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Chapter One

Haron - 140th year of Ber's First Reign, 103 years after the fall of Julra

The natural laws of magic are governed by the six Old Gods, their likenesses portrayed as statues in the Pantheon of

Erewen as rulers of this land. It is said that the day Julra fell, black tears streaked the goddess Wira's face as she

mourned its people's entry into her deathly embrace. Certainly, the solid foundation of magic was shaken with the

loss of so many talented practitioners to keep its balance.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 37 of Ber's First Reign

"Where is Haron Val Toric?"

If the tavern hadn't been silenced by the heavy wooden door slamming against the wall under the knight's brutal kick, no one would have understood the question in clumsy Common tongue. Every scruffy and scarred face turned to face the abrupt noise with pints lifted halfway to their mouths and conversations half-spoken. Resparian knights didn't venture down to the lower sectors very often. The sight was less than a treat, however.

The guest, with lesser manners than an unbroken kisteral, was very plainly a hired guard of a noble Highlan. The gambeson beneath his armor—that looked like it had never seen a battlefield—was dyed a light chartreuse and made from some kind of silky fabric instead of a more practical cotton, and every piece of metal on his person was polished to a high shine. The knight's helmet was pinned under his elbow to reveal a scowl darkening his craggy face. He didn't seem particularly happy to be darkening the door of The Hanging Cat. Unfortunately for him, in the lower streets of Gilamorst his kind were not particularly welcome, either.

The stifled air was soon broken with boisterous, drunken guffaws.

I leaned over the bar top and gently shoved the empty glass closer to Gaion, the scruffy old barkeep and owner of the only decent tavern in Gilamorst I've found in my five years of living here. Neither of us, along with the rest of the bar, were fazed by the knight's abrupt presence. He didn't seem to like that. Hewas probably used to everyone stopping what they were doing to jump to his demands. That kind of expectation would only end in a rude awakening here.

Finally, a barmaid's voice rose above the howls and bawdy laughter. "There's no one by that name here, sir." The lie flowed smoothly from her pink-tinted lips. She had been in the process of clearing a table near the door, stacking the wooden platters on a hand but otherwise not looking his way. Otherwise, she may have been able to avoid his grasp.

"Shutyourmouth, wench!" The knight's gloved hand snatched out and tangled itself into the voluptuous blonde waves of the woman who answered him. The jolt made her cry out and drop the plates she was bussing back to be cleaned. The sound of them clattering against the stone floor sent a hush around the room. "I wasn't speaking to the likes of—"

His crude mistake had at least fifteen men shoving back their chairs and grabbing for

their swords. No one took kindly to roughing up the ladies, especially the ones that served their beer. The barmaids and escorts served many people in The Hanging Cat, more so for information than anything else. It was an unspoken rule that the men kept their hands to themselves unless invited otherwise. A rule that wasn't shared among many other establishments in Gilamorst.

Gaion slammed two wooden tankards on the bar, calling the attention of the knight as if he'd dropped a gavel. Lucky for him he didn't use the glass ones. They would have shattered under his strong grip. "If anyone would know who was in this bar, it would be those so-called wenches you think so lowly of. If Lota says this Haron isn't here, they're not here. Now get your fucking hands off my staff and get out, or I'll be dealin' with you m'self." His voice rumbled, white brows beneath a wrinkled forehead dropping low over piercing blue eyes.

He was far past his own glory days as a captain in the late king's army, but his stare could still kill at a hundred paces. Anyone sitting in the line of shot shifted slightly, knowing Gaion's ability to drop even the burliest of thugs on their asses. Not looking away from the knight, Gaion shoved the glasses down the smooth bar top, polished with years of service, into waiting hands on his right side. He looked about two seconds from leaping over it with whatever manner of weapon he kept stashed by his feet for rowdy guests.

"There's a bulletin on the wall you just threw my door into if you have a poster to pin. You'll only get a response if there's an award attached."

Lota thrashed around a bit more and grabbed the hand holding her, twisting it around into a painful angle as she ducked under his arm and shoved the knight away. The move made him howl and swear in pain. He shook the wrenched hand out and flexed his fingers in their plated gloves while throwing a dark glare at her retreating form. The spitting blonde wove through the tables and ducked through the blue curtain covering the doorway to the kitchen.

She was probably going to look for the largest, sharpest butcher's knife she could find.

The obtrusive knight muttered something to his silent companion hunkering behind him—a young page who'd barely hit puberty and dressed in the same unfortunate colors—who stepped around him carrying a satchel laden with papers, their edges peeking out from beneath the flap as it bulged with the load. He hurried to the bulletin, plastered so heavily with posters it couldn't be seen beneath them, and struggled to push a pin into the many layers of paper to attach his own.

One of the regulars took pity on his ignorance. "This is why you buy a tankard first, boy!" The scruffy man hefted his empty cup, bottom aimed toward the poster, and slammed the pin through with a heavy hit and droplets of beer flying everywhere.

The boy squeaked, clearly shocked by the method, and practically flew back out the door behind his master.

The knight was not as affected. "The reward is worthwhile, I assure you. The favor of a Highlan is not easily bought, and Highlan Pid will pay most handsomely for his request."

"I say that about my cunt, but I don't put a poster up about it!" One of the prostitutes chimed in from my side, causing an uproar of laughter and jeers. She propped a fist on her hip and leaned in menacingly. "Tell your Highlan master the only thing that talks here is coin! And lots of it!"

I kept my head down, face hidden beneath a simple brown hood, but snorted into my own cup, nudging the outspoken woman with my elbow as we laughed together at the knight's rising ire. Jessella and I had been friends long enough to know she wouldn't rat me out for some Highlan's purse. We had also spent enough scandalous nights together, probably in said Highlan's bed or one of his acquaintances. Nobody's coin

impressed us that much. We shared an interest in the thrill of bedding people we shouldn't.

The boisterous noise of the lively pub kicked up again, effectively dismissing the sour-faced knight and his poor page as they turned to leave as abruptly as they came. His moment of attention had expired in favor of good beer and better conversation.

“Why is someone always busting down my door looking for you, Haron?” Gaion muttered, slapping his wet cloth on the bar beside my elbow before proceeding to clean up sloshed beer. “Do I need to put out posters of my own stating you don’t frequent these parts?”

“I’m waiting to see how many posters they put on that bulletin before realizing someone has already come calling.”

He let loose a gruff laugh. “I wouldn’t give those knights that much credit. They aren’t exactly hired for their brains if y’know my meaning. Most of them are rejects from the royal army.”

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Jessella butted in and draped herself across my back. Her full breasts pushed against me enticingly and drew the eyes of several interested men nearby. Dark brown hair fell across my shoulder, a light floral scent wafting from the voluminous curls. “They’re certainly not great lays in bed, either! Too cheap, and too boring! I would never sell you out for a moral-coated dick, Haron.”

I grip her by the chin—sharp nails digging into her smooth, pale skin, how I know she likes it—and yank her toward my mouth for a salacious kiss. Men in various states of sobriety start whooping and hollering and slamming their cups on the wooden tables like a bunch of heathens excited for a show.

“Thank you, vilasch. Your loyalty is much appreciated, as always.”

“Old Julran affections are the way to my heart, I suppose.” Jessella planted her own sloppy kiss on my cheek in return. “Speaking of loyalty, my weekly fuck is waiting in my quarters. Find me later, Haron?”

My smirk was plainly insincere. “Nothing in life is guaranteed. But if I am around, I may join you.”

I wouldn’t be joining her.

I had some pompous Highlan to terrorize.

Finding this Highlan Pid who had summoned me was laughable work, even without looking at the wanted poster with the horrible rendition of my face plastered on it. I should murder him on those grounds alone. He’d made me look like a sweet damsel

that needed rescuing, with large doe eyes and entirely too straight hair. Whoever had described my appearance to him was obviously making a fool out of his ignorance. The fact he thought I would come if called was offensive enough without that innocent portrayal. Clients usually came to The Hanging Cat themselves if they were looking for my services, not pinning a poster on the bulletin like I was a wanted criminal. And those who came looking for me weren't interested in help with someone who was living. I wanted to know who he wanted to contact, without crawling to his feet.

A few words in the Old Language sparked my magic and melted my body into shadow. I swept between the guards' feet at the front gate and through the shrubbery to the front door. The idiocy of these high-flying nobles with their elaborately decorated front lawns was baffling to me. There were so many places for someone to hide and ambush them. For the moment, they were very useful for creating dark places for my shadowed form to flit through. I crept across the front of the mansion and around the corner, between the bushes and exterior stone wall, until the first window of a dark room was within reach to my right.

The wards on this house were pitiful. Whoever he paid to set these ripped him off majorly.

I pulled a dagger from its sheath at my thigh and gently shimmied it into the sash, being careful not to cut into the wood, and sent a burst of my own magic along the blade to disperse the ward. The fool hadn't even locked the window, so sure of the spell that held it closed to be enough protection to keep him safe. It was quick work to leverage the dagger against the window and slide it up on smooth tracks just wide enough to climb through.

The room I slipped into was a study elaborately stocked with floor-to-ceiling shelves of books, all leather bound and very academic-looking. Some even gave a faint aura of magic warding, probably set by the author of the book, that glowed red in my

sharpened sight. Belatedly, I wished I had brought a larger satchel with me to peruse and "borrow" some of his books as advance payment for my time.

Bemoaning my lack of preparation, I skirted the ornate desk carved out of some dark wood to where this Highlan Pid planted his ass in the cushioned chair. There were two sets of drawers—three on the right and left—but only one gave the same red hue as the books and window of a defensive ward. Another weak defensive ward at that.

"For fuck's sake," I muttered, more in annoyance than frustration. "Maybe there's a market in scamming Highlans with cheap wards." I didn't even need to break the ward with effort. My innate magic was enough to reach straight through it and grab the drawer's bronze knob, breaking the ward like ripping through wet paper as I yanked it open. Inside, several envelopes made of heavy, ivory-colored paper were neatly stacked and tied with a piece of twine.

"This could be promising."

Just as my hand gripped the thick bundle and pulled it from its hiding place, the study door was thrown open to slam against the wall behind it. Little flakes of plaster sprinkled the floor beneath where the handle had likely buried itself from the force. A large, black-gloved hand reached around the wall, his body not yet filling the doorway, and blindly tapped the touch-sensitive plate on the wall to activate the everflame sconces lining the room. I remained frozen, staring at the scene unfolding before me, not bothering to duck behind the desk for cover. Obviously, I wasn't the only one breaking and entering tonight.

Finally, the man moved around from the cover of the wall and, with the most ridiculous crouching walk, crept into the study. He grabbed the edge of the door and made to pull it shut when he realized the damage he'd made to the wall behind it.

"Shit," he cursed, none too quietly, and jerked the handle from where it had been

embedded. "Didn't mean to kick that hard. That's gonna leave a mark."

This guy had the observation skills of a fucking log. I was by no means a small lady, and it had been a good three minutes of this comedy, and he hadn't even addressed me. "Yeah, it will. Now, would you mind getting on with whatever you barged in for? I'm busy."

He whirled around, drawing a large hunting knife from a sheath at the small of his back, and crouched into a defensive stance. "The hell? How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to watch you make an absolute idiot look like a Covenant scholar." I rolled my eyes and swung my small pack off my back. Surely someone had heard this oaf of a man barge in here, and I would rather him take the fall for breaking into a Highlan's study. "Good luck not getting caught. Someone is coming down the hallway now."

We stared into each other's eyes for another awkward moment, wondering who was going to make the next move. I wasn't lying; someone was about ten paces from the doorway. The heavythudsagainst the stone floor likely belonged to another guard. Then, something devious sparked in the other man's dark eyes and a corner of his lips pulled up slightly. He was clean-shaven and deep-skinned like most Resparians, looking no more than mid-thirties in age, and obviously conditioned from some kind of intense physical labor. His black hair was cut short to his scalp to reveal a jagged pink scar across his left temple. If he was trying to make himself less noticeable, he wasn't doing a particularly good job of it. Even the most inexperienced of criminals would think to hide defining scars like that.

"Thief! I caught a thief in here!" he hollered at the top of his lungs. More than one set of footsteps pounded down the hard stone of the corridor now.

The first guard skidded into view, almost sliding past the open doorway while gripping the pommel of his sword in the other. His gauntlet-covered hand gripped the doorframe to steady himself from falling over. Looking between the two men, I realized the first was wearing the exact same pale green tunic and leather pants, cinched with a belt bearing the Highlan Pid's family crest on its buckle in silver. There was no way this buffoon was a part of the Highlan's guard.

Which meant we were both thieves in his study. And I was the only one looking guilty at the moment.

"You bitch! Stop with your hands up!" The second guard held his free hand out like he was going to cast some spell on me at the first twitch. "Good job catching this one." He nodded to the other one, who was clearly not a compatriot. Even I could tell that much. Maybe the whole house was full of idiots.

"Thank you, sir," he answered gruffly. "All in the Highlan's service."

My eyes did a heavy roll. "Yes, yes, this man who threw one of your soldiers into a closet with a slit throat and stole his clothes did a great job finding me. However, I have no plans of getting caught tonight."

"Now wait just... How—" The one in the doorway seemed flabbergasted. Another set of hollering down the other end of the hallway, shortly followed by some screams and cries of maids, validating my claim. The second guard was clearly torn between leaving us alone and rushing to see what was causing the chaos down the hall.

"Lucky for me, I could use a dead body right now."

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The man's soulless body called out as clearly as the living people in front of me. I could feel the very moment he died from the brutal cut of the imposter's knife while I crept around outside, and now his corpse would make the perfect ally and distraction for my escape. Centering my mind amidst the chaos surrounding me—both men tromping across the floor, the maids' startled yells in the hall, more men clattering down from upper floors—came naturally after so many years of practice honing my skill. Letting my will be known, I flicked my hand in an elaborate flourish that ended with my palm facing upward, the dark shimmering purple of my magic pooled in its cup that I blew, scattering the magic like dust from my palm. The magic swelled rapidly, ruffling pages on the desk and blowing past the two men as it flew by to enter its new host.

A low groan permeated the walls. It was closely followed by more horrified screams and curses and several bodies scrambling down the hall behind the guard, shoving at each other in their panicked haste to escape the gruesome situation.

"What the hell..." The guard leaned back into the hall, his head craning back and to the left to see what everyone was running from, and gave his own hoarse yell shortly after. "Holy shit, it's a fucking undead!"

"We prefer the term 'revenant,' but yes, it is," I answered brightly to the question no one had asked. "And he's definitely hungry. They're particularly fond of livers, but—"

The inhuman snarls of the undead cut off the rest of my explanation, shortly followed by the howls of one of the guards that fell into its unforgiving clutches. I leaned a hip against the heavy desk and crossed my ankles and arms, the perfect pose of patience. "Do feel free to go take care of that. I'm not sure your men are faring so well out

there."

A rather wetcrack and several more high-pitched screams punctuated the severity of their issue. The guard at the door—who I assumed was the head guard, judging by the black cape draped from his shoulder plates—cursed darkly and gestured to me with a sharp jerk of his head. "Haul her off to the castle's dungeon until Highlan Pid can interrogate her." A cruel smirk twisted his thin lips. "He will enjoy that after all the trouble this one has caused."

He didn't give either of us a chance to respond, rushing off down the hallway toward the fevered screaming and obvious clanging of swords. The fake guard and I stared at each other for another silent moment before I gave a casual smile. "So, how do you plan to haul me off, Rocks-For-Brains? I'm sure even an imposter can figure out where the dungeons are. I'll give you a hint. They are usually belowground."

He was not amused. "Shut the hell up and get outta here."

"Aren't you worried about losing your job?"

"Are you always this fuckin' annoying?" He countered my question in a harsh tone. "Gods, I hope I never run into you again."

I rose from the desk, snatching up the bundle of papers to take along with me. It was hard to tell how important or relevant they were to me, but it would probably piss the Highlan Pid off immensely, and that was my goal. That's what he got for sending a brutish knight to kick down Gaion's door looking for me. "Lucky for you, I don't think we run in the same circles. Any who, may the gods smile fondly upon you!"

The man rolled his eyes at the traditional parting line. "You sound like my damn grandmama. Now get on—"

CRRRASH!

That one sounded like it took a wall with the impact. Highlan Pid would have some serious renovations on his hands come morning. "I'm gone, gone!" I answered in a singsong and moved to the window I had used previously to break into the study.

As much as I hoped to never see the sleazy guy again, the country of Respar was not as large as it seemed, and even less so in the royal seat of Gilamorst.

Chapter Two

Haron

The City of Scholars, ever dedicated to studying this world, gained a wealth of knowledge from the Julran refugees

who flooded our city. There was so much we did not know about spellcasters and their magic. While the fall of their

kingdom was tragic, I am sure we have much to learn from each other in the coming years.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 37 of Ber's First Reign

I should have waited to open those fucking letters. Or rather, I should have killed everyone in Pid's manse on principle alone. Starting with that sorry excuse for a father, Jinon Pid. Whether he knew what his daughter Trisne was involved in or not, he hardly played the part of a father who gave a shit about her. Even I knew more about the girl that he did, and I merely attended a few of her parties as a client's guest. She would always ask me questions about the north and the City of Scholars there,

with the intent of one day traveling to study as a research assistant in the Covenant Library. She was kind and soft-spoken, but held a fire in her eyes I admired. All her father seemed to care about, however, was her eligibility as a bride to the upcoming king. That was all the rage recently, in light of the late king's sudden death. Every eligible daughter of minor nobility was thrown into the candidate pool to marry Prince Irin before his father's body was sealed in the royal mausoleum.

It was obvious, with him looking for a necromancer, that he would be trying to track down someone's dead spirit. I just didn't expect it to be Trisne Pid's, according to these damning letters. Even worse, Prince Irin probably wouldn't bat an eye at her disappearance. Not unless someone shoved it right in his face. Now, an alley wall held a fist-sized crater from where I'd punched it in my rage. Additionally, I had to deal with bloody knuckles on top of the terrible knowledge now weighing on my conscience.

With a forceful thought and a burst of magic, the heavy door to The Hanging Cat flew inward, banging hard enough against the wall behind it for the doorknob to leave its mark. A group of regulars sitting to the left visibly startled and sent beer sloshing all over the tabletop, followed shortly by rowdy cursing and yelling for towels to mop up the mess.

“What the fuck, Haron—” one began, shoving his chair back with a snarl and brushing a hand down the front of his tunic, now soaked. His brows were drawn low over dark eyes as they rose to mine. With my black mood, I wholly welcomed the opportunity for a brawl to let out some of this pent-up rage. Whatever he saw in them had his head bending low, muttering something incoherent as he reached down for a stool that had toppled over.

“Haron?” Gaion called out from behind the bar. Concern tinted his otherwise gruff voice. “What’s wrong, girl? Hey, come over and talk—”

“Not now, Gaion.”

Just that short answer was forced through teeth clenched tight enough to crack them. I wove through the lively tables with single-minded focus on the staircase to the left of the bar. Gaion hardly had time to make it around by the time I hit the first step, taking them two at a time. Jessella must have caught him at the bottom; I could faintly hear her talk Gaion out of following me up, telling him I just need some space.

Bless her.

The room Gaion held for me felt like it absorbed my foul mood, shadows coming to life under my unchecked magic and creeping up the white plastered walls, slowly choking the everflame lamps mounted on them. It had been years since this side of my magic had reared its head, and I had half a mind to just let it loose on this wretched, tainted city. Let the bastards who thought they were above consequences see what it was like dealing with a horde of revenants. Hell, I may even let Trisne have a go at her despicable father. The thought was enticing.

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The only equalizer in this world was death. And they would all learn that lesson if it was the last thing I did in this life.

The letters I stole from Jinon Pid's study were not at all what I hoped to find. At the same time, I was likely one of the few people in this hellhole of a city who would give a shit about their contents. Just thinking about it made my hair thrash in the air from unbridled magic slipping through my grip. The walls creaked ominously in their attempt to contain the pressure growing inside the room from my brief lack of control, spiderweb cracks breaking and spreading across the plaster, and whispers of the dead grew louder in response to the bloodthirst. Wild magic gulped down my emotions like the sweetest goldtine—its hungry draw taking the edge off my more violent emotions and using them to turn more corporeal, becoming angry whips of darkness lashing out at the furniture and gouging the ceiling. Its greedy pull on my lifeforce was enough to drag me back from the brink of a full rampage, and I seized the distraction to steady myself.

Falling too far into madness wouldn't do me or poor Trisne any favors.

There was incriminating evidence written in those letters. Blackmail against Highlan Pid regarding his only daughter. Letters that implied the writer knew Jinon, and his intent to marry Trisne off to the prince. The sender had obviously used a fake name, but their messages were plain enough, even without decoding. From what I gathered, Trisne had been assaulted at a social function she had organized just over a month ago. Several times. And whoever was involved thought to rub it in her father's face in the form of blackmail and an arranged marriage. Just the thought of it had my blood flash to boiling all over again.

Pid did not fulfill the blackmail, it seemed, which ended in his only daughter's death. A daughter I assumed he had wanted me to find.

The most recent letter from the despicable human-shaped garbage was dated ten days ago, when the rumors of her disappearance started to circulate in the lower streets of Gilamorst. That was shortly after Trisne's documented disappearance from court gatherings she had agreed to attend. Pid's antagonist threw all caution away with encoding it, leaving his message bare and plain for anyone to see.

My stomach churned at the implications. If he wasn't hiding, the worst possible outcome had already come to pass.

Highlan Pid,

If you are not amicable to my offer of marriage, given Trisne's unfortunate circumstances, I will be forced to take more drastic measures. Measures that ensure she will be unable to marry anyone else. Come find your crest in the graveyard, Highlan Pid.

F

I tossed the stack of threats violently on the small desk, sending the letters scattering in all directions and falling to the floor on either side. My right hand lifted to bite the thumbnail almost to a bloody nub, gears grinding in my mind in its attempt to pick apart the mystery. The author obviously knew Jinon Pid well. At least, well enough to know his daughter was on the cusp of marriageable age to prey upon. And the fact Pid kept these letters bundled inside a weakly warded drawer instead of burning them was evidence enough he failed to take their words seriously.

Jinon knew his daughter was dead. He either wanted to reveal her secrets or bury them deeper than her grave. And I intended to find out which was true.

Us necromancers had a less-than-savory reputation, but not for entirely unfounded reasons. No one thought having their loved one resurrected from the dead was particularly natural. Half the country of Respar was brainwashed to think the souls of the resurrected would haunt their families for the rest of their lives. The number of times someone had come to me in the dead of night, hidden by darkness to ask for my services, was so numerous I switched my working schedule to accommodate. It had nothing to do with ‘working better necromancy magic at night’ and everything to do with the unfounded fear of being seen employing a necromancer. Nonetheless, it was a necessary evil in some cases. Most of those cases involved unresolved mysteries linked to hidden wealth or illegitimate children, with the occasional suspected murder to break the monotony of family feuds. Typically, I avoided raising the dead without the explicit consent of the closest family member—maybe the one idea both myself and the guild agreed on—but this time I was immensely tempted to break my own policy in the name of vengeance.

Just like anything else the populace at large didn’t understand, there was a considerable amount of superstition behind this profession. And none of those misconceptions have been squashed by the royal family of Respar or the Gilamorst Necromancy Guild. It was almost as if they wanted the world to think finding the truth from the dead was forbidden. How convenient for them.

The most common practice to keep a body from being resurrected was ensuring it was burned to ash. What most did not realize was that human bones were highly tolerant of heat, so unless a family could afford a pyromancer to vaporize everything, reanimation of a skeleton was still possible. And as long as some part of the body was recoverable, it could call back the soul. People in the more rural areas of the country believed that planting haronhock and weeping jurlans, named for the country of necromancy’s origin, would protect the corpse from necromantic spells. While the lacy white petals of haronhock mixed with the vibrant blue teardrop blooms of weeping jurlans made for a beautiful gravesite, they were only as effective as the thorny brambles they created in keeping the dead in their grave.

I stood over one of those graves now. A nondescript, plain headstone with the Pid family crest etched roughly onto the back of it and nothing else. Bars of an iron cage encasing the grave was barely covered by the freshly-disturbed dark soil. None of the typical accoutrements, like coins or mourning cakes, were laid at the head of the deceased. Those were more old superstitious beliefs, meant to help the soul bargain for safe travels with the goddess Wira through the gates of Genma, the realm of the Old Gods. Old as those practices were, it was still common to leave some kind of offering at the grave regardless of beliefs.

If I didn't know better, I'd say whoever made this grave was being intentionally disrespectful. Someone less knowledgeable would assume the condition of it was due to superstition or ignorance. To a trained necromancer, this was an obvious attempt of a person uneducated in the art at deterring necromantic spells. However, fresh graves have a particular... aura about them. The feel of disturbed magic of the earthmingled with the residual energy of a soul, leaving behind an earthy tinge to the air mixed with old blood and the indescribable flavor of death that coated my tongue with every breath. Hence the secondary function of such fragrant flowers, to try and mask that distinct scent from a necromancer. That smell of death was what drew me to the back of the old cemetery, past the neat rows of more recent burials and into the wilder part, where graves sat forgotten and overgrown with wild haronhock.

"What kind of secrets are you keeping?" I whispered to the chilled air, puffs of white breath drifting from the spaces between the deep blue scarf wrapped around the lower half of my face. "Or rather, who is trying to silence you?"

Low murmurs from the guards walking the perimeter of the Gilamorst Cemetery signaled my time to leave. Not that it was extremely challenging to squeeze through the iron fence surrounding the grounds, or blend with the shadows to creep my way around to the main road, but nevertheless I did not want to be rewarded for my efforts with a raised alarm from the dopey guards.

I reached out to pick a dainty haronhock bloom from the tangled bushes, its white petals seeming to glow in the dark. One of the thorns hiding in its bushes nicked me on my pointer finger knuckle, taking its payment in blood. I lifted my hand for inspection and watched the wound well up until the blackened-red blood flowed over, dripping back onto the grave of a woman whose life was cut too short.

“As a memento of my visit, Lady Trisne. Whoever put you here will pay with their life, I swear it.”

Chapter Three

Haron

Magic, it seems, is a zero-sum system. Nothing can come from nothing.

There is always a cost.

Spells cost power and materials, and neither of those are limitless.

Thus is the natural order of the world.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 37 of Ber's First Reign

Nothing spoke of the disparaging difference between male and female necromancers more than the required monthly tithe demanded from either gender. Or, more notably, the lack of tithes entirely from men just because they were—and I quote from the Gilamorst Necromancy Guild handbook—"...more suited for the practice of necromancy, and therefore less of a liability to the guild in terms of support and resources requested." Firstly, the entire notion of gender playing into magical proficiency was a grossly outdated ideology. If the guilds would pull their collective

heads from their asses, they would realize the lack of women practitioners had less to do with innate talent, and more to do with the greater demand of women growing families in the wake of several devastating wars in the last century.

The War of the Wilds was hardly twenty years ago, and Respar still licked its wounds cut deep by the Hollows tribes of the north trying to reclaim their borders. And ten years before that was the self-inflicted war among Respar's own citizens, when a group of nobles tried to overthrow the ruling Gailish family. It took a lot to repopulate one whole country from the aftereffects of war. Respar only survived off the backs of women not being called to the front lines, and therefore available to rear the next generation. Julra, and what was formerly Golath, were not as fortunate with their female survivors.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:12 am

Ironically, with most of their husbands dead and the pitiful penance paid out under the stingy rule of the late King Henton, women were driven to hone their own magical talents in what became the very lucrative market of spellcasting, again left with a void due to most practitioners being called to the front lines in every war. Respar was but an infant as far as countries were concerned—it had formed just over a hundred years ago from the debris of Golath and Julra tearing themselves apart in the Frigid War—but it made up for its infancy with a fair share of resilience inherited from the Julran refugees who fled south from the war. While some Julrans chose to stay in the City of Scholars, most journeyed further south and joined the hunter-gatherer tribes they found to create the city of Gilamorst. The tribesmen were eager to learn of magic practices and social structure the Julrans brought with them, and together created the blended country of Respar that spanned the southern third of Erewen's diamond-shaped land.

An unfortunate carryover of the more archaic tribal mindset had been the unfounded belief that women were seen as less than their male counterparts. Regardless of the amount of wars that dwindled their population, Resparian men held firm to their values that women could not be reliable spellcasters, effectively shunning them from a majority of professions managed by guilds dedicated to the six major branches of magic. The ruling Gailish family did little to correct the outdated viewpoint, surely realizing it helped keep their patriarchal rule if half the society was repressed by the other. King Henton and his father, King Olsten, had been the worst perpetrators. They actively passed laws to suppress female spellcasters and discouraged guilds from allowing them to join, under the guise of concern for their mental wellbeing under the strain of manipulating wild magic.

The fact the Gilamorst Necromancy Guild relied on my particular skillset was a

constant thorn in their feet. I was the most reliable necromancer known in Respar for being able to communicate clearly with the dead. Therefore, I made it a point to dig in just that extra bit by paying my tithe in person whenever I was in the city. Of course, there was an option to request a carrier from the guild to meet me and pass the money along—a service I'd only used a handful of times in my five years of membership—but it was immensely satisfying to watch the treasurer squirm when I met in person to turn in the rather exorbitant amount I owed them. Unless I knew I would be gone for months at a time, I would make the guild wait until I was damn good and ready to pay. Otherwise, the guildmaster had every right to put a bounty on my head to collect their money elsewhere, something I'm sure the old guildmaster Nebold was foaming at the mouth to be able to enact at my first wrong step.

The building was everything one would imagine when thinking of a guild for necromancers. Soaring arches reached up to top the four-storied building constructed with dark stone, complete with flying buttresses connecting the lower roofing up to the top of the fourth floor and narrow dark stained-glass windows meant to block the curious eye from outside. Ominous ribbed pillars as wide around as the oldest trees in Ber's Forest lined the front of the hall, bracketing the archways, holding up the roof upon which stood grotesque sculptures of various night dwellers of the Old Religion. No one had seen those creatures in over one hundred years, simultaneously with the fall of the Julran empire and stout practitioners of the Old Gods, but they still lived on in cautionary tales to children warned to come home after dark.

Even the long stone staircase leading up to the massive dark wood door reinforced with iron filigree that doubled to keep from being cut down screamed standoffish. It was ostentatious and over-bearing architecture at its finest. Definitely the opposite of subtle. Like, how many phallic spires did one guildhall need? The place could be repurposed as a fortress.

And the most offensive piece of this guild? A horribly inaccurate and effeminate statue of Wira placed squarely at the base of the guild's staircase for all to see.

Honestly, I would be doing the goddess a favor by taking a war hammer to it. How it was possible to take the only warrior goddess and turn her into this benevolent, peaceful-looking entity with billowing skirts and folded hands baffled my mind. I hoped the artist got whatever was coming to him, portraying the Goddess of Death and Darkness like this.

I took a wide berth around the statue just in case the goddess herself finally decided to deal with it.

The scuff of my boots against the stone broke the choking silence that loomed around the guild. Even on a main thoroughfare in the bustling city, casual traffic avoided walking in front of the guild as if it was cursed. Just another obvious perception of society and their natural aversion regarding necromancers. Or maybe it was the hideous statue of Wira. We were not exactly the most popular or even well-received magic practitioners. Guild halls for the other practices—broadly split into light, dark, then by elements such as fire, earth, water, and air based on their patron gods—were bustling with life and almost always hosting client meetings from the public who visit to ask for aid. Really, it felt more like I was visiting a dead relative in the family crypt.

Two hooded figures stood on either side of the massive door as I finally crested the last step. I knew that they knew I was coming in with purpose, but neither moved from their spot nor even offered to open the door for me.

"Make way, boys. I'd hate for you to get hit with some basic courtesy." My snark could not be contained, nor could my stride be slowed by the likes of these snobs. I planted my right foot on the door as soon as I was close enough to reach, and that finally got a reaction from one of the silent guards.

"Get your foot off—"

His gruff command was cut off by the blast of wind propelled from the bottom of my boot, knocking them both straight onto their asses as the heavy door flew open to slam noisily against the wall. The clattering of stone hitting the floor echoed through the hall's cavernous entrance, announcing my presence.

"Just leave the door open, I won't be long," I threw over my shoulder and continued on my merry way down the long carpet runner leading to the branching hallways further inside the guild.

Along either side of the grand foyer, the walls were lined with larger-than-life paintings, full body portraits of every notable contributor to the study of necromancy. Most of them were larger than life in more ways than one. I was pretty sure Nebold the Great over there didn't stand much taller than the desk he was placed beside in the painting. Nor was he carrying the considerable... package bulging from the front of his ceremonial robes. The most entertaining, though, was the artist's portrayal of the first documented necromancer, Prince Morrette Hilj of the Royal Julran Family. The Father of Necromancy, according to the gold nameplate etched with the subject and artist's names.

"Prince?" I scoffed. "They still haven't changed the nameplate, huh? No respect for Julran titles, these people."

Their portrait stood in a place of honor, bracketed by everflame wall sconces on either side and set in a very lavish, very tasteless gilded gold frame. Like whoever had made that decorative decision wanted to draw attention to the guild's wealth and dominance. They might as well have just mounted an oversized dick on the wall beneath the portrait.

I stepped up to the painting and craned my head back far enough to take it all in. How the artist even knew what Morrette looked like was beyond me. Considering they lived over a hundred years ago and this guild had only been established in the last

seventy-or-so years, the portrait was more of a generic representation of someone with Julran heritage. Blue-black hair, dark eyes, almost-translucent pale skin, and overall delicate features were common traits of ancestors to Julranrefugees still living in Respar. The Princept—not a prince, as I had repeatedly told Guildmaster Nebold—had a mysterious look in their eyes, like they were staring straight into the viewer's soul.

"Looking good, friend." I gave a mock salute to the esteemed 'Father of Necromancy' and with a chuckle to myself, turned to make my way through the main hall to meet the treasurer.

Other guild members wandered the main hall, but they all gave me a wide berth as I walked across to one of the four branching hallways. Gaunt, pale faces stared out from black hoods like they had been brought to life to wander the guild. I was the only one dressed in traveling clothes, a simple brown tunic tucked into black leather pants with my worn riding boots and a light cloak. I was also the only necromancer who actually traveled to meet clients. Everyone else expected clients to come to the guild to request services.

It was likely the reason I made triple their monthly earnings, until I was dragged back in to pay my tithes.

Tithes were classified as ten percent of the month's earnings. Mine counted in the thousands of drummons every single month, enough to put a hearty down payment on a reasonably sized family home or fund a stupid misogynistic guild so they could brag about their successes in a monthly report to the royal advisor. Nebold Briton, the current Gilamorst guildmaster going on fifty-odd years of leadership, had no qualms in voicing his displeasure at my membership in the guild. The only reason he couldn't vault my ass off the highest parapet of the hall was the bold fact I was the most reliable and successful necromancer, despite not following his archaic and backward ways of teaching the art, and I passed all his stupid tests when I approached the guild

five years ago.

I was the embodiment of everything against his teachings, proving just how useless and silly his blabbering was. He believed those who practiced magic associated with the dead should look the part, dressing in drab mourning colors and starving themselves nearly to death, so one foot was already set in the grave. And here I was, full of vitality and willful motivation, setting my own rates far more fair than those he established for the members and actually following through with my services. Honestly, someone needed to throw him off the throne of lies he'd built in the once-prestigious guild hall. It wasn't going to be me, so I didn't really bother with fighting him. As tumultuous as our personal relationship was, we had an understanding—Nebold left me alone, and I brought in my tithes as required.

Regardless, I tried my best to avoid running into the decrepit guildmaster when I could help it. Not that I wasn't good for a brawl, but I didn't want to draw any more attention to myself than I already sat under with his watchful eye. All it took was one fabricated report to the royal advisor overseeing the trade guilds, and I would be put under an investigation I couldn't afford.

Unfortunately, luck was not on my side today.

"Haron, are we in a rush today?" My hand was set on the cool iron knob of the guild treasurer's office, and I could hear him rustling papers at his desk just on the other side. Nebold's shuffling steps with slipper-clad feet, combined with the light thud of his staff hitting the black marble floor, had my shoulders hitching up in irritation.

Slowly, with a fake smile I only saved for cretins like Nebold, I turned to the left where he was hobbling down the broad hallway. He wasn't alone, walking alongside a taller blonde man until they both stopped at my side. His guest was richly dressed, with a stiff blue tunic cut to flatter his broad chest and narrow waist over a pair of white pants paired with shining black boots that reached his knees. A black overcoat

clung tightly to his shoulders, the right breast adorned with medals denoting his status as minor Resparian nobility. Thick looping chains draped from his neck, and even with his hands pulled behind his back I could imagine every finger adorned with rings. The man tilted his head slightly and his gaze skimmed down my stiff body.

Something about that look made my stomach churn. Or maybe it was the man in question. Not that I was unused to lecherous looks, especially in a country that treated women like commodities, but there was just something... off about him. Something that brushed along my skin like the slimy slither of a poisonous snake, making me stiffen in apprehension until the feeling passed. I couldn't even tell what kind of practitioner he was. Anyone who used magic had a faint, hazy aura that clung to them, and even the ones who didn't would have some tinge of it from exposure. Magic was hard to escape in Respar. But with this man, there was no trace of magic at all. It almost felt like he sucked in whatever residual magic that would normally cling to a person.

His dull brown eyes finally managed to find their way back to my face, and a slow smile crept onto his full lips.

"Not at all, Guildmaster." I kept my tone cordial, despite keeping a crushing grip on the knob. "I know the treasurer's time is valuable, so I make my appointments short. And I see you're busy with your own meeting, so I'll just be on my—"

"Introduce me," the man demanded, turning to Nebold and completely ignoring the rest of my words. His voice was low, but not as deep as I'd imagined. And his tone brooked no argument.

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Nebold crumbled, the sniveling rat that he was. "Of course! This is Haron Val Toric, one of our more..." His mouth twisted like he bit into something sour. Nebold's shifty gaze flickered to my own, obviously rooting around for some mild word to describe me. I crossed my arms and leaned on a hip, trying to keep my face smooth to not betray the immense satisfaction of watching him flounder. "Successful necromancers, despite her short term as a member. Haron, this is Highlan Gennel Rhen of the Guild of Finance."

Gennel's lips curled even more. His eyes bored into mine, even as he reached out to pull a hand from where I had it tucked beneath the opposite elbow. I was wrong about his hands. He wore pristine white gloves tucked into the sleeves of his coat, ones that looked like they had never seen a speck of dirt since they were made. The urge to use that hand to smack the smile off his face was very tempting, watching him pull it up to his face as he bowed only a little. "The pleasure is mine."

As soon as his cool lips touched my skin, every part of me balked in sick revulsion. My arm felt like it had been doused in freezing cold water, numbing up to the elbow and sending shivers beyond it that shook me hard enough to make my teeth chatter. And the twisting, nauseous roll in my stomach threatened to send my breakfast back up onto the smug Highlan. Some flicker of emotion lit his eyes briefly, like a recognition of how that simple touch affected me, and his smirk turned sly when he finally let my hand go. I immediately wanted to thrust that hand in a fire and purge it of his touch.

It was... unnatural. Every part of me screamed to get away from this man. I had the impression Gennel knew exactly how he made me feel, and wanted to see some kind of reaction from it. Instead of jerking my hand away to rub against my pants like I

wanted, I slowly pulled it back to where it had been crossed in front of my chest. He wouldn't get the satisfaction of a rise out of me.

Nebold, oblivious to my disgust, turned back to Gennel. "Highlan Rhen, a pleasure as always in speaking with you. I look forward to presenting my proposal for the first expedition at the Guild of Finance."

Gennel bowed his head slightly, but never took his eyes off me. "Of course. An honor meeting you as well, Lady Val Toric." Finally he let my hand slip from his, and I gritted my teeth as subtly as I could manage before bowing back.

I didn't trust myself with any more than that. If I unlocked my jaw now there was no telling what would come out of my mouth. Without another word or look to the guildmaster, Gennel turned for the guild's exit and made his way down the hall. Nebold stared at his back all the way down until he turned the corner before setting a supremely pissed-off look on me.

"You didn't come visit me, despite my many requests to have a meeting at your next tithing."

My restraint had dried up. I rolled my eyes and reached for the treasurer's door again, determined to get out of here as fast as humanly possible. "I'm sure Ybin would have had me hauled off to your study as soon as I deposited my tithes. And it seemed like you were busy, regardless."

"Come with me," he commanded in a voice not accustomed to disobedience. "I already informed Ybin you would be late to submit your tithes."

He was enjoying the power play. He knew that I knew there was no escaping this encounter without causing a scene, since he had sent out several official requests while I was traveling or fulfilling requests. For some reason, Nebold was under the

impression I had to drop everything and come running back to Gilamorst whenever he beckoned.

Fucking wily bastard. "Of course you did."

Nebold waited until I came alongside him. His nod of approval made me feel like he was training a hunting dog instead of interacting with a human. With the stiff shuffle of a man not used to much walking, we slowly made our way back down the hall into the depths of the guild.

"Tell me of your recent work, Haron." Again with the commanding, never a casual question with him. "With how you ignored all my previous summons, I assumed you were involved with some secretive or dangerous jobs."

I kept my hands clasped at the small of my back and my gait slow and even. "There were a few cases with some prominent figures, but nothing outside of what I could handle. Mostly settling family disputes or finding dead bodies in Ber's Forest. You know, the usual."

There was no fucking way I was telling him about Trisne Pid. For all I knew, Nebold was the one who buried her himself and tried to make it look like a novice's attempt at hiding a dead body. He was shrouded in so many corrupt and shady dealings with the Highlans it would not shock me in the least if he'd rid them of unwanted children before. Everyone knew Jinon had no love for his daughter, even less so when she publicly announced her withdrawal as a bridal candidate for the almighty Prince Irin Gailish. I doubted Nebold was the one who wrote the letters, but I would not be at all surprised if he helped Jinon hide Trisne's death.

Finally, Nebold huffed a sigh. "I see. Well, we can discuss more about my expectations in my study."

He was referring, of course, to the looming double doors we had stopped at. They were quite gaudy and just as falsely foreboding as Nebold, carved with intricate designs of skeletons clad in armor and bearing weapons, as if rallying for war. There were rows upon rows of them, all standing at attention in a militaristic formation, with the Wiran eclipse of the double moons, Desper and Gilana, rising high above them in the sky. When the larger red moon Desper moved in front of its blue counterpart, it was believed to give immeasurable strength from the Dark Goddess herself for necromantic castings. However, one has not been seen since the fall of the Julran empire. Some thought it was the goddess Wira punishing humans for letting her beloved kingdom of followers fall to war.

So of course, Nebold thought it proper to carve her sacred eclipse into his fucking door. From how the skeletal army stood, it was like they guarded the room beyond the doors from whoever deemed themselves worthy enough to visit Nebold in his private study.

“Please, come in.” Nebold gestured to the door. One of his assistants stationed beside them scurried forward to grip the knobs and push them open with a small huff of effort. “Can I offer you a drink?”

So you can poison me with it?

“I’m fine, thank you.” I followed him inside the study, trying not to roll my eyes at how overdone the decorations were. Skulls mounted on the wall, a complete skeleton in the corner hanging limply from fine wires attached to the ceiling as if it were floating in the air. “Happy to see not much has changed here since I last visited.”

The barbed compliment flew right over Nebold’s head as he shuffled around the monstrosity he called a desk. It was offensive to my minimalistic tendencies. “Thank you, Haron. I pride myself on consistency. Change is for the fickle-minded.”

“I beg to differ, but I don’t think you brought me in to debate philosophies.”

“No, I did not.” He settled into the wide wing-backed chair with the groan of a feeble old man. “At least I have no plans to debate my point. This is more of an intervention.”

The pause he added was obviously meant to intimidate. Leaning back in the chair, fingers laced together and the picture of authority, Nebold leveled a stern glare at me across the room. “Are you going to sit down?” It was a question, but not one he expected me to answer.

“Nope,” I popped the ‘p.’ “I’m not planning to stay long, so I’m fine by the door.”

One of his greyed eyebrows rose in question. “Oh? What makes you think you have the power to determine when you are allowed to leave?”

I rocked back onto my heels and slid my hands into the tight pockets of my leather pants. This little back-and-forth was nothing if not amusing. He didn’t seem to feel the same, his expressive brows now lowering slowly over his eyes. “Firstly, trust me when I say I have more than enough power to leave if I want to. Secondly, I have not done anything outside the guild’s constitution to warrant detention.”

“And you think ignoring your master isn’t a punishable offense?”

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I couldn't hold back the waves of laughter that exploded from my chest. It was almost enough to bend me in half from how ridiculous Nebold sounded. By the time I recovered and wiped the tears to clear my eyes, he was hovering over his desk with his palms firmly planted on its polished black surface. Nebold looked an inch away from murder.

"Sorry, sorry," I fanned myself, trying to compose myself. "The fact you think you are my master is the best joke I've heard from you yet! Tell me, in what way does a guild master elevate themselves to that kind of status? Because the last time I checked, my profession has nothing to do with my personal life. And what proof do you have that I was ignoring your missives? Did you think maybe I was, oh I don't know, working? A message a day for two moon phases is a bit much, don't you think? That's fourteen pieces of paper, wasted! Think of all the diary entries you could have used that paper for! I'm sure you'd need them to feed the ever-hungry appetite of your ego."

"You come when you are summoned, no matter the assignment you are on." It was impressive how many shades of burgundy Nebold's face had managed to turn in the short time of our conversation. If I didn't hate every fiber of his measly existence, I'd be concerned about his health. "You are a member of the Necromancy Guild, and as such are duty-bound to obey me—"

"I'm going to stop you there, Nebold."

He sputtered at the lack of formality, using his given name.

"I chose to join this guild because I happen to do most of my business in this city, and

was under the assumption I would get some mutual benefits from bringing my tithes in exchange for referrals. If we are being blunt with each other, I am more likely to get jobs by not mentioning any association with your twisted little union over here. So spare me the ‘bow down and obey’ shit you press on all your little followers and leave me be, or I will take my tithe elsewhere.”

The study felt like it had become a vacuum with how the air stilled at my open threat. Even the sawing breaths from Nebold’s lips cut short. Maybe he thought he was being wily, building his magic in silence for some kind of nasty spell, but he grossly underestimated how underwhelming his talent was.

For men like him, strength only came in the form of blind loyalty from the weak-minded.

“Keep your curse to yourself, Nebold. It will not end well for you to cast it my way.” I reached for the knob of the right door and yanked it open effortlessly. One of his lackeys stumbled in as if he was eavesdropping. “And stay out of my way in the future, if you don’t want to see just how well-studied I am.”

My foot barely touched the hallway floor when a strong grip caught my wrist. A snarl, wholly inhuman even to my ears, ripped from my mouth as I twisted it around in an effort of self-defense. “Don’t touch me again, if you want to keep that hand.”

There was a commotion in the study—mostly Nebold barking orders to his followers to make sure I didn’t leave—that I left behind as I sprinted down the hall. Other guild members loitered in the grand hall, exclaiming as they were pushed aside by the growing crowd trying to catch me. My hand just barely rested on the main entrance door when I was yanked back again.

This time, I whirled around and snatched the man’s arm at the wrist. “I told you not to touch me.”

Chapter Four

Irin

Today, a staff of the Clifftombs was found among the Julran refugees who gave an interesting insight to the royal

family. Of King Vin and Queen Mila Hilj, there were two children, Maura and Morrette. For royals with more than one

child, a choice is given as to who will succeed the previous ruler. Maura assumed the role of successor as future

queen and Morrette took the role of Princept, a gender-neutral position dedicated to leading the Julran military and

training in the art of war.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 37 of Ber's First Reign

The royal carriage rolled to a stop in front of the only guild hall I could safely say I'd never visited, even when touring the city with my father in my youth. The sheer oppressive force of the monolithic Gilamorst Necromancy Guild seemed to push away anyone walking along the bustling street running in front of it, the normal passersby giving the dark stone steps a wide berth without even sparing them a glance. Avoiding anything associated with death was an instinctive choice, apparently.

Staring up at the pointed spires topping the hall, the heavy steps of my personal guard passed by to stop at the carriage door. Beolf, brows drawn low in a disapproving

scowl, made sure I could see the full effect with his helmet held under the opposite elbow. The livid pink scar over his left temple looked even deeper as the skin pulled around it. "Are you sure you don't want me to come in with you?"

I scoffed and brushed his concern away as I exited the cabin, Behar jumping after me with his tongue lolling out happily. He didn't care that we were going to a literal house of death. He was just happy to be outside the palace walls. The scruffy black rinhound wove through the street traffic with no hesitation and took the guild's staircase two at a time. He stopped halfway up before turning to sit on the step, large ears perked up and head tilted to the side as if asking, 'what are you waiting for?'

"I can hold my own, Beolf. If I were you, I'd be more worried about the possible reduction of your wages to make up for the horrendous cost of submitting a request to the necromancers."

"Greedy bunch, the lot of them," Beolf harrumphed. "Necromancy is unnatural. I'm just waiting for the day these practitioners get stricken down by an angry god." He kept running his hand along his jaw where a beard used to be, clearly uncomfortable without it. His last assignment in Highlan Pid's house required him to be clean shaven, so he was not as noticeable as my personal guard. "Speaking of, that is the worst version of Wira I have ever laid eyes on. Did the sculptor even know who he was making?"

Every guild in Gilamorst had a statue of their patron Old God—Joles for the pyromancers, Hira the hydromancers, her twin sister Wira for the necromancers, Ber at the terramancers', Zintar at the aeromancers', and Colleter for the healers' guild. Most of them were larger than life, replicas of the statues at the Eternal Pantheon in the City of Scholars. They usually carried their weapon of choice or a tome representing their wisdom, as for Colleter. Wira was the only one who carried both sword and tome, as the Goddess of the Night and Keeper of the Dead.

This depiction of a goddess who was usually portrayed as a fierce warrior was... sadly lacking. Instead of the armor Wira was believed to don, this version chiseled in a light grey stone wore a diaphanous dress with neither a tome nor sword in hand. Her hands were folded demurely in front of her waist, and a look that could only be described as doting was carved into her face. If not for the only accurate piece, the delicate tiara mounted with a red stone to represent a Wiran ruby, there would be nothing about this statue that represented Wira at all. Even her hair was loose and cascading down instead of tied in a long braid as it normally was.

I wasn't a stout devotee of the Old Gods, beyond respecting their authority over magic beyond my comprehension, but this statue of the goddess made me balk at the femininity of it all. The way she looked down at the guild's visitors with that peaceful, loving expression made my skin crawl.

"It's definitely an... interesting take," I hedged. "Maybe the artist was trying to make her look more approachable."

Beolf snorted. "I guess. Still looks unnatural seeing her look so... nice."

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My head swung to the left and right out of habit to avoid traffic, even with the flow now blocked by the rest of my guard to maintain a safe distance from the rest of the populace. Ever since the death of my father, may the gods torture his wretched soul, security has been heightened to painful degrees by his lingering advisors until my official coronation.

I was the only male heir alive. If I couldn't take the crown, the entire royal family would shift to a cousin on Father's side. Pila Monato, while known for her beautiful golden hair, blue eyes, and skill with the lute—but hardly known for being my mother—was nothing more than a valued mistress to Father even after my birth. No one in her family was even remotely considered to be in line to the throne, despite their distant connection to old Julran nobles.

"Wait here," I commanded, stopping at the bottom of the stairs beside the statue. "I will not be too long."

Beolf huffed again. He was the only person alive who could talk back and not get immediately dismissed for impudence. We grew up together, him serving as my childhood friend-turned-general, so he earned that right after so many years of putting up with my schemes. This latest scheme had tested and proven his loyalty the most of all. "Fine. But only because those bony fuckers creep me out. Then again, so does this." He jabbed a thumb over at the Wira imposter.

The closest soldier taking place beside Beolf guffawed loudly. "That's your weakness, General Zirch? Some starved old men with gnarled hands? They're hardly—"

"Can you please move? I already told the guildmaster to shove off!" The demanding

voice rang strong and husky from the top of the stairs. A voice that was most definitely feminine, despite the rough language. And the unladylike growl that followed. "I said, get out of my fucking way! Get your hands off me before I turn them into shriveled jerky!" Another man responded in a lower tone, with boots scuffling on the stone as if a skirmish had broken out from whatever he'd said.

Behar's ears swiveled toward the noise, and he sprinted the rest of the way up the stairs. I barely needed to glance at Beolf to come with me as we followed him up the staircase to assist. What we walked up on was about as far from what I expected as possible.

A black-robed man howled in agony and gripped his right wrist, holding a gnarled hand in front of his face where it trembled violently. It looked like it had been pulled from a hundred-year-old crypt, all dried and contorted with pieces of desiccated skin flaking off. Another man held onto a tall, rather muscular woman for just a moment before ripping his hands off as if they had caught fire. Her vibrant red-gold hair—half of it pulled from a fat braid draped over a shoulder reaching just past her chest—was disheveled enough to appear she had been manhandled in a brutal manner before we crested the top step. Now, a vicious snarl pulled her lips back from white teeth and a wild light lit in her eyes. If I hadn't hear her speak before, I would have thought a feral animal the guild held trapped in their hall had broken loose. Behar remained at the top step, hackles raised and a low, rumbling growl rattling from his chest.

My mouth opened to call out and insert myself into the fight, when the woman whipped around almost too fast to track and planted a brutal sidekick straight to the center of her captor's chest. His body flew back like a discarded doll to slam against the heavy doors behind them and set him wheezing from the blow. It was at that moment I realized she was not the one who needed saving. My arm shot out to hold Beolf back by his bicep, more wary than before of getting involved in this fight. The guild's door creaked open behind the limp body of the necromancer, slumped against it, and let him fall the rest of the way to the floor as more robed men barreled

through.

"Haron Val Toric, by the guild's authority, I command you to halt!" There was hardly any conviction behind the shouted order. Whoever it was sounded utterly terrified, actually. "We just want to talk like civil adults! Come back inside before you make a fool of yourself."

A harsh laugh barked from her twisted lips. "That's fresh coming from you, Nebold. I know exactly where you put people who don't fall in your line. Now, I recommend you let me leave before you have more than just me to deal with!" Slowly, with the obvious experience of a blooded fighter, the wild woman backed from the door and closer to the stairs where we hovered. She didn't think we were as much of a threat, it seemed. She didn't spare us more than a cursory glare.

"Is assistance needed?" Beolf chose to interject, his voice low and authoritative. His hand not held back by my grip moved to rest on the sword pommel at his hip. "What seems to be the issue here?"

The woman whipped around, mouth open as if to chew him out as well, when a shocked expression crossed her face. "You?" There was enough context in that single word to tell she recognized Beolf from somewhere, now that he had her full attention. "By the gods, I thought I got rid of—"

Her tirade was interrupted by two more cloaked guild members walking cautiously through the double doors, followed by one clearly stooped with old age. The latter clung to an intricately carved staff polished to a high shine. Topping the black wood was a large Wiran ruby, one of the largest I've seen in person, so dark a red it was almost black. I considered myself well-versed in magic enough to know that ruby was from Julra, commonly used for strong castings of dark magic. How someone like Nebold got his hands on it was a mystery I mentally marked to review later.

"These greedy bastards want more than a tithe," the woman, Haron, offered up before anyone else could. "Lest this old skeleton forget who the fuck he's trying to hold hostage! You know what? I'd like to see you try to fight off the hordes of undead from your own catacombs! They scream the screams of vengeance for being kept down there! Let's go, Nebold!" She lunged at the old man, hands outstretched as if to wrap them around his neck, when I lunged thoughtlessly to catch her by an arm.

Once, when I was a boy exploring the gardens with Beolf, I had caught a snake whose width was larger than my lanky wrist as it slithered through the bushes. It had been a venomous banded topal, and I remember to this day the feeling of holding it behind the jaw as the powerful snake thrashed in my hand. Knowing it could bite and potentially kill me if I made one wrong move was the most exhilarating and terrifying thing I'd ever done... until now.

Holding Haron by her arm as she thrashed and spat profanities, after seeing what she'd already done to the other guild members, now topped that memory. Despite the alarms blaring in my mind to let go, the immediate fascination with her took hold of rational thought and promptly kicked it off a ledge.

"Let's all take a step back and calm down." I tried to pull Haron a little further from her intended target, not that she responded much to my effort. I barely cleared her shoulders, and judging from her strong build we may even be close to the same weight. It was unlikely I stood a chance to physically move her, if she refused to come along. The second tug was more convincing, drawing her closer to my side. Her eyes were still locked on the old man's hunched form, hostility tensing her body as if she would pounce at any moment. This close, I was able to see her eyes were mismatched colors, the left a sparkling blue and the other so dark it appeared black. Unusual, to say the least. "Guildmaster Nebold, I presume? Did this woman break any laws?"

Suspiciously, the guildmaster seemed hesitant to answer. His wrinkled face crinkled

even further as he scowled at the woman. "Not exactly. Or perhaps I should say, not yet. But this one is a feral woman set on a path of destruction, should we allow—"

"Allow?" she screeched incredulously. "You allow me to what? Exist? Just because I don't have a dick doesn't mean I lack the same gods-given talent as any other necromancer in this fucking crypt! I buy my right to practice in this profession every damn month, and you want to lock me in a cell because I refuse to accept you as my 'master'?" The way her voice pitched lower made it seem like those were his words. "Well, you can take my final tithe and shove it right up your pretentious ass! Consider our ties cut, you fucking bone chewer!"

Her arm was ripped from my grasp as she snarled and muttered to herself, spinning on a booted heel and descending the stairs in long, purposeful strides. Two of the other guild members that came with Nebold made as if to chase her, but a warning bark from Behar startled them enough to hesitate. He had moved his body between them and her retreating form, hackles raised and lips pulled back slightly to expose long fangs as he began to growl. The sudden protective gesture from him was surprising, to say the least. He didn't usually warm to people that quickly, much less defend their backs.

The guildmaster sighed and leaned heavily on his staff, the picture of rejection. "Let Haron go. She will come back on her own when she needs the guild again."

"I wouldn't hold my breath on that," Beolf snarked, too quiet for Nebold to hear. "Even the wrath of gods is challenged by a woman scorned. Especially that harpy."

I chose to let the comment go unrebuked. "Guildmaster, could we keep our scheduled meeting?" My question was slightly pointed, very disenchanted with the woman Haron's treatment from him. "I have pressing royal business to discuss and would rather not take any more of your time than necessary."

Honestly, I didn't give a rat's ass about the old man's time—beyond the fact it could be cut short abruptly from the aged look of him—but in my experience, appearing considerate of whoever I planned to manipulate was the first step to lowering their guard. The decrepit guildmaster was well known for his greed and stinginess, and I knew he saw me as a fat sack of drummons.

And I was anxious to retreat to my study again, to research who this fiery Haron Val Toric woman was.

"Of course, of course! I would never turn away a member of the royal family. My deepest condolences for the loss of the late king, he was a great man and a great ruler."

Nebold's slimy sympathies almost made my gorge rise. Only years of schooling my face for the public view kept me from showing the pure, unbridled hate and disgust at the words he simpered. He was one of the few guildmasters who didn't show up weekly at Father's court, trying to get into his good graces for favors and business. The Gilamorst Necromancy Guild was strong enough to stand on its own, and I had little to no leverage against them. As much as I hated to acknowledge, I was on the back foot in the upcoming negotiations. And my request was... an odd one, to say the least.

"Please, come join me in the study." Nebold beckoned with a gnarled hand. "We will have all the privacy we need there. I have to say, I was both startled and pleased when your assistant came calling for an appointment." The man turned to shuffle back into the hall, his slipper-clad feet silent against the lush pile of the blood red carpet runner beneath our feet. His two attendants each held a hand out on either side of Nebold's teetering walk, as if ready to steady him at the first sign of falling.

Was he close to death himself?

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The practitioner on our right moved to open a door from the main foyer to a receiving room, moving ahead into the room and toward a side table laden with a kettle, small fire plate, and what appeared to be several canisters of tea. Behar trotted along at my side, nails clicking against the black stone floor not covered by carpet, ears still perked, and tail held high as he took in the environment.

"I sincerely apologize for the unpleasant display you had to witness," Nebold began. He moved to sit in one of the overstuffed chairs by the unlit fireplace and waved his hand to indicate I take the one opposite him. My head nodded absently, not taking my eyes from the one preparing our drinks. "Haron is... she is quite passionate about her career, one could say."

"It appeared she was under the assumption you were trying to keep her here." I kept my voice even and settled into my chair. Immediately, my hand moved to rest on Behar's head as he sat alert to my right. "Is this a common practice for your guild? I would imagine she would be upset if you were trying to detain her unfairly."

Nebold slouched in his chair, sinking into the cushion so far it seemed about to eat his small body whole. He delayed answering by carefully leaning the staff against a small table at his elbow. "It was all a complete misunderstanding. Miss Haron came to deliver her monthly tithe to our treasurer, and he mentioned the possibility of her taking up a residency in the Gilamorst branch in exchange for a lower monthly amount. We have had... difficulties finding a necromancer with her particular skillset and felt it would benefit both parties to offer her a room here to more readily serve clients. Despite her explosive and undesirable personality, Haron Val Toric is an immensely talented practitioner."

Lie. Lie. Lie.

The lies poured from his mouth as easily as the breath from his lungs. Behar growled again, sensing my growing discomfort listening to those deceptive words. It was easier to take the burden now, drawing on our shared strength to maintain my composure.

"'Undesirable?' 'Explosive?' Those seem like harsh words to describe a lady," I commented. It felt like I took ages to respond.

The man pouring our tea barked a short laugh, quickly trying and failing to mask it as a cough. Nebold shot the back of his hooded head a particularly dark glare. "Pardon the insolence of my understudy. He had an... unfortunate encounter with Haron previously, and has thus developed some bitter emotions he has yet to overcome."

"I could imagine," I mused, thinking back to the woman I could barely hold back from lunging back into the fight. The banded topal of a woman with fiery hair and interesting eyes. "But aside from the unruly guild member, I am here on other business related to Father's death."

Nebold waved his hand as if shooing away the unrelated subject. "Yes, yes. Please, do elaborate on the details. We will do our best to accommodate your request, for the right fee, of course."

Lie.

"I would like to have a necromancer on retainage at the palace until after my coronation. I have reason to believe several staffmembers who recently took their own lives were in fact involved in Father's death, some of whom we have not yet found their bodies. We need someone who can locate the missing bodies as well as resurrect them."

Now we traded lies. My stomach churned uncomfortably at the volley, but I had no intention of ever openly speaking of Father's true demise. At least, not if I wanted to keep my own head. Patricide was met with a cruel fate in Respar.

"So, someone who can speak to souls, instead of simply bringing the bodies to life?" Nebold rubbed his hand across the short white beard covering his thin jawline, his brow even more wrinkled with consternation. "That could be... a difficult request to fulfill."

"How so? Isn't that the whole purpose of your spellcasting?" My ignorance of this particular sect of magic was obvious, but at this point, I was invested in getting the guild's help to cover my tracks, willingly or otherwise.

"There is a difference between bringing a corpse to life, and being able to bind the soul that once inhabited that body to this world long enough to gather information from them. The latter is a much smaller and more rare study of our practice, lost to us since the fall of the Julran kingdom. In fact, only one documented necromancer has that particular skill set since the founder of necromancy himself, Prince Morrette Hilj."

The news injected some hope into my bleak outlook. "Excellent news! Where can I find this practitioner?"

This time, Nebold visibly winced. "You already have. She just stormed away."

Well, fuck. "Is there any way to locate Haron without upsetting her even more?"

"We can try to summon her back to the guild." He shrugged, not seeming very confident in his own plan. "She is quite the restless sort, so it's difficult to point you in a certain direction to find her. Be prepared to pay a hefty sum for her services. Haron Val Toric knows she is worth her weight in drummons. Usually she helps with

family matters, raising dead relatives of her clients to provide closure on unresolved issues or helping to find lost bodies. And of course, the request will need to be routed through the guild to ensure all laws are properly followed and regulations are maintained."

More lies poured from his wrinkled mouth. It made my stomach churn uneasily with the assault to my senses. It was hard to pin down what Nebold was lying about, but regardless of that I had no intention of giving him more access to my plans than I already had. It seemed someone from the guild will be watching to see if I make contact with Haron myself, to avoid being cut out of their comfortable position as the middleman. I was less than unconcerned with their intentions to stay inserted in this business relationship. There were other ways to lure Haron out than through a stuffy guild request.

I moved to rise from the chair, leaving Nebold to scramble up after me as I moved to exit the study with Behar at my heels. "Feel free to send the invite to Haron and relay my interest to employ her long-term. I will be waiting for your reply by the end of the month." That gave him a little over two moon phases to show me just how much sway he had over the woman I planned to steal from under the guild's thumb.

"Certainly, Your Highness."

The first time I realized the extent of my gift, I was a young child. Beolf and I had been playing rough in the garden, and he had accidentally broken the thin arm off a small statue with his wooden sword. When the head gardener came around to scold us, I told her I was the one who broke it. I knew she wouldn't be as harsh on the only Gailish prince as she would a lower-born noble.

What I didn't know was that lie would send me into body-twisting convulsions. They only stopped when I catered to the overwhelming urge to hurt myself bodily, resulting in a broken thumb I had dislocated with my own hand. The poor woman

was so traumatized she ran through the castle halls crying hysterically for the healer. I remember turning to Beolf, heart pounding in my chest and tears streaming down my cheeks as I gripped my wrist tight from the pain, to see his horrified and disbelieving look as he stared down at my thumb hanging loose from its socket.

He mentioned later, when we were older and I explained the compulsions of my inherited ability, that his loyalty to me became ironclad. Having a prince take what could have been a violent beating off his shoulders had opened Beolf's eyes.

It took many years of trial and error to come to terms with what I later learned was called truthsayer magic. It was an exceedingly rare gift. The scholars at the Covenant Library only had eight documented cases since its establishment almost three hundred years ago, although they were sure it was more likely people didn't come forth with the knowledge they possessed this power. On the surface, it seemed beneficial, being able to sense a truth from a lie. For every other documented case, the holders described some kind of physical discomfort, like ringing ears or throbbing headaches. One even claimed to have red-tinted vision when he heard a lie. My case was similar to a woman interviewed seventy years ago—almost halfway through the recent Fourth Reign of Ber, so at least forty years after the fall of Julra—who mentioned nausea brought on by both spoken and written lies. To the scholars' best knowledge, it was the intent of the words that triggered the truthsayer side effects. Whether the words were heard or not had varied degrees of importance. From the scholars' observations, it appeared that the people with stronger reactions were also better able to determine lies. Maybe it had to do with the natural balance of magic, having to give and take in equal parts.

None of those cases mentioned self-harm if they spoke a lie themselves, though. That honor seemed to have only been bestowed onto me. With that terrible price, though, came the most sensitive truthsayer ability the scholars had ever studied. So much so I spent a whole summer in the City of Scholars when I was fourteen, going through several tests to see just how far I could be pushed before the compulsive self-harm

occurred. While it was a miserable experience, the scholars' recommendation to study an alternative magic was what drove me to hone other talents in terramancy. I had to find something to ground myself to, some element that was easily accessible and mostly stable to set my focus. My love of the outdoors had a small part to play in that choice, one that the terramancers' guildmaster Chaol Loren still firmly believed was another sign of my calling to the practice.

Chaol showed me the widely unknown and unused terramancy of beastwalking. Imbuing the user's body with animalistic qualities to enhance their strength and senses, it was mostly avoided for a good reason. It required a sacrifice of sorts. A pact was made with an animal, and a piece of the spellcaster's soul was exchanged with that animal to become a familiar. Mine was Behar, then a rinhound pup I found on a hunt with my father, who I had smuggled back to the guild to complete the beastwalking ritual. He has been my ever-present companion ever since. His life had been extended to match mine, and likewise my life was tied to his. I relied on his heightened senses as much as my own, and I didn't miss the fact his hackles only fell flat when we hit the bottom step of the necromancers' guild hall. And that piece of magic I gave him in return took from the truthsayer ability, dulling it to a more manageable gift instead of an overbearing curse.

From the more pronounced reactions I felt while meeting with the guildmaster, I suspected there was something more foul than the lies Nebold spewed coming from that guild.

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“I don’t trust that wily old bastard,” Beolf huffed, arms crossed in the seat across from me in the royal carriage. He thumped the back twice to signal the driver to take us back to the palace. “There was something off about that whole hall actually. I’m hardly a practitioner and even I could feel some nasty magic at play in there.”

Something that the woman Haron said nagged at me. “I wonder what the woman yelling at Nebold meant about the dead wanting vengeance. What could he possibly be doing to make dead people angry?” My eyes drifted down to where my hand rested on Behar’s head, rubbing my thumb between his eyebrows as he closed his eyes in contentment. I could feel my own brows furrow in annoyance at the puzzling riddle.

It all felt connected. Nebold was doing some kind of questionable spellcasting, and Haron seemed to be in the way of whatever he was trying to accomplish with it.

Chapter Five

Irin

There were accounts that Princept Morrette Hilj was a skilled practitioner of necromancy. The known founder of it, in

fact. From what the Julran refugees spoke, there was a massive spell casted, powerful enough to raise a small army

of the dead to fight the Golathians, likely meant to buy them enough time to flee unnoticed. If magic is a zero-sum

and has a cost for every action...What was the cost of that spellcasting, I wonder?

-*"The Tragic History of Julra,"* by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 37 of Ber's First Reign

A timid knock at the study door drew my eyes to it. It was not one of my guards. They practically beat the door down when making their presence known. And it wasn't one of the other nobles clambering for an audience. Those were only accepted during court hours, and it was well past dinner. This was my sacred time to hide alone in my study and read. My time to avoid all the chaos flying around and pecking holes in my life like ravenous carrion birds. My problems would hardly wait for me to die before they took their piece of me.

"Enter," I called across the room.

My hand drifted to the half-full tumbler of goldtine spirits, chilled to the perfect temperature with a large chunk of ice and kept cool in the crystal glass. Its deceptive, mellow sweetness had brought me low many times—the morning hangovers were almost too high a price for the temporary escape from reality it offered—yet it was still my comfort drink to soothe the headaches brought on by stress. The bulky ring on my right pointer finger clinked loudly against it as I lifted the drink, the ruby-eyed dragon making up the Gailish royal crest staring right at me from its coiled pose. I narrowed my eyes at it as I took a healthy gulp of the liquor, savoring the burn down my throat.

The familiar blonde curls of Ittman Juril—my late father's most trusted advisor—poked through the crack he'd made in the door. "Good evening, Your Highness. I am glad to find you here. Do you have a few moments to spare?"

Not really.

"Certainly. Please come in, Highlan Juril. Would you like some goldtine?" I lifted the decanter sitting at my elbow in offering before refilling my own glass. He waved off the gesture and stepped fully into the dim study, pushing the door shut quietly behind him.

"No, thank you. My wife would have a fit if she smelled it on my breath." His head shook in a 'what can you do' manner. "I would never openly bemoan her stern behavior, but I wish she would lighten up every once in a while. She strives to be proper at all times."

Lie.

I raised my glass to him and took another sip. "Well, cheers to not having a stern wife."

"Yet," he added pointedly. The fake smile on his face was meant to indicate a joke, but it was more of a threat. Nonetheless, I forced a laugh and took another sip to keep the annoyance from my face.

Ittman's shoulders slowly loosened with the casual demeanor I showed for his benefit.

"In all earnest, Your Highness, I hope that status changes soon. The council is definitely... more on edge, with you being the only viable heir and none of your own to solidify the Gailish line. We would be distraught to see the crown pass to some distant cousin in the Monato family."

Lie.

The bitter, ashy taste in my mouth at the presence of a spoken lie was too strong to be washed away, even by the poignant and distinctive flavor of goldtine. An unfortunate side effect of my inherent magic, and a flavor I became accustomed to from a young

age growing up in the royal court. I tried to keep the twist of my lips hidden by the press of my glass against them, but something must have given my disgust away. Ittman began to twitch and fidget with the hem of his stiff vest.

"Which brings me to why I sought you out tonight," Ittman began, moving slowly to sit opposite of the elaborately carved monstrosity of a desk my father had selected for this study. He meant it to be intimidated and imposing, with each leg sporting the intricate etching of a monstrous, scaly virilan, its mouth gaping and fangs bared at whoever had the misfortune of facing it. The depiction was to the craftsman's own taste—fortunately, the creatures were only shown in ancient texts from the First Reign of Ber, long before the land of Erewen split into three countries. "We, as in the Council of Advisors, spent a considerable amount of effort putting together the folio of possible candidates to select as a wife following your coronation. I'm sure you remember from the meeting just after the funeral. And I wanted to make you aware of my sister being nominated as one to include in said folio..."

Ah, so we get to the crux of the matter now.

Of all the carrion birds circling me, the Council was by far the worst. I wasn't particularly mourning my father—I was, after all, the one who'd poisoned him myself—but the audacity to schedule a meeting within the moon phase after his body was put to rest and present this ridiculous list of bridal candidates was baffling to me. I'd pushed off every meeting for the past four months or so since his death, but it was becoming more and more difficult to avoid having to be in the same room as the scavengers again.

"I assure you she will not be considered to marry."

Whatever Ittman was blubbering on about petered to a halt. The quick flare of offense lit his face, creasing his brow and darkening his otherwise light blue eyes. "Pardon? Can I be so bold to ask why Ishma would not make a suitable bride in your eyes?"

“I’m wondering why you would think she is a good candidate. In an unbiased view, of course. I would expect that much from my advisor.”

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Ittman's face was turning an alarming shade of purple. "She... Ishma is a well-bred lady of the court, sir! Our family had been in service to the crown for generations, dating back to the establishment of Respar! What more could you possibly ask for?" The question seemed to take him by surprise, as if he hadn't meant to say it aloud. He fidgeted with his tight collar and cleared his throat several times. "Apologies, sir. It is not my place to assume what you desire in a wife."

"On that, you're absolutely right." I pointed a finger in his direction, the others wrapped around my tumbler as I lifted it for another drink. "And all the reasons you listed previously have no bearing on my choice of a wife. I need someone to rule at my side, not a breeding mare."

I could see his jaw working even from where I sat five paces away. "Of course," he said, although it was more of a choked agreement. "I just want what is best for my sister."

At that I barked a laugh. It held no mirth. "And you think that is being a queen? I'm shocked someone as close to the throne as yourself has such a romantic view of the position."

"Pardon?"

"Let me be clear." I placed the glass down gently and laced my fingers to rest on the desk. "I don't want or need a soft lady of the court as my wife and queen. I have seen people get chewed up and spat out, even by the likes of you and the other old men my father called advisors." Ittman balked and his mouth opened as if to argue, but I barreled right over him. "I would be even more leery of choosing any relative of

yours—which, let's admit, is about half the noble women in Gilamorst—because I know you'd be at their ear directing their every move. So no, I don't want someone you can easily manipulate, nor do I want anyone elsehand-picked by your peers. If that was what you were here to petition me about, I hope I made my stance clear. And honestly, I would prefer you spend more time trying to investigate who killed my father than finding someone to birth my successor.”

“I... But sir... We—” Ittman was well and truly flustered now. I loved watching him squirm under the harsh light I cast on his intentions.

"I have reason to believe you had a hand in my father's unfortunate demise."

My accusation, blunt and straight to the heart of the conversation, made the man's face drain completely of its caramel coloring. His eyes widened to a comical proportion, as if at any moment they would be shot straight from his skull. "I-I c-could never, P-Prince Irin!" He struggled to get the words out in his flustered state. "Your f-father was as c-close to a father of my own as I could have imagined!

"You were also the last to see the king in his dining chambers. So, could you tell me why you needed an audience with His Majesty at such a late hour?"

His lips pursed, as if trying to keep himself from revealing whatever it was he tried to keep inside. "That really is not your business, Your Highness. It was a sensitive matter to begin with."

"Was the matter regarding me?"

"I really must insist on confidentiality. Especially since we have more pressing matters—"

I slammed my hand on the desk enough to make pens and letter openers skitter across

the top. It was immensely satisfying to see him jump out of his chair like a scared rabbit. "This is a pressing matter for me. How you answer could determine whether your head stays attached to your neck."

Ittman was struck speechless. His mouth opened and closed several times like a fish gasping for air out of water. I could feel the corners of my lips curl up slightly, and despite the very satisfying feeling of being the predator in the room, tried to keep my gloating hidden behind another sip of my drink. The crystal tumbler was turning out to be the most useful prop in this room.

"Take this back to the council," I continued, leaning back far enough to prop up my shined black books on the corner of the desk, right in the crook of a virilan's neck craned to face our visitor. "Let them know I already have a bridal candidate in mind and will not need assistance with planning the coronation or wedding. I also want a written report of your exact conversation with my father the night before he was found dead. You will have a moon phase to put it right here." I tapped on the desktop with a finger. "That's fair, isn't it?"

It was just enough of the truth to not cause me to inflict self-harm. If my research proved fruitful, I would have more of an idea about a possible bride. One with fiery red hair.

No one knew of my ability to separate lies from truths. It was a subtle skill, one not easily sensed by the temples or guildmasters when I was presented to them as an adolescent on the cusp of maturity. To say my father was disappointed at my apparent lack of magic was an understatement. To the world, I just seemed to be an incredibly astute and observant person. The sensory responses I experienced when presented with falsities were a huge part of how I'd managed to place myself in such a strategic advantage after Father's death.

"That's... fair." Ittman finally managed to find his voice. He rose on obviously

shaking legs and gave a shallow bow. Insulting to anyone else of the royal family, but I couldn't care less as long as he got out of the study quicker. "Thank you for your time, Your Highness. I will deliver your request to the council and report back within seven days."

"Excellent," I murmured to his retreating back, watching him scamper away and slam the door needlessly hard behind himself. "Run along to your master and lead me right to him."

There were many cogs in movement now, and one wrong move would have me crushed between the gears in this machine of betrayal. Or I could take down this manipulation machine entirely, and from its rubble build the country I believe Respar could be without all these broken cogs.

"What had Ittman running off like his ass was on fire?"

Beolf slouched in the chair opposite mine by the fireplace, swirling a glass of goldtine. His trimmed black beard—just barely growing in since he shaved for his infiltration of Pid's guards—covered most of his lower face, but the twitch of his lips into an amused smirk was obvious enough.

"You saw him?"

He barked a hearty laugh. "Hardly! He sprinted out of this room so fast his feet hardly had traction against the floor. It reminded me of the time I let Behar out on a frozen lake for the first time! He even tripped going around the corner toward the grand hall."

"I wish I would have seen that in person."

"Me too. But I have something else that needs your attention, beyond Juril acting like

you lit him up.”

I lifted my own tumbler, encouraging him to continue.

“Guildmaster Nebold has threatened to issue a warrant for that woman we ran into. Haron Val Toric? He says she is a danger to society. In his statement, he claims she is too dangerous to employ, so he will not be able to facilitate a contract for her employment as part of your staff.”

It hadn't even been one whole moon phase, only six days after my visit to the guild to request her on retainage. Either Nebold didn't do a good job presenting the offer, or he didn't even try. I placed my bets on the latter. It was interesting he only threatened, and didn't follow through with the warrant.

“How so?”

Beolf leaned to the right, resting his head on a fist and watching the goldtine swirl in his glass. “Apparently, she is an abomination to the natural order of magic, in his words. She is extremely powerful for a female practitioner, and Nebold is afraid she is out of control. I suppose what we witnessed yesterday was the tail end of a conversation regarding her staying in line with the guild’s rules.”

A smirk crept onto my face thinking about the scene from yesterday. “She did seem quite fierce. Not something you normally see in a Resparian woman.”

“For good reason,” he snorted. “You weren’t there to see her bring back a fucking corpse and maul people with it! I still have nightmares about that night in Pid’s study. He’s a slimy bastard, but I may be agreeing with him on this one. Haron could be a real threat if she’s as strong as he says. Is that someone you really want to have lurking in the halls?”

A twinge of guilt stabbed my stomach. I hadn’t disclosed the real reason I wanted Haron under contract. He was under the same assumption as everyone else that I wished to employ her to investigate the suicides of Father’s closest attendants. He didn’t know they were not, in fact, suicides at all.

I wanted Haron under my control to prevent her from outing my secrets. I couldn’t afford to have anyone who was able to resurrect Father to confess how he actually died, if he was even able to speak on it. Honestly, I had no clue how speaking to spirits worked, or how much they were able to divulge. What I do know is that, if anyone were able to find out, it would be the renowned lady necromancer. There

were plenty of those who practiced necromancy who faked what Haron could do, but they were not a concern. Keeping my finger on Haron's pulse would ensure no one else used her against me.

“Does he have proof of his claim? I doubt a necromancer who can raise one body would be much of a challenge against a cavalry if it came to that.”

Beolf's eyes shot over to me, narrowing until the chocolate color was almost entirely hidden. “Why does it seem like you're protecting this woman? You know as well as I do female spellcasters are unstable. They don't have the constitution to deal with wild magic like men do. They're too emotional and erratic to control such an unruly force. And a female necromancer, on top of that? Women are meant to create life, not reanimate the dead. They belong in the healing sectors, if that. Your grandfather was right to set up the decree to regulate women in magic professions. It has probably saved countless lives, stripping magic from those who couldn't be brought to heel.”

“Haron didn't strike me as unstable. Just extremely pissed off.”

Beolf looked at me as if I'd grown two extra heads. “Were we looking at the same woman? She was absolutely feral! Did you see that man's hand? It will never work the same!”

“The healer was able to restore it just fine. And she did tell him to take his hands off her.”

A long, awkward silence fell between us. “I'm wondering if she hadn't put some kind of hex on you, Irin. Since when are you such a staunch supporter of female spellcasters? They're fucking insane if you ask me.”

I snickered. “I'll be sure to tell the next healer you said that, as she's busy reattaching your arm from whatever battle you drag yourself out of during patrol.”

Beolf scoffed but had no remark to say beyond another swig of goldtine.

“In response to Nebold’s request, let him know we will be looking into Haron’s background. He will need to send substantial proof of her instability before we take any kind of disciplinary action against her. And I will not accept no for an answer in regard to drawing up her contract. I have a great need for a necromancer of her skill.”

“As you wish.”

Chapter Six

Haron

For being a royal of the Hilj family, not much is known about the Princept Morrette. Beyond studying as a skilled

spellcaster and general of the army, the details of Morrette’s life remain unclear. Even the gender is unknown to us,

as the Julran society did not place emphasis on this aspect of their lives. Among the refugees living in the City of

Scholars, some do not identify as strictly male or female in regards to gender roles we, as scholars, are familiar with.

I am curious to learn more about their social structure in this regard.

"The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 37 of Ber's First Reign

It was rare—exceedingly rare, unless they were looking for money—that the

necromancer's guild sought me out. Females in the profession of death were not looked upon fondly, typically seen as inferior to their male counterparts due to their gods-given task of bringing forth new life. Some bullshit about "clashing energies and the feminine influence" that most necromancer guilds believe were logical reasons to block us from practicing. And since I was an agent of chaos and thrived in anarchy, I thoroughly enjoyed snatching jobs out from under those crotchety old wretches' noses and undercutting their mandated rates. The only reason they didn't kill me themselves was solely for my income value. Given the trap I thwarted the last time I went to deliver my tithe, I was sure that wily old Nebold would abandon secrecy entirely and put a bounty on my head if he couldn't lure me back with a formal invitation. I've had more than my fair share of experience with men like him.

Nebold couldn't stand the thought of someone of my skill not being under his control, doubly so as a woman. And I knew he was doing some shady shit with the dead buried beneath the guild in its catacombs. Every time I even came close to the guild hall, it burned my senses like curdled milk in my nose. There was some rancid magic being practiced under his lackluster supervision.

Needless to say, the Gilamorst Necromancy Guild was hardly who I expected to leave a request to meet so soon after my last visit, in the form of a very heavily warded scroll Gaion had sitting on the bar for me. One of the Highlan had a family member lost in Ber's Forest a day's ride from Gilamorst, and he had asked for my help in finding his body. The Highlan, Fint Von Zalon had nearly lost his lunch at the sight of his ravaged nephew's body. It didn't take a resurrection to tell he had been killed by a rinhound and left for the other forest scavengers. Their family were members of the Gilamorst Terramancy Guild, so I was appointed to coordinate the body's retrieval and burial services with Guildmaster Chaol Woren. If Nebold ever found out I didn't come to him for burial services, I'm certain steam would come out of his hairy ears.

Just the visual made a smile curl my lips, making Gaion's brows rise in question as

he poured me a tankard of ale. I sat heavily in the chair across from him, dropping my heavy sack at my feet with a sigh. The Hanging Cat was not technically open until lunchtime, so the tavern was empty of its usual bustling crowd and chaotic noise. However, Gaion knew not to criticize my choice of a drink this early in the morning, bless him.

"Some little pipsqueak of a boy dropped this off just after high noon yesterday." Gaion nodded his head to the scroll. "Seems very urgent. The boy was prepared to go hunt you down in the city until I finally convinced him you'd be back sometime today, and I'd get it to ya. Could have used some more meat on his bones, that one. He looked like a walking skeleton hisself."

Besides the dark purple ribbon edged with black and sealed with the wax stamp of the guild—a large bird in flight holding a sprig of frilly haronhock in its beak—the sharpzipof magic was just as much of a tell the scroll came from some particularly powerful spellcasters. The active magic made the tips of myfingers numb with its intensity as soon as it left Gaion's hand. It was taking my measure to see if I was the intended recipient.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:13 am

"Probably a new trainee," I mused. "The Gilamorst guild has a nasty ideology that they must maintain themselves as close to death as possible to cast the strongest necromancy."

"Is that true?"

We both looked down at my very fit, very voluptuous body—clad in a simple yet supple set of black leather riding pants and a plain sleeveless white tunic tucked into them, held up by a matching leather belt laden with my hip bags attached and a short sword in its sheath. The curves of my body were accentuated by muscles developed from regular, intensive use. Then, I looked up at Gaion with a raised brow. "Do I look like I starve myself within a breath of dying?"

A loud guffaw barked from Gaion's lips before twisting into a wry smile. "'Spose not. I've seen you eat a whole pig by yourself." He shook his head, as if remembering the night with disbelief, and went back to polishing the wooden bar with an old rag.

"I wouldn't mind another pig soon, old man," I replied, touching the scroll to my temple in a mock salute and leaving him to his busy work. "Otherwise, would you kindly send something up for lunch?"

"Sure, sure. Wouldn't want you to waste away."

"Thanks, pops. Feel free to send it with Jessella. I have a lot of appetites to quell today."

He huffed a sigh. "Jessella is out with another patron for the week, something about

some family gathering and a noble trying to dodge arranged marriages. Sounds like one of those sappy fantasies she reads."

"Let her live her dream. Life is too damn short to be stuck miserable." I tapped the stair railing with an open palm, making a loud thwack to accent my point. "And those sappy fantasies make for some great inspiration in bed, so I don't wanna hear it from you!"

Gaion huffed another laugh and waved his meaty hand around with the polishing cloth. "Yeah, yeah, get off with ye. I got work to do before opening and don't have time to argue with your stubborn ass." With that, he threw the cloth over his shoulder and lumbered through the swinging wooden door behind the bar leading into the kitchen. A waft of hearty beef stew carried on the air wafted by the doors rocking back and forth on their hinges, the smell making my mouth water.

"Go get some raunchy books or get laid, Gaion!" I yelled teasingly toward the kitchen. Titters of laughter from the two cooks—Hitala and Durit—grew louder with whatever Gaion growled back at the ladies.

The scroll, momentarily forgotten in my other hand, pulsed an angry heat as if it were about to catch fire. Those crotchety old necromancers hated being pushed to the side. "Fine, fine," I grumbled at it. Taking the stairs two at a time to the third floor, I pulled the key for mine from my hip satchel as I stepped up to the second door from the staircase on the left.

The lock's machinations clattered and clunked inside the door, spelled against picking or other nefarious means of breaking in, and swung open on smooth hinges despite its worn appearance. Even with my steady residence the last four years—at least, in the time Gaion knew me as Haron Val Toric—there was not much in the room that would indicate I lived there. No personal touches, nothing left in the chest at the foot of a fluffy, feather-stuffed twin bed, and nothing beyond a couple sets of loose white

shirts and practical leather pants. I never left my weapons or satchels, either out of habit or paranoia or some muddled combination of the two. When I first moved to the area five years ago, I was more of a wanderer camping between Gilamorst and the next northern town of Covenant Crossing. Maybe it was loneliness or boredom that drew me into the city, but my passing business became so regular here Gaion had offered the room.

He may have been joking at the time; it was hard to tell with him. But I took him up on it regardless, and he hadn't been able to shake me since.

Moving more on rote memory, I unbuckled my belt and hung it on the corner of the bedpost, followed by the much larger leather-worked pack on my back to hang before rummaging around for my notebook and a charcoal pencil. The scroll continued to pulse its impatient heat as I sat at the small desk along the right wall by the matching light wood dresser.

"Let's see what made you stoop low enough to send someone after me," I muttered. "Are we demanding a payment of blood now?"

The red wax seal pulsed a bloody red, answering my question succinctly enough. Necromancers as a whole tended to demand their payments by more visceral means than gold and prayers. With the sharpened tip of the letter opener I kept in the desk drawer, I stabbed the meaty part of my palm and smeared a bloody streak across the magic seal to break it. The whole process was nothing more than routine. The injured hand barely even throbbed as I wrapped it with a spare handkerchief from my pocket.

A sizzling hiss of reactive magic soaked my offering into the wax and melted it away to puddle on either side of the scroll, repelled from it like rain dripping down oiled leather.

"Let's see what warranted a sealed scroll, I suppose."

Even speaking to no one but myself, alone in my bedroom with this fucking piece of paper, my enthusiasm left something to be desired. It was an active decision to not associate with the necromancer guild any more than I had to, and nothing killed my joy more than being dragged in, like I predicted this letter was about to do. My only comfort was the sheer discomfort it likely took for a necromancer—most likely a pretentious man—had to swallow his pride and pen this scroll to me, one of the very rare successful women in the field. Dragging this out wasn't going to make the situation any better.

Grasped firmly between the point and thumb of both hands, I snapped the scroll open and braced myself for the secondary verification spell.

My eyes barely managed to close in time to avoid being blinded by the vicious red light that flashed from the parchment's surface. Searing heat moved from the top of my forehead all the way to my chin, as if a burning gaze was methodically passing over my face. If I had any kind of impersonation spell active, it would have lit my head on fire and killed me in the most brutal fashion. I saw it happen to a thief once. It was not a pleasant experience for either of us before I plucked the scroll from his loose grip to read for myself. In my defense, he shouldn't have held me hostage while trying to impersonate me in the first place.

Rostered Member Haron Val Toric

You are hereby ordered to attend a summons request from the Royal Family of Respar, in the main guild hall located in the kingdom seat of Gilamorst. Failure to present yourself at this summons will result in the stripping of your guild membership and a bounty be placed on your head for punitive action.

Your presence is expected on the twenty-second day of the month of Berth at the fifth hour of the evening.

Signed,

High Necromancer Nebold Briton, Gilamorst Necromancy Guild

"Pretentious asshole, indeed," —was my initial response, noting today's date as the twenty-first day of Berth— "expecting me to drop everything and just come when called. I thought I made myself clear the last time that I parted ways with that fucking cryptcrawler."

At the very bottom of the scroll, beneath the High Necromancer's flourished and elaborate script of a signature, was a simple circle made of small runes. For those educated in the Old Language, they could read the directions to prick a finger to place their blood print in the center to confirm receipt of the important message. It was not an uncommon tool used for confidential letters. And it didn't really matter which finger was used, as long as the blood belonged to the recipient. The spell would zip on back to the sender and notify them of receipt and how far away the recipient is, yet another unfortunate method the guild will use to track my location.

That wouldn't stop me from being cheeky, though.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:13 am

The letter opener came out again, and I pricked the middle finger of my right hand as a final "fuck you" and pressed it with unnecessary pressure on the scroll until the blood leaked through the parchment. It didn't make a difference how much blood was offered to the spell, but I figured since the Gilamorst Necromancy Guild was not above breaking the backs of its more talented members to gain a profit, they wouldn't mind the extra contribution to their stupid scroll. Nebold must be beyond desperate to give the royal family some kind of measurable result to be reaching out to me for an audience. We hadn't clashed since my entrance ceremony to the guild five years ago. And I may have raised the entire mausoleum beneath the guild hall to prove a woman could be a skilled necromancer, after he made a back-handed comment about hoping the guild could help me achieve my dreams to be a passable necromancer. The thoughtless statement completely invalidated the rigorous practical and written examinations I passed to even set foot through the doors, much less several more rounds of interviews and presentations to validate my skills.

The spell activated, a pale green fire sprung from the rune circle and quickly spread across the parchment, twisting and changing form to that of a small, shadowy bird hovering in front of my face and leaving a small pile of ash behind. It hovered for a moment before turning to sail straight through the wall, as if responding to a call. I leaned back in the simple wooden chair until the front two feet lifted off the floor, holding one elbow in the palm of the other hand as I watched the small wound on my fingertip stitch itself back together and absorb ruby-red droplets back beneath my skin.

"Let's dance, Guildmaster."

For it being the first days of the Chilled season, the nights were hardly cool enough to

warrant a coat. Nonetheless, I donned a light one to avoid the strange side glances as I made my way down the cobbled roads to the Gilamorst Cemetery. Tucked under my arm was a vibrant bouquet of wiranblood flowers, completing the look of a mourner going to visit a loved one's burial site.

I was going to visit someone, just not in the traditional sense.

Trisne's unmarked grave was one of the furthest back from the main gate, like someone had tried to tuck her away out of sight. The Pid mausoleum was prominently placed in the front of the burial grounds for everyone to admire its intricate architecture, like every other noble family. Not many families, the rich included, could afford the amount of gold-cast decorations and stained-glass windows as that obnoxious creation. It sickened me to think of all the things those people wasted drummons on. It sickened me even more when I learned Jinon didn't even have Trisne listed on the plaque mounted to the front of the mausoleum, or any indication of her ever existing as part of the family.

Her plot remained untouched from my last visit. From how far back it was hidden in the burial grounds, that was not much of a surprise. The haronhock and weeping jurlans had taken over the entire area with their thorny vines, spreading unchecked to creep over nearby gravestones long left untended. Truly, it was a beautiful display of nature overtaking this little corner of a grim piece of land.

"Hello again, Lady Trisne." I bowed at the foot of her plot. "I hope you are amenable to helping me with terrorizing some entitled old men. What do you say?"

A light breeze teased the overgrown bushes, making it seem like they shuddered with excitement. I took that as a yes.

"Excellent."

Gently, I laid the wiranblood flowers at my feet. Against the dark soil they looked like their namesake, as if Wira herself had cut her wrist over this poor girl's grave. It was a moonless night—no sight of the double Wiran moons ideal for necromancy—so I had to bring along some tools of my trade to help with my ceremony. From my satchel I pulled a silver chalice, haronhock oil, dew collected over a moon phase, a simple dagger in a hardened leather sheath, and a red woven throw to lay everything out on.

Because of my... condition, the temperature of the ground as I knelt was almost negligible. Most temperatures, hot or cold, were difficult to feel. I sat back on my ankles and reached for the chalice and haronhock oil to begin the ritual. With my teeth I pulled the glove of my right hand off to drip oil along the inside walls of the heavy cup and spread it with my fingers. The analgesic properties set my fingertips tingling.

“Dark Goddess Wira,” my voice was heavy and low in the night. “I beseech you, please grant me your blessing.” I set the chalice down at the foot of Trisne's grave and lifted the dagger. The drag of its blade against the sheath as it was pulled out was the only sound that dared be heard. Everything else had fallen silent, like the goddess was walking among the tombstones. “Let me borrow your strength and temper it with your immeasurable wisdom. Let me borrow the body this soul once belonged to, and I will lend you my soul in return.”

The wicked-sharp blade barely touched my skin to split it open. Dark red blood dribbled slowly down my wrist to land in the anointed chalice. Every drop that touched the oiled metal sizzled as if feeding a fire, magic sparking in bursts of indigo and burgundy as the spell was fed. Runes of the Old Language lit along the outside of the chalice and cast a silvery glow across the dark soil and dead grass. I flexed my hand a few times to keep the sluggish blood pumping enough to give the spell its fill. It didn't take long, the spark fizzled out to signal it had received enough. I didn't bother with compressing the cut, it would stop bleeding on its own soon, and brought

over the dew in its thin bottle.

“Quench your thirst, Lady of the Dead. I welcome you to the mortal world.”

At the first touch of dew dripping into the chalice, a blast of air blew my hair back and threatened to topple me straight onto my ass. An unhinged grin pulled my lips back as wild magic poured through my veins, sending my blood to boiling and lighting me up from the inside. It was exhilarating, like riding a kisteral without a bridle or jumping from the tallest tower in Respar. It was partly terrifying and partly freeing, a feeling that would never get old no matter how many times I invoked Wira’s help.

The chalice emptied, blood sloshing around the sides as a small vortex formed in its center, like something was sucking the liquid down from the bottom. And in exchange, a surge of magic filled me like water breaking a dam, filling the bone-dry creek bed of my soul. I had to act quickly, though. Wira did not take kindly to necromancers who wasted her time.

I held my hand, still bloodied from the ritual, over the grave of the girl so horribly wronged. At first, the tremors were almost unnoticeable, barely shifting the loose soil lying atop her resting place. But soon the earth bowed up, bending the bars of the cage surrounding her coffin until the metal screamed and tore apart. A single hand, flesh barely clinging to the bone, punched up from the small mound and clawed at the surrounding ground to pull the rest out of the grave. Pale pink silk appeared next, stained with ichor and rotten flesh where it cinched tight at the wrist with tiny gold buttons. It was not the customary black of a burial shroud.

Trisne had been buried in whatever she was wearing at the last event she attended. Even that small detail filled me with a rage I almost choked on. I didn’t know her very well—we obviously didn’t run in the same noble circles—but I had been introduced to her by other clients and the times we did speak were pleasant. She had

been a passionate girl with a thirst for knowledge, and when she found out I was a necromancer, spent the rest of that evening pelting me with questions about the profession. Trisne had grand plans of moving to the City of Scholars to train under a researcher, with an interest in aeromancy.

She was such a bright flame, snuffed out much too soon. But I was determined to find the water that doused her. I rose to my feet and waited for the rest of her corpse to join me above ground.

It hadn't been long since she was buried, so she was still recognizable by the caramel ringlets once pulled up in an elegant hairstyle with a sprig of haronhock flowers pinned in, now dried up and crumbling onto her scalp. The light pink dress was absolutely destroyed, hanging in tatters from the waist down to expose her whole upper body and the horrible evidence of her death. Scattered among the discoloration of old bruises and the natural pooling of blood in a corpse, there were several strategic cuts over every major organ. Given that the whole torso was not cut open, it gave the impression each part was harvested while she was being kept unnaturally alive. Bits and pieces of this poor girl had been cut away, and she had likely suffered through every second of it until she was released from that torture when she died.

It was a violent death, but it was also deviously meticulous. I could imagine either a highly skilled necromancer like myself would have been able to sustain her like that... or a moderately skilled hydromancer forcing her blood to circulate under those horrendous conditions.

Trisne stood before me now, and all I could feel was rage.

It was no secret that women were seen as lesser than in Respar. The country was just over a hundred years old, it didn't have the benefit of centuries of knowledge like Julra or Golath. The City of Scholars to the north technically sat inside its borders, but it claimed immunity to the influence of the ruling family under the effort of

neutrality. When the land was only split by Julra and Golath, the City of Scholars was a space unto itself unbothered by the nomadic tribes that wandered the unclaimed land. The Covenant Library was probably the only self-sustained entity that employed equal parts men and women, rewarded for their prowess in research and document preservation instead of magic capabilities.

Trisne had shown an interest in being one of those library researchers. Once she realized her chances of marrying Prince Irin were slim, she was vocal in admitting her wish to leave for the Covenant Library. I had only met her on a few occasions, mostly events co-organized by the guilds to mingle with potential clients, but Trisne had struck me as a practical and sincere person. Whoever did this to her did it for their own selfish motives, not out of revenge or anger toward her.

“Lady Trisne,” I fought to keep my voice smooth, “who did this to you? Who killed you?”

At first, she just stood there still as the statues scattered through the burial grounds. There were no eyes to speak of. Only gaping, ragged holes remained in their place from being brutally ripped from her head. She had no way of showing recognition or confusion, and her mouth hung loose on her jaw from the deteriorating muscle showing through tattered skin. There was no brain activity to speak of—I relied on the imprint of her last moments of life and the barest minimum of nerve activity to loosen her body enough to move.

Finally, a low moan rattled from Trisne’s open mouth. It sounded mournful and lost, like she was about to cry. “H... He... She...” she began. The words were obviously hard to get out. “He... search...ing... tome...” The rest was garbled sounds and hacking as the rest of her response lodged in a collapsing throat.

Searching? Tome? The message didn’t make sense. I could perform an additional spell to try finding the whole answer, but from what organs had been taken from her

body, I gathered there was some kind of dark magic that was interfering with my own. Also, since her eyes had been gouged out, there was little chance she could give physical descriptions. The body was only able to tell what it could gather from the five senses. Since she didn't start with what they looked like, I doubted she actually saw her attackers before she was disfigured so horribly. Multiple people were involved in her capture, that much I was sure of.

"After you, my lady." Together we picked our way back through the still night, avoiding the most direct path through the tombstones in favor of the flat paved walkways for her shambling body. At the gate I cloaked us in a cloaking spell, and we left to carry out just a bit of the revenge owed to Trisne Pid.

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Trisne's corpse made for a rather convincing duplicate once I dressed her in some of my shabbier travel clothes and old boots I'd traded out for the new ones I wore now. A wide-brimmed felt hat pulled low across her brow solved any other issues of someone noticing the dupe from afar. And I perched myself on the furthest building's roof I could manage while keeping the body in sight, so the necromantic spell I cast would be the most effective to control her movements.

It wasn't a spell I particularly enjoyed using or wholly removing myself of guilt from. Considering my other option was to be captured and possibly tortured by Nebold and his cronies, this was the only way I could fulfill the most basic of the demands laid against me. I also wanted to measure Nebold's reaction to her resurrection. If he gave even the smallest indication of recognition or surprise at her appearance, I would have enough proof to pursue his involvement in her murder.

He could deliver his message to my double, and if he didn't piss me all the way off, I would keep my more violent tendencies to myself. Stewing in my momentary hatred of the guildmaster filled the last few moments of Trisne's slow walk as her body crossed the empty street. She had almost made it up the main stairs when the first snag in my plan came unraveled.

As soon as my double hit the top step, Trisne stuck in place like a bug caught in the spider's web. A faint red sheen washed over her, but it didn't seem like the two goons at the door were able to see that. It was the telltale sign of an activated ward.

I didn't suspect Nebold to be this wily. He had the guild warded against revenants entering from the outside. Curiosity had me leaning over the edge of the roof I was perched on, waiting in twisted anticipation to see what his next move would be. It

seemed we all watched in suspense, including the two guild members staring at the intruder, currently vibrating with a growing intensity.

In a last-ditch effort, I had the corpse drop the scroll held in her right hand with a flick of the wrist, with just enough force to roll it to the door. Both men jumped out of their skins and backed far away from the innocuous scroll.

“Oh, gather your balls,” I said through her mouth. The voice was distorted and raspy from being forced through a desiccated throat, but loud enough to reach the necromancers huddled against the doors like a couple of children. “I just came to deliver a response to the illustrious Nebold. Please make sure he gets this so he can promptly throw it in his fireplace.”

The guild’s doors slammed open, and Nebold hobbled out as fast as his crooked back and stiff legs would let him. He stumbled to a stop just beyond the threshold, eyes wide in his deeply wrinkled face as he took in the corpse suspended before him. But it wasn’t just shock that danced across his face.

He recognized Trisne. And he looked extremely pissed to see her stuck in his ward.

“Who brought you here?” he hissed. “Who would dare to send a revenant to the Necromancy Guild?”

“Let’s not play coy, Nebold.” He startled visibly hearing my voice come from Trisne’s mouth. “I was wondering if you knew anything about this young lady. Her father, Jinon Pid, came looking for me, and I figured you were the one who pointed him in my direction.”

Now Nebold’s thin body was violently shaking. He couldn’t take his eyes from the body caught in the ward. And he looked about two seconds from heart failure. “You insolent w—” He had to stop himself from finishing the insult, with all these

witnesses around. “What is wrong with your mind to think this was anything less than vagrant disrespect for poor Trisne’s body? Such tremendous talent is wasted on the likes of you—”

He sputtered to a stop, almost sounded like he gagged on something. The four guild members turned to look with varying degrees of concern and confusion. Maybe they didn’t realize the trap he just sprung on himself, but I did.

“How familiar are you with Lady Trisne, Nebold?” I used her mouth to deliver my accusation. “Was there something you wanted to say to her now that you’re face-to-face? Maybe an apology?” A bitter laugh came from her crumbling lips. “Silly me, you may not know what that is! See, an apology is when you admit you did something wrong and—”

“Silence!”

He looked about two seconds from keeling over, his face a mottled purple color as he shook violently like a leaf clinging to its branch in a storm. Nebold raised his staff and slammed it hard against the stone floor of the entry, causing a small crater from the blast of magic he released with it. The Wiran ruby flashed brightly from the top of the staff, just before black whips lashed from it and sliced clean through Trisne’s body, still suspended in the air. Pieces of her fell onto the steps with sickening thuds and a notable lack of viscera as the ward dropped the rest of her. Where the whips had hit, the rotted flesh sizzled as if cauterized by fire.

Her head was still intact, rolling to a stop on the wide step. The hat I’d put on her landed a few steps lower, making the whole scene just a little more macabre. One of the guild members began to retch loudly by the main door.

“You will suffer dearly for this, Haron.” Nebold’s voice trembled, this time with unbridled rage. “Mark my words.”

With Trisne's mouth still intact, I got in my last word. "Duly marked, wretch."

I let my control over her corpse slip as a frustrated howl tore from Nebold's lips. From a distance, I watched him lash at Trisne's body with shadowy tendrils until pieces of her scattered across the entry steps. He was more than angry at my little display.

He was scared.

Chapter Seven

Haron

I, as a devout scholar, dedicated to documenting everything I can, mourn the loss of all the potential knowledge still

trapped in the Clifftombs. A discovery team was sent last moon phase to assess the state of the kingdom, only to

find strong wards placed on the castle that prevented entry. Among the team were several staff of the royal family,

and even they could not pass. What secrets are the Clifftombs hiding? And when will they be divulged?

"The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 37 of Ber's First Reign

I was wholly expecting a squadron to be banging on my door this morning, sure that Nebold had scurried off to report me to the guards for the scene I caused yesterday on the guild's front steps. The unassuming scroll that was delivered by Lota, one of my

personal favorite barmaids at The Hanging Cat, was a pleasant surprise. She bounced back rather quickly from Pid's knight roughing her up. He had just missed her bursting through the kitchen door with a massive cleaver when he left the tavern, and everyone in the room witnessed her violent threats if he ever came back.

“A messenger from the palace sent this over just before breakfast,” she said with a friendly smile. “You’ve been getting popular, Haron. What kind of trouble are you getting yourself into?”

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I replied with a toothy grin of my own. “Only the best kind, m’lady. Be a dear and bring some breakfast up, would you?”

“Of course.”

I leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb and watched her descend the stairs with a sway of her curvy hips, a wholly different hunger rearing to life in my core. My teeth caught my lower lip to keep the groan from slipping out, and I tapped the scroll in my palm twice before finally retreating into my room. If I stayed out in the hall waiting for her to bring my food back, I’d be just as likely to pull her back in with me. Jessella would probably be very cross with me for having some sexy, slippery fun without her.

Looking more closely at the scroll, I realized the seal that held it shut didn’t give an indication of who exactly it was from. Not that I received missives from the palace often, but the sender was usually considerate enough to include their imprint in the wax instead of a blank circle like this. Even the magic warding those not intended to open it was not familiar to me, though I couldn’t discern more beyond it than the earthy brown tinge of terramancy woven through the spell’s aura.

What terramancer would be looking for me from the palace?

I reached blindly for the letter opener on my desk and nudged the chair out with a hip to sit. The spell dispersed as the unassuming wax seal broke and the scroll unfurled from its tight roll. Hesitantly, still undecided if I want to get tangled in whatever an unmarked scroll would hold for me, I pulled the scroll open to read it.

Lady Val Toric,

From my conversation with Guildmaster Briton, I was unsure my request to employ you would be passed along, much less well received. If you can meet to discuss terms, please respond with a place and time of your choosing.

Regards,

I.G.

My eyes rolled at the embellished signature scrawled across the bottom of the short letter. All this cloak-and-dagger nonsense was not my typical method of dealing with clients. There was only one person I could think of with these initials in the palace who would send secret letters, and I doubted I'd be able to brush aside his request now that he'd sought me out directly. I was more curious why he would want to employ a necromancer of all people.

"Let's play, little princeling."

Plain stationery was neatly stacked in the top right drawer of the desk, and I pulled a sheet of paper and pen from it along with my own sealing wax and stamp. My message was concise and polite, despite the smirk that grew on my face as I wrote it.

I.G.,

Consider me intrigued. You know where to find me, obviously. Feel free to join me for an ale any night this week.

Best,

H

Part of me wondered if Prince Irin would come down from his ivory tower again. Until the death of King Henton, he didn't venture out in Gilamorst often unless it was at his father's side. I doubted he even knew where The Hanging Cat was, beyond it being in the lower streets of the city where the poor lived. Something like mischievous glee had me snickering to myself just imagining him coming through the tavern door.

Instead of rolling the letter up into a scroll, I dribbled a puddle of wax in the bottom right corner and used the nearby letter opener to prick my pointer finger to add a drop of blood to the black liquid. Before the wax cooled too much, I pressed the weighted seal to it, letting it set before carefully pulling the seal away to reveal my own unique insignia. The crisp image of a bird in flight holding a wiranblood flower was revealed—similar to the Necromancy Guild's but not quite the same—along with a thin line of script in the Old Language that circled it. My blood activated the script, which pulsed with a deep violet aura before flaring to life. The paper fluttered slightly, the edges lifting on an unnatural wind, before it sprang to life and began folding in on itself with the spell's guidance. In a matter of seconds, a paper replica of the bird was standing on the desk, its head tilting as if it were alive. The wax seal now sat on its small breast like a badge.

I moved to open my window, allowing the bird-shaped letter to take flight with a flutter of its wings and dart from the room. Then, I changed into more comfortable sleeping clothes and took a well-deserved nap. And I waited.

The intimate brush of someone's coat against my arm was the first indication my invitation had been accepted. I sat at Gaion's bar with Jessella, who was talking about her last escort job with a Highlan's son. Our backs were to the door and heads bent close together to block out the raucous noise of the tavern.

"The poor man was so awkward; it seemed like he didn't like the family gathering we had to attend. His aunts were awful! Criticizing his clothes, picking at his hair. I

almost smacked one of their hands away on reflex!”

I snickered, envisioning Jessella being escorted from the party after hitting a relative. “I’m sure you would have squawked every step of the way as they booted you from the event.”

“You bet your ass I would have—”

“Lady Val Toric?”

The voice was low, but its owner was leaning close enough to catch my ear from my side opposite Jessella. My head turned slightly to take in the guest with a critical eye, noting his very unassuming and plain brown coat with the collar popped to hide his neck and some of the jaw. A wide-brimmed hat sat low across his brow—also not uncommon for travelers passing through—and hid the rest of his hair. All in all, he cut a mysterious figure as he sat casually on a stool, leaning on the bar with his elbows and slowly nursing a pint of ale.

But an earth-tinted aura just barely emanated from the man, the typical appearance of a terramancer at rest.

A wide grin broke across my lips. “Yes, that’s me. You must be I.G.?”

With the lengths he was going to hide his notable appearance, I assumed Prince Irin didn’t want me blasting his name over the din of the boisterous tavern guests. He reached his right hand covered in a supple leather glove to shake my own, which I took politely. “I’m grateful for the opportunity to meet under... less hostile circumstances.”

That was a nice way of mentioning my little scuffle at the guild a few days ago. He was being so cute. “Trust me when I say that was not even close to hostile. All the

bodies present that day remained alive.”

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A disturbed laugh burst from his lips, like he surprised even himself with the sound. “Gods help anyone who makes you more angry than that, then.”

Jessella pushed into our quiet conversation from the other side. “Oh, who’s this Haron? A suitor?” she asked in a teasing sing-song voice. “Does this mean I get a break tonight?”

“Not likely, wench.” I leaned in close enough to playfully nip at her full, painted lips. “Will you come find me later tonight? Maybe bring Lota along?”

A visible shudder rocked through her delicate shoulders, even as a coy smile graced her face. She reached a manicured hand to my face—her nails were filed sharper than normal and painted a bloody red—and pinched my cheek lightly. “We’ll be in my room. Don’t make us wait too long.”

With that, Jessella slipped off her stool and turned to weave her way through the crowded tavern. My cheek pressed firmly against my shoulder as I watched her mingle with some of the regulars, laying her dainty hands on their shoulders and leaning close to their ears when she spoke. It was hard to take my eyes from her, admiring the deep blue dress she wore cinched in at the waist to reveal every curve it tried to cover with her dark brown curls hiding just enough of her shoulders to tease.

“Is she...a lover?”

Irin’s question pulled me from my salacious daydreaming of all the things I wanted to do to her later. I turned my attention back to him, my lip firmly pinned between my teeth around a hungry smile. Only his eyes and a sliver of his face were visible, but

there was definitely a spark of interest in his hazel gaze.

“When she allows it,” I finally answered. “But we’re not here to talk about my sex life, are we? I was under the impression you were looking to hire me for my skills in necromancy.”

From what I could see of the tops of his cheeks, Irin blushed a pretty pink beneath that honeyed tan skin. “Of course, yes, I meant that—”

He was obviously flustered. And watching him squirm on the hook he’d set himself was fulfilling in its own way. I braced my elbow on the bar to prop my head in as he bumbled and blustered through several attempted apologies. “Can we... can we find a private place to discuss our own arrangement?”

My smirk grew salacious again. His eyes drifted down to lock on my lips. “Of course, whatever you would like. Gaion!” I called down the bar to its grouchy tavern master. “Put my guest’s drink on my tab, would you?”

Gaion scoffed. “Like I ever make you pay for drinks, girl.” His response was almost a growl. “Get outta here. I’ll send up some dinner later.”

I threw a joking salute and smacked my hands on the worn bar to push myself up off the stool. “Thank you, father! Come along. My room is upstairs.” I gestured for Irin to follow me in skirting the main area toward the staircase.

“Of course.”

He took a moment to make sure his coat covered as much of his defining features as it could, slipping the last couple of buttons through their holes to the chin and adjusting the collar again before rising to join me. His hands remained firmly in his pockets and his elbows tucked close to his body, as if trying to look as small and

unassuming as possible. It wasn't until we both cleared the door, and I shut it behind us with the lock thrown, that he finally seemed to relax a bit.

I gestured to the coat rack. "Feel free to strip some layers. Make yourself at home."

Irin took in the simple, unadorned room for a few moments, taking a slow spin in the center until he faced me again. "Not that I'm trying to pry, but is he truly your father?"

"Gaion? Gods, no! If he were, he'd likely chew my ear off daily instead of weekly for all the things I make him put up with. But I've known him since I began visiting Gilamorst regularly a little over five years ago, and he hasn't been able to weed me out of his life yet."

A small smile teased the corners of Irin's mouth. "I see. You are fortunate to have people like him who care so deeply about you."

There was something behind his words, a tinge of sadness and longing, that made my heart twist painfully in my chest. I knew the kind of loneliness he likely felt. It may have been many lives ago, but it still stung sometimes to think of being held at arm's length by those who should hug tightly. I didn't like to dwell on it too much, and I wouldn't let him either.

With a snicker, I reached over to snatch the hat from his head and toss it on the rack. He blinked a few times, obviously shocked that part of his cover was removed.

"Is this how you treat all your clients?"

He got a toothy grin in response, drawing his eyes back down to my lips, where they lingered just a bit too long. "Only the ones who lurk around in disguise. If you can't trust me to keep your identity a secret in the privacy of my own room, it will be hard

to establish a working relationship for anything. Right?”

“I suppose,” he answered, and pulled his hands from their pockets to undo the buttons on his coat. “I guess I was a little shocked at how... sparse your room is.”

“Why? Because I make a lot of money?” It was oddly entertaining to throw Irin off balance and watch him try to maintain that stiff composure Gilamorst nobles seemed obsessed with. “Not that it’s any of your concern, but most of my profit goes to helping Gaion run The Hanging Cat or to the Gilamorst Orphanage. Which, I’m sure you’re aware, the ratio of girls to boys adopted is one to four. In case you want to add that to your list of issues to clear up after your coronation.”

Irin was shaken by the unexpected information. “I... um, that... that is concerning. And also very noble of you. Gilamorst is certainly grateful for—”

“Let’s cut the pleasantries, shall we? Your payment of whatever services you want from me will benefit the people of Gilamorst more than the regime has thus far, so don’t waste my time. Respectfully,” I added snidely. “Please, take a seat and tell me what your need my services for.”

The available seat in question was a well-worn couch beneath the room’s only window, where I usually sat to read the latest news pamphlet or a rare tome on necromancy that caught my eye in a bookshop. He continued to stare dumbly as I walked to the chair belonging to the nearby writing desk and pulled it out for myself, further indicating where he should sit. It wasn’t until I found a blank piece of paper and a pen to write ‘terms of service’ neatly across the top that he finally moved, taking a seat on the couch stiffly.

“Loosen up, Your Highness,” I teased. “I’m done chastising you about the deficiencies of your crown city. Now, how can I help you?”

He still looked a bit like startled prey but collected his senses enough to clear his throat and cross his right leg over the left. His hands clutched the knee lightly, the pose of casual sophistication. I noticed his thumb worry at something beneath the glove of his right pointer finger absently.

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Whatever confidence Irin had walked into this room with seemed to have left him now. “I was hoping to negotiate an agreement for retainage.”

My brows shot up like they were trying to join my hairline. This was a surprise.

I raised my eyes from the paper I was prepared to write on, scanning the prince’s freckled face for any sign of duplicity. He was nervous, sure, but he seemed sincere. “Retainage? As in, serving on your staff? Being on call for your needs, essentially?”

His eyes shifted to the side, not meeting mine directly. “It’s... a bit more complicated than that. There’s quite a bit of...” Irin glanced around the room, as if he was going to find the right words to use in here. “Mystery involving the late king’s death. And on top of that, some of his most trusted advisors died shortly after his body was found. I need a skilled necromancer to call on if any other staff members... suffer a similar fate.”

There was something about his stilted speech, the awkward pauses and general unease that made me suspicious. “Certainly.” I put the pen down and leaned back in my chair, pushing the front two legs off the ground until it creaked in protest. My elbows found the armrests and I steepled my fingers to press them against my lips thoughtfully. “You do realize I am capable of raising the dead to determine the cause of death, don’t you? This mystery” — I didn’t think it was much of a mystery, sitting in front of the only person who would benefit from King Henton dying— “could be easily solved if I had access to the graves of the victims. You wouldn’t need to keep me on retainage for that.”

The change was immediate. If I hadn’t been staring so intently at his face, I would

have easily missed the slip in control he held on his expression. Alarm widened his eyes and pressed his lips together tightly before it settled again.

Interesting.

“I’m sure you could,” Irin answered, voice smooth and unbothered. “But I have others who are already looking into the advisors’ deaths, although their bodies have yet to be found so the deaths are assumed. And Father’s death was ruled as an unexpected heart failure. I’d like to reserve your services for future cases, if there happen to be any, and if needed, go back and reevaluate those who are missing.”

“Mmhmm,” I hummed noncommittally. I’m sure my suspicion was plain on my face, but he made no effort to dissuade it. This whole effort of trying to have me held on retainage seemed like a farce, something he was just going through the steps on. Why else would he not want me to investigate the people who’d died recently?

My curiosity was eating me alive.

“Ok, I’ll go on retainage. But I have conditions of my own.”

I’m sure if I hadn’t been watching him so intently, Irin would be sagging in relief. As it was, he expressed his eagerness by planting both booted feet on the ground and leaning forward, hands gripping his thighs as if to contain himself. “I’m open to negotiations.”

Sure he was.

My eyes never left his face, but I set the legs of my chair down and reached for the pen still laid across the almost-blank paper, pressing the end to my bottom lip in thought. I was going to take full advantage of the boon I’d been given in Prince Irin’s obvious desperation.

“First, my rate will be five drummons per moon phase. Four of them will be sent directly to the orphanage. And you will indicate it is from me, not a donation from the sudden conscience the royal family has developed.”

Irin nodded, not batting an eye at the amount. That wasn't even a drop in the bucket for the royal treasury. But that would be a huge break for the orphanage.

“Secondly, I have the right to deny services and terminate my contract if I find anything that indicates some nefarious plan you're dragging me into.”

He was more hesitant to agree to that condition. “What would you describe as ‘nefarious?’”

“Well, it doesn't really help your case to ask that kind of question, for starters.”

A heavy sigh left Irin's nose, and he leaned back to pinch the bridge of it in frustration. He was practically vibrating with the tension coiled in his body. It wasn't his body language that interested me, however.

It was his aura.

His magic was all over the place, arches of earthy brown tones leaping from him as if his own magic was trying to escape his body. I'm not sure even he realized how erratic his energy appeared. It wasn't uncommon to see people's energies spike under emotional stress, but this was wholly different. It was like he couldn't contain that terramancy magic.

Like it wasn't really his to begin with.

“Terramancy is not your affinity, is it?”

Irin's head snapped down and his face was a mixture of shock and offended. "Excuse me?"

"Your magic is all bent out of shape." I gestured at him vaguely with the pen. "I've only seen that with practitioners who do not practice in their natural affinities. Or in children who have not practiced their affinity control very much. So, tell me, are you a child?"

Muscles in his jaw fluttered so prettily in his outrage. Irin's hands balled into fists on his thighs, and he leaned heavily on them, like he was trying to hold himself back from jumping off the couch. "No offense, but that's pretty fucking rude," he spat through gritted teeth. Actually, he looked about two seconds from snarling like a dog.

"Ah, there's the real Irin!" I threw the pen down on the desk hard enough to make it skitter across the wood. "We aren't standing on formalities here, and quite frankly, I'm not fond of dancing around the truth. So, back to your original question. By nefarious, I mean whatever you're plotting with regard to those deaths you claim were unknown or assumed, as someone who would benefit directly from them. So, since we're being frank with each other, I'm telling you upfront that if I find out you're using me to cover up what actually happened, I will void my contract and come after you myself. Do I make myself clear, Your Highness?"

Irin's face was flushed red, his breaths loud as they were forced through his nose flared in real anger. His jaw shifted side to side, like he was chewing on his answer before finally spitting out, "Fine. Anything else, necromancer?"

I smirked at the title. He almost growled. "Just one last term. This one will be mild in comparison."

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Irin scoffed and rolled his eyes. “I am quickly finding that nothing is ‘mild’ when it comes to you.”

“You’d be right about that. But this is more of a request. I’m investigating a particularly brutal murder, and I need access to some of the upper echelon to look for some clues about how she died. You may be aware of the recent disappearance of Lady Trisne Pid?”

He blinked, looking absolutely confused and disturbed. “Trisne? I thought she was visiting the City of Scholars. You mean to tell me she’s dead? When did this come to light?”

“When I had her body shamble up to the Necromancy Guild and confront the guildmaster.”

Now he looked truly disgusted. “Wha... How? Why would you do something vile like that?”

“If you saw the state of her body, I don’t think you’d say I was the vile one. It appeared, from the damage done to her body, that she was used for some kind of ritualistic practice. I have reason to believe Nebold was involved, but I don’t think he was alone.” I steepled my fingers again, staring at the wall in front of my desk but my mind in other places. “I’d like to get a feel for the pulse of the nobles, see if anyone is particularly jumpy after the scene I caused yesterday.”

“And how exactly do you want me involved in this plan?” Irin seemed skeptical, and still a little traumatized.

My stare cut to Irin's frowning face. "I need some access to Highlan-hosted events. In particular, anything Jinon Pid is involved in."

I didn't want to mention the letters I stole from Pid's study. Irin would likely confiscate them and start his own investigation, ergo her death would be buried under political bullshit as soon as Jinon caught wind of it. I was sure by now he realized that evidence was gone from his desk, but since I hadn't been hauled off under his orders there was a chance he didn't know I was the one who had stolen the letters. He would find out soon, though. And I was positioning myself to be untouchable in the Prince's employment and presence.

This last request threw Irin completely off-balance. He folded his arms, brow drawn low in confusion, as he seemed to consider the term. "So basically, you want to be my guest for any events Highlan Pid hosts?"

"Yes."

"And you will agree to stay on retainage as long as the payment is made weekly, and you reserve the right to terminate if you are uncomfortable with the arrangement?"

I picked up the pen and began jotting the terms in a bulleted list on the paper. "That's it. And the invitation to attend events Highlan Pid hosts."

The tapping of the pen as I wrote was the only sound breaking the silence between us. Irin seemed to really be mulling everything over, probably looking for any indication I was trying to trick him. "Fine. I agree to your terms."

I added his own to keep me on retainage at the bottom and struck two lines for both of us to sign on. "Excellent! Our words and signatures are our bonds. After you."

He plucked the paper off the desk as soon as I slid it close enough to reach, his eyes

flitting over the few lines on the page. Without looking, Irin reached out with his palm up to silently ask for the pen. My fingertips barely touched his skin when I handed it over, but even that slight contact had a zip of magic shocking my fingertips. Irin flinched at the contact. I could imagine he felt like one big, exposed nerve, with his magic so out of sorts right now.

Once he was satisfied with the contract and laid it on the small side table to sign, he quickly handed the page back without making eye contact. Like... he was ashamed of his lack of control. His thumb worried that same spot on his pointer finger again. I signed my own name with sharp, precise slants and plucked another page out of the desk to lie on top. It was a simple spell, one that most practitioners learn early on, to copy the text from one page to another. I pressed my hand firmly at the top and focused a bit of magic in the palm before sweeping it down the page to copy the original.

Irin's eyes were downcast when I offered the copied contract out to him. "Next time, bring your hound with you."

His smile was rueful. "No keeping secrets from you, is there?"

"Nope," I popped the 'p.' "So, you will be picking me up tomorrow evening?"

"Pardon?"

I pushed up from the desk and meandered over to the door, pulling it open in a silent gesture that our time here was done. He was slower at following behind, absently holding the paper at his side as he gave a lost look.

"Highlan Pid is holding a masquerade tomorrow night, and I intend to go with you. I'm sure you were invited. Maybe check with your head butler to ensure we are on the guest list. I can meet you at the street corner three blocks south of here, say five

o'clock?"

Irin continued to gaze with a mixture of awe and shock, like I had swept him clear off his feet with the knowledge of Pid's party. His lips began to curl up at the corners, an amused smile slowly cresting his face when he came alongside me in the hall. "You are a fascinating and terrifying woman, Lady Val Toric."

"Haron, please," I corrected him. "And yes, I am."

And with that, I firmly shut the door in his face.

Chapter Eight

Haron

A select few of the Julran refugees have chosen to stay in the City of Scholars to further their studies and likewise

add to our own library the history of Julra steeped in magic. A thousand strong, however, have set out from the city

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walls to brave the wilds with the hope of rebuilding a new empire. I am unsure of their success. The only promise of

civilization are nomadic tribes who wander these lands. I overheard that they have already chosen a name for this

theoretical new country.

Respar.

"The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 38 of Ber's First Reign

Asleek, black carriage pulled by two matching kisterals slowed to a stop on the street corner I'd indicated to Prince Irin, and the driver stepped down from his seat with a flick of his tailcoats. He bowed his head politely to my covered form and held a hand out silently for the parasol grasped lightly in my right hand. It didn't have much use in the waning light, but the tip was a concealed knife I planned to use if the prince decided to be wily. There was no way I was giving it up easily. "Please allow me to take that from you, my lady," he offered in a quiet tone.

Instead, I skirted him and walked up to the flank of the six-legged kisteral. With a light touch, I placed my hand on the soft fur at its back to keep from spooking it. It huffed and shook its shaggy head, but didn't seem to mind me petting it. Slowly, I made my way up to its long neck—stretching taller than me by half—and gave it a good scratch at the bend of its shoulders. Kisterals were believed to have been a crossbreed of the long-necked kismes of Julra and their stockier cousins the hatrals

from Golath. Many of Respar's stock came from Julran refugees who'd brought them over during the Frigid War. Digging my gloved fingers deep into its silky fur brought back many memories of my childhood, grooming my own with my sister in the stables. The very stubborn kisteral I owned now was named after said sister, in honor of their similar dispositions, and lived in the stables out behind The Hanging Cat.

"Excuse me." The driver cleared his throat slightly. "I'm afraid you may run late to the ball if we stay here much longer. Can I assist you inside?" He held his hand out again for the parasol.

My face was hidden behind a dark veil, but I gave a grateful smile regardless and folded it closed. "Apologies and thank you, but I will keep it for now. I appreciate the accommodation, meeting me here. I'm sure the request was odd."

"Not at all, please step inside." The driver bowed again and leaned to open the carriage door. It swung on silent hinges, the interior all lush with crushed velvet in the royal colors of deep blue and gold. I wasn't expecting the shined pair of black riding boots attached to legs clad in pants that clung enticingly to every muscle.

"Good evening, Your Highness."

Irin's face was half covered with a likeness of a black rinhound, the bottom half of his face visible beneath a lupine snout wrinkled in a snarl. He held a gloved hand out to take mine, and the pure white fabric was a comical contrast to my own outfit. I looked like I was a dark spirit come back to haunt him.

"Good evening, Haron. You look lovely tonight." His voice was warm and low, intimate in the small space as I laid my hand lightly on his.

"That wasn't the intention but thank you all the same." I tried to keep my tone cordial, but there were still a couple of jagged edges. "You also look the perfect

image of a prince.”

"You have me all figured out." The begrudging mirth in Irin's voice was obvious. I made sure to gather all my skirts around my legs tucked close so the driver could close the door. Irin took in the rest of my appearance with an appreciative smile. "I should have known you would hide your face with a veil instead of a mask. Not much of a rule follower, are you?"

“Maybe I’m in mourning.”

He scoffed. “Last I checked, mourning women don’t attend socials.”

“You’re right,” I answered casually. “But they attend wakes. It’s only appropriate, since Trisne never received one.”

Irin’s eyes widened in surprise behind his canine-looking mask. The way it was molded gave the impression of fur, without actually having fur attached to it. Whoever had made it was a master in the craft; the texture carved into its surface looked so real I wanted to reach out and touch it.

“Am I going to regret agreeing to bring you tonight?”

“Possibly. But I’m sure I can make it up to you later.”

Admittedly, the little princeling was looking delicious tonight. Except for the pure white of his gloves, he was clad entirely in deep vermillion with sparse gold accents, mainly the family crest pin on his chest and woven chords looped across his shoulders denoting his royal status. His overcoat had the light sheen of crushed velvet, and beneath it poked the high collar of a black tunic adorned with smooth, gold buttons down the front. His white-blond hair was smoothed back from the rakish style before, exposing the bronzed olive skin and hazel eyes associated with

the majority of the Resparian populace.

“Fair enough.” he reached over, slower this time to show his intentions, and pried my wrist away from where I pressed it on my lap over the parasol. “I do, however, have a little something I’d like you to wear. To show that you are my guest.”

Before I could balk, Irin slipped a wristlet of flowers—three full blooms bound together with sprigs of white buds nestled in between—over my fist and adjusted it to face upward. They weren’t just any flowers, though. A thread of trepidation tangled itself around my lungs and squeezed. “Wiranblood and haronhock? That’s a bold choice.”

He leaned back to his side of the carriage, a smug grin on his stupidly handsome face. “I thought it was fitting.” He tapped the matching pair pinned on his chest, a single wiranblood with its ruffled petals spread wide and almost blended into his overcoat. “Consider it a sign of good faith, at least for the duration of our... working relationship. I know to respect a strong spellcaster when I see one. Especially a necromancer.”

I hummed noncommittally. “Such a revolutionary thinker.”

“I think my respect is born more out of self-preservation.” Irin barked a laugh. The carriage jolted a bit, the sound clearly startling the kisterals that pulled it. “You’re not a very discreet person, Haron Val Toric, despite your best efforts. And I think you owe my general a sincere apology for traumatizing him the last time you met at Pid’s estate.”

I snorted. “You should have sent someone who could actually blend in instead of that bumbling giant. Even I knew he was an imposter. Which leads me to my other question. What business did you have, sending your oaf to go investigate?”

Irin scoffed, clearly amused by my low opinion of Beolf. "That's my childhood friend you speak of. Don't think I'll hold him back if he decides to knock your head off your shoulders for being rude." He folded his leg neatly, resting his ankle on the opposite knee and leaning back into the cushioned bench. "And as for my own investigation, I have reason to believe Jinon has been evading taxation to the crown for several years now. So it seems we both have reason to not trust him."

Trying to fold my arms again was difficult with this ridiculous little wrist decoration. It rankled me. "So it would seem. Knowing what you do now about Trisne, have you given any thought to detaining Jinon for interrogation?"

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“I thought that was the point of having you as my guest tonight.”

My eyes narrowed at his clear avoidance of the subject, not that he could see my glare. “Hardly. I’m just chasing out the prey tonight. Jinon I will deal with later.”

“Has anyone ever told you how intimidating you are when you speak like that?”

“Not to my face. But I’m happy my message got across.”

Honestly, it rankled me to no end that Irin didn't jump to action after revealing Trisne's death. It shouldn't have surprised me, though, to see yet another Gailish royal so uncaring about the women in their kingdom. I turned to pull back one of the curtains and peered through the glass to avoid looking at him for the rest of the short ride. He seemed just as content to keep the silence, though I could feel the cold burn of his eyes through the thin black veil. I chanced a quick side glance and caught him trying to straighten his smirk, which only stoked the fire of my frustration. He kept his posture loose and casual, slouched a little in the padded bench so his knee just barely brushed my own, tucked close to my side of the carriage. One arm was draped across the seat back and bent at the elbow so he could rest his head on a fist as he kept staring. It was like I was a puzzle he was trying to solve.

“Where is your hound?”

The question caught him off-guard. Irin’s brow wrinkled slightly before smoothing out again. “I keep Behar in my room when I attend functions like this. There are too many opportunities for me to be distracted enough that something... unfortunate could happen to him.”

“Hmmm,” I answered noncommittally. His magic was unstable again. I hoped it wouldn’t affect my efforts tonight. “You must have a strong bond with him.”

“I do,” he confirmed. “I’ve had Behar since he was a pup. Father was... less than pleased when he found out I’d been hiding him in my chambers for almost a year. I think he was more upset at how unaware he was of the situation.”

“You were not close with him.” It was more of an observation than a question, one Irin seemed to take in stride. Not that I was surprised. Every other time he spoke of his late father, it was with the same tone as mentioning the passing of an old acquaintance and not a beloved parent.

He shrugged, as if his father’s approval meant nothing. “After I chose to study terramancy, he avoided me almost entirely. He thought practitioners were weak because they relied on magic to make their lives easier.”

“That’s an extremely ignorant view of the world. Terrifying that someone that obtuse was ruling this country for sixty years.”

A smile curled Irin’s full lips, but it was sardonic. “I thought so too.”

Showing up to a masquerade party without a mask was a conscious choice on my part. I wanted whoever thought they were hiding to believe they were bold enough to let some tidbit of information slip. Tonight, I was the bait and the predator. But walking into the main ballroom with a very eligible, very attractive prince brought on a whole other kind of attention I wasn’t particularly interested in. We barely made it past the coat check before a rail-thin woman in a parakeet mask approached us out of nowhere, towing an equally thin daughter by her elbow. Their outfits were obviously very coordinated, both in white, high-collared gowns accented by feathers around their throats and wrists in bright, garish colors.

“Your Highness!” She curtsied deeply, still pulling her daughter to dip just as low. The poor girl wobbled on her heels to keep from falling, and I instinctively reached out to catch her. “We are so honored you grace us with your presence tonight! You remember my daughter, Malita, don’t you? We were so thrilled when the royal council reached out to us regarding her eligibility as your bride!”

The mother’s face practically cracked in half from the beaming smile she showed Irin. Malita, on the other hand, seemed absolutely miserable. The only part of her face that matched her mother’s was the mask she wore. “Good evening, Your Highness.” She was much less enthusiastic, but still polite in her subdued greeting. “I am... thrilled to be considered.”

Irin was visibly uncomfortable. “Thank you, that is very kind. However, I have not given much consideration to my potential bride yet. I’m still... in mourning over the sudden loss of my father.”

His voice was smooth and pleasant enough, but the arm mine was looped through flinched hard. I thought someone had bumped into him from the other side, but something on his glove caught my eye. His hand was fisted so tightly the fabric stretched over his knuckles, and across the top of his pointer finger, a patch of red spread slowly over what I thought was a ring. For a moment, I couldn’t take my eyes from the bloody spot. That violent red, creeping slowly over pristine white... just like blood seeping through fresh snow.

The sight of it was confusing more than off-putting. Did he cut himself on something?

“Have a good evening Hilra Bavomont, Lady Malita.”

I felt Irin pull me away from the women, even as the mother sputtered and made to follow us. “Prince Irin, perhaps—”

I'm not sure what possessed me to stop and turn back to address her. Irin seemed just as shocked, accidentally pulling me ahead in his attempt to flee a confrontation. Malita was holding onto her mother by her dainty wrist and trying to keep her from following us.

“Step. Off.”

Both of the noblewomen reared back at my hostile tone. The whites of their eyes were visible even behind the masks, giving them an almost comical appearance of scared birds, ruffled feathers and all.

While my face couldn't have been visible, something had Irin pulling me lower by my arm, urging me to lean down slightly to match his height. It didn't seem to bother him I stood a head taller, even when he had taken my hand and guided me from the carriage in front of Jinon's mansion. The softest brush of air hit my cheek through the veil, then a quiet chuckle tickled my ear. “Let it go. They're not worth the fight.”

Irin pulled me again, guiding me to a tall table, but I kept my eyes locked on Hilra Bavomont's gaunt, shocked face until the crowd of party guests swallowed us. I wished for a moment she could see my face, so my glare could take full effect. People became uneasy when I stared at them with my mismatched eyes. They didn't like the unnatural or unusual here.

“I need a drink,” I muttered. “Please tell me they have some decent goldtine in this place.”

A smile spread across Irin's lips, and he navigated us to some long tables lining the left side of the ballroom. They were laden with exorbitant amounts of food, the likes of which even a gathering this large couldn't finish, arranged in intricate displays of Resparian fauna interspersed with game caught in Ber's Forest nearby. It was revolting.

How could Jinon put this elaborate party on when he assumed his own daughter was dead?

“This is probably not your typical scene, is it?”

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The veil I wore hid the smirk I could feel spreading across my painted lips. What a haughty little princeling. He thought he was sweeping me off my feet, bringing me to this gaudy event and allowing me to hang off his arm like holding the lead of a prized kistral. Something to show off his power and status and essentially snub the council fighting to control his future. I was using him, and he thought he was using me, too. But he forgot to discuss those terms with me beforehand. I gave him a taste of the freedom he longed for when I snapped at the mother and her daughter, so they would go and titter to the other ladies about his prickly date. His little scheme of keeping away all the hungry scavengers would only work if I agreed to keep up the appearance.

Irin didn't realize how long I've been playing this game of deception.

His hand crept around my back, fingers wrapping around my waist, as we wove through the collections of guests absorbed in their own conversations. My gaze roamed the crowd, noting the doors that led from the room and the alcoves along the walls guests could tuck themselves into for their own nightly entertainment. It was no secret the kind of balls Jinon Pid hosted were of the sensual variety. They were part of the reason Trisne distanced herself from him and hosted her own parties, notably tamer but no less elaborate in scale.

“For you, my lady.”

A flute appeared in front of my face, the delicate stem gripped in Irin's gloved fingers. It wasn't the one that was bleeding. Actually, that hand was shoved deep in his pocket. My curiosity got the better of me.

“Is your hand injured?” I plucked the glass from his hand and lifted it slightly in gratitude.

He had picked up a glass for himself with the same hand he offered mine to me and raised it halfway to his lips when it stopped. His hazel eyes locked onto my face, and for a brief moment, I had the eerie feeling he could see right through the lacy pattern of the black veil covering it. We studied each other, neither of us willing to back down first.

But finally, he relented. “No need to worry about it,” he answered and took a sip of the goldtine.

“That didn’t really answer my question.”

He shot an annoyed glare, then tossed his drink back. “Didn’t you want to talk to the guests? Come, let’s mingle.”

I’ll be filing this conversation for later.

“What a delicious-looking woman you are escorting, Your Highness.”

I was grateful for the dark veil covering the snarl that leapt onto my face. It gave me just enough time to squash the disgust before Irin turned us around to face the source of the compliment. Of course, half his face was also covered with a rather grotesque trebegnon mask. The top jaw was lined with blood-stained fangs cutting the man’s face in half at the nose, and the lower jaw traced his own with more teeth. Whoever designed the mask kept functionality in mind — the mask was hinged at the jaw to move when the wearer spoke. All that was visible was a particularly smug grin that set my teeth on edge. All along the mask’s edge real trebegnon fur was swept back to cover the newcomer’s head to imitate a mane. Notable for its iridescent-black sheen in bright light, the fur was cut bluntly at his wide shoulders.

The rest of his attire was equally gaudy, playing on the dark purple-black of the feline trebegnon form with a double-breasted coat over a white dress shirt, with frills at the collar spilling over. The rest of him matched every other noble in the room—black pants, knee-high leather riding boots hardly used for their purpose, and all manner of jangling medals and adornments hanging off the breast pocket of his coat to denote minor nobility.

We stood for a good minute in silence, eyeing the other up. His gaze had yet to make it near my face, his dark eyes glued solidly to my ample bust. Even modestly covered to the neck, I drew unwanted attention from the likes of this slimy bastard.

“Good evening.” Irin finally broke the tension. His arm tightened around my elbow, drawing me closer to his side. “I do not believe we’ve had the pleasure of meeting yet. These masquerades make for challenging socials, do they not?”

A rather smooth way to ask, ‘who the fuck are you?’ I applauded Irin silently. If I let my tongue loose from between my teeth for two seconds, I would probably regret whatever came out of my mouth. Being called a ‘delicious woman’ was far from my idea of a compliment, and I attended plenty of high society functions like this.

The man let loose a ringing guffaw that drew the attention of everyone in a four-foot radius. “Yes, yes, I admit the idea was mine! Highlan Pid and I are rather close, so he sought me out for inspiration.”

“A shame he couldn’t ask his daughter Trisne to host it. The parties I attended that she organized were always fantastic.”

The stranger kept that same cocky grin on his thin lips, but there was a subtle shift in the air as his eyes finally rose to meet mine through the veil. He was sizing me up like the namesake of his outfit, a trebegnon lurking in the shadows, waiting for the right time to strike. Except he was doing a terrible job of being subdued about it.

“Yes, a shame.” He drawled, his voice whiny without much bass to it. “I was rather fond of Trisne myself. She was a beautiful girl. So full of life. So full of... passion.” A deep breath whistled through his nose and his eyes slid shut as if recalling some euphoric experience.

My skin crawled, and I had to swallow down the disgust that roiled in my stomach. “You speak as if she is dead. No one has reported her whereabouts, have they?” Irin tensed up beside me, pulling my arm again as a warning. I ignored it. “And who are you to claim such familiarity to her when you have yet to give your name? It comes across as a bit lecherous, in my opinion.”

“Apologies, my lady. I am Forol Hent, a childhood friend of Jinon’s.” The bow he gave was half-hearted, not even lowering his head so he could maintain his stare set on my face. I was even more grateful for the veil now. Even with my experience in these social gatherings, there was no way my expression was anything less than pure loathing. “You are in a similar position, I believe. What kind of relationship did you have with Trisne?”

The question was intentionally barbed. I stood stiffly, hoping he would be the fish that caught himself on my hook so I could watch him flail and deny having anything to do with Trisne's death. Forol's eyes wandered slowly down my body again, his gaze intentionally vile and wholly inappropriate. Like he was trying to make me uncomfortable and scare me off.

He knew something.

Irin hesitated for only a handful of breaths, then began pulling me away from what was rapidly boiling to a more unsophisticated conversation. “Dear, I think I see Highlan Ymir and his wife by the desserts. I’ve been meaning to introduce you. They are staunch supporters of the Terramancy Guild, and I was in the same class as their son. It was good to meet you, Forol.”

I wanted to snarl. Gods, I wanted to leap at this Forol's throat and tear it open with my teeth and nails. I would show him what a real predator looks like in the hunt, instead of just wearing the fur of one like he shot it himself. This fucking bastard knew something about Trisne's death. I could feel it. The way he talked about her so off-handedly, like a foregone conclusion, was offensive on its own. But there was something deeper. Something... wrong about this Forol Hent. I couldn't see it with my eyes, but the instinct that kept me alive for so many years was howling in my ears that he was dangerous. That he was not at all who he presented himself to be.

That cocky smirk stayed plastered to his face all the way to the far wall Irin dragged me to, my eyes never leaving the snake's.

"Stop it," he hissed under his breath and gave me a shake. "What is wrong with you?"

I balked. "With me? Were you not listening to the same conversation? Where the fuck were you?" He kept my arm pinned under his when I tried to pull away. Irin was coming very close to having that fucking arm ripped from its socket.

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“Let’s step outside and cool down.” Irin towed me along to the closest balcony, nodding to couples and smiling along the way like I wasn’t two seconds from going feral on him. “What is going on with you?”

Keeping the snarl in my throat was difficult. Irin finally let me snatch my arm away and I moved to grip the banister with both hands hard enough to whiten the knuckles. Anyone looking on from the inside would probably think I was light-headed and needed some air with how I leaned over the railing. Really, I was counting five things I could see in an attempt to not lose my composure entirely.

“You didn’t think there was anything off about that Forol bastard?” I kept my voice low enough that Irin had to move to my side to hear clearly. “He knows something about Trisne. The way he talked about her... What kind of friend of Jinon's talks about his daughter that way?”

He turned to lean back against the railing beside me, his hip lightly brushing my hand with his closeness. His arms folded across his chest and cut a sharp line along his shoulders where the coat pulled tight. “He was... odd,” he finally answered, “but nothing that would warrant such a violent reaction.”

"Of course not," I spat. "I'm sure Resparian nobility doesn't turn on their own very often. Nor would it seem odd for a manto speak about how passionate his friend's daughter is. How does that not sound perverted to you? Or even mildly suspicious, considering Trisne is now dead?"

The vehemence in my voice seemed to startle Irin. Whether it was from his upbringing in this woman-hating country or his separation of normal behavior

because he's royalty, surely neither would make him so blind as to think Forol Hent was totally innocent.

He stared at me like I was a wild animal, wary I was going to tear his throat out. "Haron, I think you're blowing this wildly out of proportion," Irin began, his voice pitched low enough to stay between us. "Am I just supposed to haul in a man I've only spoken to once, and interrogate him on Trisne's death because he seemed odd? From one conversation?" He heaved a sigh and pushed his hand through his hair, turning his eyes to look out over the garden sprawled behind Pid's mansion. "I know you meant to attend this ball to find anyone who may be involved in her disappearance, but that seems a bit extreme to me. I thought you were gathering evidence, not going on a full-blown hunt!"

Something twisted painfully in my chest. Perhaps... he was right. I had no reason to be angry with him, just because Irin didn't share the same suspicion of Forol Hent that I did. I just couldn't shake the slithering, unsettling feeling that man gave me even with that brief encounter. There was just something wrong about him, and I was frustrated I couldn't voice what that was exactly. "I'm sorry," I finally managed to respond, even as the apology tasted like ash in my mouth. "I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. I just... Forol's behavior warrants some looking into, is all."

Irin sighed, as if tired of the conversation. "I will ask my spymaster to see what he can find about him. Is that satisfactory enough for you?"

That will have to be enough. For now, at least. "I know you have constraints in your current position, so I appreciate the offer. I'm sure you would hate to rock boats with your ascension to king approaching."

Irin leaned even closer into my side. The move was slow, a bit hesitant, like he expected me to turn on him and snap my teeth. "That is not the reason I'm hesitant to dig into the man's background. It would be difficult for me to justify tearing his life

apart on the back of empty accusations and a bad feeling. Even as the king apparent. It would not sit well with the nobility, I'm sure."

I gritted my teeth. "Fine."

He sighed heavily. "In my thirty-two years of life, never has a woman said she is fine and actually been fine."

"Thirty-two?" I scoffed. "What a babe! Even more reason to not listen to you, youngster."

One of Irin's brows rose in disbelief. "Really? We're bringing age into this? I'm afraid to ask what yours is, I've seen what you can do to a man's hand. I'm sure that is possible with any other body part I value."

Oh, he would absolutely roll if he knew my true age."Well, you have some sliver of common sense then. That's reassuring."

My shoulder pressed into his chest in a half-hearted effort to get some space, but Irin refused to budge. His arm wrapped around the front of my waist and kept our bodies close, his hip now pressed to mine as he tilted his head to peer beneath my veil. A playful smile tugged at his full lips. "Arewefine?"

"On what terms? This is nothing more than a mutually beneficial working relationship." It was painful to swallow down the ire prickling in the back of my throat. But I was already drawing some attention from another couple standing on the other end of the balcony, even if they couldn't hear all we were saying. I had always been an expressive person.

So, I allowed myself to be wrapped even further into Irin's arms, and used my extensive acting skills to smooth over my outburst.

“Hmm, maybe so.” Irin’s mouth moved slowly, aching so, to brush his lips against the lace-covered skin of my upper arm. The touch sent gooseflesh prickling under the thin fabric. “It would be foolish to let someone like you slip through my fingers. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t interested in something... more.”

“Well,” I hedged, tilting my head further out of reach of his devious lips. “You’re going to have to work for it, like everyone else.”

And with that I twisted out of his arm and dropped a proper, if not somewhat cheeky, curtsy before brushing past the baffled prince back into the ballroom. Regardless of his threats on managing my own interrogations, I would get what I needed from Jinon Pid about his so-called childhood friend.

Chapter Nine

Irin

The more I learn about Julra, the more sadness I feel with the council’s choice to remain neutral in all ways.

How surreal it would have been to walk the marble halls of the Clifftombs and speak to Princept Morrette himself.

How much would we have been able to contribute to each other’s growth if we had not kept every piece of

knowledge as a secret?

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 38 of Ber's First Reign

Watching Haron navigate the ball the remainder of the night was similar to watching an extremely skilled dancer, enchanting everyone she interacted with. She shook hands with nobles the proper way, with loose fingers and palm down as they wrapped gently over the other hand and tittered with the other ladies and Hilaras as if they'd known each other since childhood. I half anticipated the more boisterous and straightforward personality she showed me on the steps of the guild to be an issue in this kind of setting, but Haron seemed able to flip a switch and adapt effortlessly to this high-class setting.

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It was... fascinating. And it made me wonder which was the real Haron Val Toric. Not once had she lied to me, but there were obviously many more facets to this woman than I originally realized. Her outburst over that man, Forol, was shocking, made even more unsettling with how willing she was to let me take over looking into him. Something didn't sit well with me about how easily she gave up the topic.

"I remember you from last year, when we requested assistance with Mother's estate," Hilra Kina Galmas gushed at Haron's elbow. Her husband, Highlan Colo Galmas, nodded along with his wife's sentiments. "I could not speak highly enough of your services! We had tried to employ a necromancer previously, and the results were..."

"Less than useful," Colo chimed in.

Kina waved a gloved hand. "Yes, he was a waste of the exorbitant amount he asked for! He couldn't even get a clear image of her in the scrying mirror, much less a single word we could understand."

Haron laughed lightly, clearly flattered. Her arm was looped around my elbow again, and I hadn't let it go all night. Hearing the nobility—of which this was not even the second or third account—rain praises on her work made my own chest warm with pride. It was an odd feeling, considering I barely knew her. But she had this...way of making me feel like I had earned a great reward to be associated with her. It was unlike any experience I've had with another person.

"I am glad to have been helpful." Haron bowed her head slightly. "Maybe I have you to thank for the influx of requests from the nobles? At this rate, you may be eligible for a commission."

“Oh hush!” Kina leaned in, her voice lowered slightly. “I wish there were more honest spellcasters like you. It’s difficult to know if a practitioner’s wages are worth their quality, if you know what I mean.”

“Well, most of those rates are set by their guilds, so it’s difficult to—”

“That doesn’t stop the slimy ones from up-charging, and we both know it. Don’t act like I don’t know you ask below your guild’s set rates.” Kina tilted her head in Haron’s direction, but her next words were obviously for me. “You have found a delightful and hardworking young woman for company tonight, Prince Irin. I am so happy your paths have crossed!”

I pulled Haron a little closer, resting a gloved hand on her bicep covered in intricate black lace to the wrist. It was muscular and toned, certainly not the pliant kind of build the ladies of the court had. “I am starting to see that myself. Your praise of her character makes me grateful she deems me worthy of any of her time.”

The response was for Kina, but my eyes were set on Haron’s face hidden behind the black veil. It did well to hide most of her, but the faintest smile was visible between gaps in the lacy pattern similar to that on her dress. Knowing that beneath the fabric were the most mesmerizing, mismatched eyes and dusting of freckles across her tan face made me itch to snatch it off the first chance I could get her alone.

Kina’s giggle was a little off, finally showing the amount of alcohol she’d partaken of tonight. “Too bad she’s probably not in your stack of bride candidates. I do not envy you having to choose between all the ladies of nobility. No offense, but I’m happy to have a son already married off!”

“My dear,” Colo gently chastised his wife. “I’m sure the prince does not need reminders of all those looming decisions for his coronation. The council likely nips at his heels daily. A good night to you both, milady, Your Highness.”

Haron rose her own glass in acknowledgement before slipping it under the veil to sip. When I found she also favored goldtine, I felt another small connection bind us closer together.

“Have you found what you came for?” As soon as the question left my mouth, I dreaded the answer. It felt unbalanced to ask so shamelessly if Haron would come back to the palace and stay with me a while longer. Especially if she was planning to snap my neck by the end of the night. She was so difficult to read.

Her shoulders rose and fell almost imperceptibly. “My expectations were low to start with, but it doesn’t seem like anyone here knows more about Trisne than what I found on my own. Everyone assumes she just left Gilamorst.”

“Mmm,” I hummed noncommittally. Trying to keep my eagerness down was like trying to keep a geyser from erupting. “I will be sure to involve my spymaster to investigate Trisne’s... whereabouts as well.” It would be foolish to announce to anyone possibly hearing that Trisne Pid was, according to Haron, verydead. Considering she used the woman's body in a resurrection, I doubted it would be helpful to the investigation even if I could get its location out of Haron. She likely took note of everything worth finding.

“I appreciate the gesture, but I don’t think the culprit I’m looking for is stupid enough to be caught by the likes of the royal spymaster.”

I bristled at the dismissal. “You may be the only person in this room who so readily brushes my offers of help aside like they're bothersome bugs.”

Haron scoffed, and I could imagine her eyes rolling. Her head rolled in my direction and sent loose red curls slipping across her shoulder with the motion. It may bother other men to have their date be taller, but I personally enjoyed the chance to peek beneath the lace veil and see the enticing curl of Haron’s burgundy-painted lips.

“You would be surprised how long I’ve had to fend for myself, Prince Irin. Pardon me that I do not fall into your open arms at every hardship. Especially since you deemed my suspicions unfounded when I thought Forol could be involved.”

The sudden venomous bite to her tone had me stiffening my shoulders slightly. So she hadn't completely dropped him, it seemed. “I'd like to remind you that going off on your own... interrogations could result in imprisonment.” Maybe it was her straightforward approach or the indomitable spirit I saw that first day at the guild, but I couldn't see myself ever standing between her and a goal without being run over.

“At risk of offending you,” Haron leaned closer, her voice a husky whisper, “I would like to see you try throwing me into your little dungeon.”

A retort was on my tongue when a Highlan's son approached us. He bowed low to the both of us and raised his head to Haron. “Good evening, my lady. We had met earlier if you remember?”

“Of course! Sig Val Lerir, correct?”

Sig's answering smile was blinding.

“I am honored,” he said, reaching to take her free hand lightly and pulling her arm from where it looped through mine. The other still held a glass with remnants of goldtine. “Would you honor me further with a dance? I’ve heard you are quite the skilled dancer.”

Full-blown jealousy reared its ugly head out of nowhere. Behind my mask I was grating my teeth, watching him look up at Haron with those star-struck eyes. There was no fucking way I was letting her go off with this smarmy noble.

“Actually,” I cleared my throat. In a not-so-subtle gesture, my hand wrapped around

her lower back to rest on the opposite hip, “I was just about to leave with Lady Haron.” I turned to face her fully. The amusement practically oozed from her as she watched my very immature attempt to whisk her away. “I have... a particularly well-aged bottle of goldtine we could share in my quarters.”

“Well, I do love a good drink.” Gently she set her glass on a nearby table and turned back to Sig. “My apologies, but it seems the prince has not tired of my company yet. Who am I to deny him, right?” The words were innocent enough, but there was a bit of edge to them that gave an entirely different meaning. One that made me equally leery and restless.

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Sig's obvious disappointment could not be covered by his half-mask replicating a kistral's long face. At least he knew he was prey and dressed accordingly. "Of course... maybe next time. I'm sure we will meet at the next gathering. I look forward to our dance, then."

That last pointed jab had Haron chuckling as soon as he was out of earshot. "Seems like poor Sig may end up in the dungeons with me. I didn't take you for the possessive type, Irin," she teased.

Instead of taking the bait, I pulled her with me along the edge of the ballroom toward Pid's front door. Beolf waited dutifully in the corner and nodded as I jerked my head, gesturing our intent to leave. He fell into step seamlessly on Haron's other side.

"Did you find what you were hoping for?" he asked gruffly.

"No, but the princeling's feelings got the better of him when another man asked me to dance."

"Did not," I bit out, even as Haron laughed openly at my expense. The gall Haron possessed was truly baffling. "It's getting late, and as you said before, it doesn't seem like anyone here has information on Trisne."

We passed a particularly narrow hall to the right, and Haron nudged Beolf with an elbow. "Brings back memories, doesn't it? Although I will say Pid has bad taste in guard uniforms, it did not flatter your complexion at all—"

Beolf grumbled but otherwise ignored Haron's ribbing. "I'd rather scrub that

memory, and any other with you in it, from my mind.”

“Likewise, sir. Likewise.”

Haron didn’t comment on the fact the carriage took us both back to the palace, nor when I stepped from it and reached back to pull her out as well. Admittedly, my spirits were bolstered by the help of some free-flowing goldtine, but Haron had drunk considerably less as she’d mingled among the partygoers. Sometimes, it did seem like she was on the prowl, weaving through the crowd on her own when I was caught up in some casual conversation or another. She kept a wide berth from that guest, Forol, though, like she couldn’t stand to be in his general vicinity. I didn’t like his eyes tracking her across the room myself. Sure, he seemed a bit lecherous, but it hardly made him guilty of a crime like murder.

The fact that everyone walked out of the ballroom alive must have meant she didn’t find the evidence she needed, either.

“May I?”

I gestured to the veil still draped over her face. My own mask had been abandoned in the carriage, pulled off as soon as we took our seats inside it. But she breezed right past me, hardly acknowledging the question, and began to climb the short staircase leading to the castle’s main entry. Scoffing quietly at her silent confidence, I hurried the few steps she had on me to loop my arm through hers, bent from holding her skirts up. I was nothing if not an opportunist when it came to Haron.

“Considering our contract did not include escort services, I’d rather wait until we are in the privacy of your quarters to show my face. I doubt many, if anyone here, know I am your necromancer for hire and not some woman you’re dragging back to your room.”

“Shocking,” I retorted. “I didn’t think you cared much for what people thought of you.”

Haron almost jerked me off-balance when she came to a sudden halt on the stairs. While I couldn’t see the glare she shot me, I could certainly feel the heat of it on my face. It was like standing too close to an open forge.

“There’s a difference between caring what people think and maintaining a professional reputation.” Her voice was sharp, as if she were scolding a child. I felt rightly chastised and bowed my head.

A different kind of heat flushed my already-warm face, and I slowly reached for her bent elbow again like I would a snarling dog. “I apologize,” I murmured lowly. “I didn’t mean to offend you. That was... very inconsiderate of me.”

“No offense taken.” She extended her arm for me to take again. She had a way of making every interaction feel like a gulp of fresh water to quench a three-day thirst. I was grateful she even let me hold her arm on my own as we walked through the entryway of my castle.

“And,” Haron added, as if to break the tension, “I was promised some quality goldtine. I hope you’re going to follow through on that.”

I pulled her gently to the right, my laugh filling the hallway we stepped into that led to my private quarters. This late at night, none of the staff were up and bustling around as they would during the day. We’d only passed three guards—two at the entry and one stationed by my door—by the time we slipped into the private sitting room attached to my bedroom. Haron drifted further into the room, making her way to the pair of armchairs by the dead fireplace, as I broke away to the liquor bar tucked in the corner.

The familiar click of nails on the stone floor not covered by carpet was shortly followed by an enthusiastic bark and Haron laughing. I turned to find Behar circling Haron and prancing happily on his front paws, bouncing too much for her to place her hand on his head for pets. The sight of him so enthusiastically welcoming Haron into our private space sparked an emotion very close to warm admiration. Most women—not that I invited many to my chambers—didn't seem to like Behar or were downright afraid of the rinhound.

Haron finally knelt down on the red and gold rug and grabbed Behar by the scruff on either side of his head to give her own happy greeting. His tongue lolled out of his mouth at her vicious scrubbing on either side of his head. She only stopped when I brought her tumbler of goldtine over. Behar shot me a betrayed look when she took the glass and rose from the floor, effectively ending her shower of adoration on him.

“To beneficial relationships.”

She clinked her glass to mine. “By the way, how is your hand?” She gestured to the one I had my sharp ring on.

I had almost forgotten about the blood entirely, so much so I didn't bother to change the glove at the ball. I was sure that had the room talking about seeing the stain on my hand. I should have gone with black. I used my teeth to pull it off from the tip of my middle finger, catching the dirty glove with my one free hand to toss it on the closest armchair. The wound itself had already healed thanks to my beastwalker attributes, but the ring and all around it was crusted with dark blood. It was specifically designed for inflicting pain—a wiranblood flower in full bloom, cast in silver—with sharp thorns wrapping around the thick band. The royal jeweler thought I was insane for asking the ring to be painful by design, even as he lied and said it would be a stunning piece. It had been a long time since I had to deal with the more... unsavory tithe for lying, but I did whatever I could to avoid it at all costs.

Having to explain why I had the impulse to chop a finger off was not my idea of a pleasant conversation.

“Did you do that to yourself?” Haron asked, not the least bit disturbed by the sight. Actually, she seemed more fascinated by the ring's design, wrapping her fingers around the band and pulling it off shamelessly to test the pointed parts herself.

I sighed, not really wanting to explain the finer details of what I considered more of a curse. “It’s a... side effect that I have to a born gift. Well, maybe more of a coping mechanism.”

Haron remained silent from behind her veil, and I wanted even more now to pull it from her face to see what expression she hid beneath it. Was she disgusted, or skeptical?

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“I’m listening,” she spoke. It wasn’t until then that I realized I had lapsed into a long silence.

“There are not many known cases of it,” I began. “But those who share this... ability are called truthsayers. People who are very sensitive to auras, specifically when they distort from telling a lie to the point where it physically affects them. The gift, if you can call it that, manifested when I was a young boy, so I’ve had to learn how to cope with exposure to lies for a long time. Hence, the ring.”

I lifted my hand for her inspection, and Haron set the ring aside and moved to lightly grip my wrist to turn it. “So, this ring is designed to help you negate the side effects? Such as what?”

It was impressive how well she was taking this. I hadn’t told many people, mainly Beolf and my parents, and even then, it took a healthy dose of convincing for them to see the whole picture. “When I was young, I would become extremely nauseous, to the point of becoming bedridden sometimes. And if I told a lie... well, it was an even more unpleasant experience.”

“And this ring, you use it to distract your senses? Like displacing pain to lessen it?” she asked very matter-of-factly, still looking over the injury with the tumbler in her other hand.

Imagining any other lady of the court in a similar position almost brought a chuckle to my lips. They would have likely feigned being faint or otherwise worried over the hand like a doting mother. Haron's cool and detached perusal of the blood and self-inflicted injury was yet another refreshing take. It was almost like I could share any

matter of brutal and morbid parts of my life — my role as royalty, or what I had done to clear the path to rule — and she would be totally unbothered.

It was tempting, bringing her into the fold. I squashed the horrible idea as soon as it crept into my head.

“Yes, precisely.”

“Hmm...” The non-answer was maddening. “Did this happen when you were talking with that mother and her daughter at the ball?”

I blinked, shocked at her sharp observation. “Yes, I suppose it did. I usually end up a least a little bloody after attending those kinds of functions.” I tried to lighten the topic. “The amount of lies I have to tell to keep the nobles off my back would likely throw me into a coma otherwise.”

Haron hummed again, not giving away her thoughts on much.

“You are like a breath of fresh air, though. I have yet to meet someone besides Beolf who doesn’t lie on a regular basis. It’s something I admire greatly about you, given our short time knowing each other.”

Her head tilted down then, as if she were looking at the floor. Now the silence was maddening. “Did I... say too much?” I asked.

“No.” She let go of my wrist, and I mourned the loss of her touch. “I appreciate you telling me something like that. I’m sure it’s a difficult ability to live with. Thank you... for your honesty.”

She didn’t seem particularly affected by the information I just dropped on her head, but I was rattled all the same. I pulled the other glove off to toss it with its pair. “Shall

we cheers again?" My voice was hopeful.

This time, she laughed and clinked her cup to mine again. With the other hand, she reached to pull the veil from her head so she could take a drink unhindered.

I had been waiting all night to rip away the damn thing that hid her face. "No, allow me."

Fortunately, we were close enough to a side table set between the two chairs for me to reach over and set my drink down. Haron waited patiently for me to remove the headpiece, but I could feel her smirking at me before I even saw the hint of her full lips peek from beneath the fabric. As much as I would have liked to yank it from her head, I carefully pulled the pins holding it to her hair so it would not disturb the elegant twist she had styled it into.

A groan tried to fight its way from my throat when her face was finally exposed. Maybe it was the alcohol, or the tension that had built when she hadn't been by my side at Pid's ball, but this close, her beauty was enough to make the gods weep. Being able to look this closely into those mesmerizing eyes, I realized the left one appeared entirely black. The whole iris was overtaken by her pupil, leaving such a small sliver of it behind there was no way of telling what color it was.

"Did you suffer from a head injury on this side?" My thumb brushed the corner of her left temple.

She smirked, stepping back to take a small sip of her drink. "Is that a subtle way of asking why I'm here in this room with you, alone? Because I've fallen and hit my head?"

The insult was so underhanded it took me a minute to realize it, but when I did, a deep, belly-shaking laugh almost had me bending over. Haron was chuckling too,

holding her elbow with her free hand and keeping the glass lifted close to her face as she wandered around the room. Behar followed behind with his tail wagging as if showing her the space.

“I didn’t mean to infer you were brain damaged.” I finally managed to speak, after much gasping and wiping tears from my eyes. “But the way your pupil is dilated, I have only seen something similar when Beolf fell from his kistral in our adolescent years. The healer had checked his eyes, and the right one looked just like yours. He was put on bedrest for a week over it and complained the whole time.”

Haron scoffed. “Well, in his case, it probably is a brain injury. That would explain a lot, actually. Have you checked his eyes recently? It could still be there.”

“Be nice. I told you, he’s a childhood friend and my general.”

She hummed again, another non-answer, wandering around the edge of the room until she came back to my side. “You two seem very close,” she observed.

It wasn’t a question, but I answered anyway. “Yes. We grew up together, trained together... his father was more of a father figure than my own. And he was the previous general until a couple of years ago. He was kicked in the chest by an untamed kistral. It killed him instantly.”

She pressed her glass to the center of her own chest as if in sympathy. “That is unfortunate. But,” Haron sipped her goldtine again, “I am happy you have someone like him as an ally, even if he is a blundering idiot. I don’t have to like him to respect his loyalty to you.”

A wistful look crossed her face then, eyes going distant as if recalling a memory.

“Do you keep in touch with your childhood friend? I assume even you have one.” I

tried to hide my curiosity with a little joke. I wanted to know everything about her, whatever scraps of information she was willing to drop for me.

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She smiled, still with that faraway expression. “I did. But, as I’m sure you’re aware, it’s frowned upon for necromancers to contact their own loved ones from the afterlife. He has been dead for a long time.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I managed to say around the jostle of jealousy and embarrassment. It was bad enough I couldn’t stand her dancing with someone, but a dead friend? I was disgusted with myself, and a bit ashamed to joke about her having a childhood friend. Hopefully Haron couldn’t pick up on my bitter emotions as I quickly hid behind another sip of goldtine.

She shrugged, resting the glass against her collarbone and drawing my eye to the elegant curve of her bones, even as they were covered with intricate black lace. “As I said, it was a long time ago. Olin and I were born within a month of each other, so we had always been together. And his mother, Sinna,” Haron chuckled fondly. “Talk about a force of nature! The woman chided us both in equal measures...” Her voice trailed off, sadness pulling down at the corners of her dark red lips. I berated myself for bringing up what were obviously painful memories to recall.

“I’m... very sorry for bringing them up. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Haron glanced over, and she tried to pull a small smile over her pain. “Life is not worth living without loss. That’s how we learn to treasure what we have.”

Both of our glasses were empty already, so I reached for hers. I kept my movements slow and intentional even as my fingertips brushed the delicate lace of her glove. She didn’t move away. “Would you like a refill?”

“Only if it doesn’t empty your barrels.”

While we didn’t empty all the barrels in the palace, two of my decanters were woefully empty by the time I tossed Haron onto the massive bed covered in all matters of finely woven burgundy blankets. She seemed pleasantly surprised I was able to carry her through the parlor with her legs twined around my back, given the handful of inches in height she had on me. I hoped to surprise her in many ways tonight.

The husky laugh she gave sent delicious shivers down my spine. At the last rational moment, I waved my hand over the everflame candelabra set on my bedside table, bathing the light in its cool purple glow just bright enough to admire her laid out on my bed. Haron had pushed up onto her elbows to watch me drop my shoes on the floor and hers along with them, a knowing smile on her face when my gaze landed on how the position accentuated her bust.

“I’m happy to see you’re mostly civilized, Your Highness,” she teased. "But I hope this will be the last of it tonight."

My hand gripped her right ankle and slid slowly up under her voluminous skirts to trace the toned muscles beneath sienna skin. The catch in her breath was like blood scented on the wind, making that dark, beastly desire in my chest lift its head and uncurl. A low growl, too deep for her to hear, rumbled between my ribs. Haron’s long fingers reached to undo the small buttons down the center of her dress, nimbly undoing the fabric to reveal the rest of her skin to my hungry eyes and pull her arms through the short sleeves. By the time I made my way up to her waist, the dress was bunched from the top and bottom.

“Allow me.”

This time, Haron didn’t stop my offer to help remove her clothes. It was a

monumental effort to slip my fingers beneath the fine material to pull the rest of the way down and not shred it from her body like the beast demanded. Pulling them from her was like unwrapping the best present.

“Close your mouth, little princeling. Your tongue is hanging out like Behar’s.”

There wasn’t enough time for my brain to think up a witty response before Haron reached down to twist her hands in the front of my dress shirt and yank me further up the bed. With a clever twist I ended up beneath her, and the smile that split her face was equal parts attractive and terrifying. For a moment, my liquor-addled brain conjured her hands wrapping around my throat with that same smile as she watched the life leave my eyes.

The night is still young, I suppose.

My hands found their way to her wide hips as she deftly unbuttoned my shirt, giving me a few moments uninterrupted to admire her beautiful body. I’d had my fair share of lovers, but most of the women in the noble houses prided themselves on being as thin and delicate as possible. Everything about Haron told of a life outdoors, despite the noticeable fairness of her skin not touched often by the sun. Freckles sprinkled down both arms and across the bridge of her nose, and sinewy muscles rippled under my hands as she shifted her position. The dim light caught on a few raised scars across her torso and stomach, further hinting at a rougher life than the ladies who typically threw themselves at me.

Everything about Haron Val Toric drew me in like no other. Her confidence, her passion, her demand for justice, and even this more unhinged side of her. I wanted to sink beneath her skin and never leave.

“Where are you drifting off to, Irin?” Her sultry voice seemed to twine with the darkness itself, adding an extra depth and huskiness. I realized belatedly she had

managed to strip my pants off entirely, leaving me laid out in just my undone shirt beneath her. Haron ran her sharp nails down my body lightly, bringing forth a violent shiver at the slight bite of pain that came with them. “Am I boring you?”

I answered breathlessly. “Not at all. I just... you’re so beautiful.”

That feral smile she wore grew a little soft, and she slid her palms back up to grip my shoulders. “Flattery gets you everywhere, Your Highness. But you already have me in bed, so there’s no need to shower me with praises now.”

“I mean it.” My voice was deep and sincere. “I’m the luckiest man in the world right now.”

“Mmmm,” was the only answer—and maybe warning—I got before Haron rose over my hips enough to slip her hand between us and angle my dick to sink onto.

The euphoric look that crossed her face was one I would never forget for all my days. It burned itself into my brain and ruined me for any other woman I ever bedded after this. Her head fell back, a low moan left her lips, and I couldn’t help but run my hands up along her stomach to squeeze her full breasts. They filled my hands so perfectly I never wanted to let go.

If I hadn’t been entranced by this woman before, I definitely was now.

Watching Haron rise and fall on my cock was like seeing the goddess Wira take human form, the duality of death and sensuality merging before my eyes in her wild grin and the spark in that vivid blue eye. The other was as black as a void, one that I would gladly lose myself in. Long nails dug into my chest as if trying to tear through the skin to my heart, and when she began to drag them down, fiery trails were left in their wake. The hiss that escaped my lips could have been from pain or overwhelming pleasure. I drew my legs up to plant my feet into the bed, giving

myself some more leverage to thrust up into her as much as she was driving down onto me. Haron leaned back ever so slightly to press her back to the tops of my thighs, and the new angle made my eyes roll back in my head.

“H-Haron.” The moan that became her name was almost embarrassing. “Gods, Haron, you feel incredible. Go slower.”

“How do you ask, Your Highness?” The way she said my title was clearly a taunt. We both knew I had no power in this moment, and she was reveling in it. Never had I experienced a woman who took charge in the bedroom like she did, and it was surprisingly exhilarating. If anyone had the power to topple my authority, it would be Haron Val Toric.

What she didn’t know was I would give this whole fucking kingdom to her if she only asked.

“Please.”

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That word, whispered from some deep part of my heart, seemed to feed her fiery passion like dry kindling to a bonfire. I couldn't do much more than hold onto her hips as she rode me, gritting my teeth to keep from making too much noise. I had already given up enough. Haron's enchanting eyes bore into mine, hardly blinking like a predator with its prey in sight. Every place her skin touched mine felt like it was a second from catching fire with how hot she burned.

Maybe that was it. This wasn't sex. Haron was devouring me, and I would gladly sacrifice myself in that fire.

"Mmmm..." Haron's voice cracked on a deep groan and her head fell back again, loose on her elegant neck. The way her back arched was so tantalizing, some of the joints along her spine cracking from the stretch. "I want to hear you, Irin."

She lifted slowly, the muscles in her toned thighs quivering with the effort, and lowered just as deliciously, aching slow. The way everything in her pelvis seemed to clench around me almost to the point of pain drew another moan from somewhere deep in my chest. I made to pull Haron over and reverse our positions when her hands slammed back into my chest and shoved me back to the bed.

"Where are you going?" The question was poisoned—deadly if answered with the wrong antidote of an answer. Her head had tilted up so her piercing stare could pin me in place. "Not comfortable having a woman on top?"

I laughed, completely breathless, as she kept her slow pace up and down. "Actually, my ass is starting to cramp in this position. I was hoping you'd be a little more cooperative with a switch."

Haron blinked. I tried and failed to smother an awkward chuckle. Then, the most glorious sound I ever heard burst from her lips and shook her whole body. Her laughter filled the whole bedroom and jostled the bed, giving more unneeded stimulation to my already painfully stiff cock.

“Such a charmer,” Haron teased lightly. She rose off the cradle of my legs, and I immediately mourned the loss of her wet warmth. “Here, move up a bit. There, with your back to the wood.”

She remained kneeling high enough for me to slide my legs higher on the bed until I propped my back against the carved headboard. With a smirk sexy enough to fry what parts of my brain hadn’t already melted, she crawled the short distance back into my lap. Her arms bracketed my head on either side to grip the edge of the wood tightly. Just the slightest brush of the soft skin on her forearms drove me wild all over again.

Gods, she was everything I never knew to ask for in a woman.

I lifted my hands from where they clutched the bed sheets on either side of my hips, moving to grip her again, when Haron shook her head. We were so close, the tip of her nose brushed against mine.

“No sir, no touching. Just sit there and take it.”

I had to bite my lip to keep the hungry whimper from creeping out. “Gods, Haron...”

I didn’t even know what to beg for at this point. My teeth dug into my bottom lip hard enough to taste blood when she placed one fingertip on my chest, gliding it down ever so slowly until the warm skin of her palm wrapped around my length. Her hands had calluses along its arch like my own, gained from regularly gripping and swinging a sword, and they added just the slightest edge of roughness against the most

sensitive part of me. That contradictory sensation sent another wave of shivers up my spine.

I didn't think it was possible to be this tortured during sex. But like everything else regarding Haron, she was more than happy to blow my beliefs right out of the water.

A particularly rough twist of her wrist pulled another whimper from me. "Haron... Haron... Gods, I can't—"

"Oh, but you can." She leaned forward, her hand and the insides of her thighs against the only parts of her touching me, and lightly brushed her lips against mine. "You can be a good boy for me, can't you?"

Haron nipped my bottom lip, pulling it slightly as she pinned it between her straight teeth, and something in me snapped from its mooring.

The beastwalker form I usually kept under tight restraint broke its chains, bringing on a partial transformation so fast I couldn't catch it in time to pull back. The world shifted to the more vivid colors of its enhanced sight, and I could feel my jaw crack and begin to shift to take on an elongated shape. It stopped just short of a full shift, bearing a mouth full of fangs growing over the normal teeth and I snarled loudly. Fur began to sprout along my arms, chest, and the tops of my thighs in a thick, black pelt. The claws blessedly didn't grow in, but my hands grew in proportion to the rest of my body, stretching out and taking more space on the already large bed.

Through it all, Haron watched with a kind of excitement not found in a normal, rational person. Even as a half-beast, it felt more like she was about to eat me.

"Ah, there he is," she cooed, running her hands down my chest before moving them back up to bury her fingers in the thick fur that had already sprouted across my shoulders. "I was hoping to see this side of you. I don't want a tame little princeling

in bed.”

“It’s... dangerous,” I managed to say, although the words were becoming garbled by the resounding growl that started low in my throat. Combined with the alcohol already taking its toll on my mind, this was the worst possible situation I could be in for sex. At least, sex that didn’t end up with someone getting mauled.

Haron had the audacity to roll her eyes. If she wasn’t so damn attractive, I’d wring her neck for her recklessness.

Instead of proceeding with caution, the woman buried her hand in my hair and wrenched my head to the side, eliciting a much louder growl from the slight discomfort. Then she pressed her face to the crook of my neck and bit down on the strained muscle even through the layer of fur. It was in that very moment I came to a very important, disturbing realization about us both.

Haron was possibly more feral than me in this form, and I was thoroughly enjoying it.

“Haron...” Her name was a rumble in my chest. I panted heavily as she continued to bite her way up my neck and along my jaw toward my mouth, even as my teeth were clenched tight in a last effort to maintain control. “Don’t.”

She caught my mouth in a brutal kiss, nipping my lips until they opened to let her in. My fists twisted so tightly in the sheets I could hear them ripping, and she took that brief moment of distraction to sink onto my cock again. The moan she breathed into my mouth was swallowed up by my responding snarl, and all my heightened senses narrowed to focus on her smell, her heat, the feel of her slick pussy almost strangling me with how tightly she clung to every throbbing inch. I hadn’t even realized I’d closed my eyes until a dark chuckle from her lips made them snap open.

Finally, I had enough of being the underdog in this bed.

A surprisedoofleft her smiling lips when I flipped us over, both of our heads now closer to the foot of the bed as I loomedover her sprawled body. I managed to stay inside her and used the extra momentum to shove myself as deep as her body would allow. Haron gritted her teeth against the pain I'm sure she felt when I drove deeper, but we were already far past gentle touches and considerate murmurs of praise.

“Just remember,” I brought my face closer to hers, ruffling the loose pieces of hair around her face with my heaving pants of hot air, “You started this.”

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A frantic, hungry light sparked bright in that one blue eye, and her sharp nails dug so deep into my back I'd be surprised if there wasn't blood springing beneath them.

"Do your worst, Irin. But don't make empty promises."

Her words, almost as bestial of a snarl as mine, unhinged me completely.

One of my hands wrapped around her throat, the span almost large enough to touch my fingertips at the back, and I let my hips swing freely as I pulled back and drove into her at a wild pace. Her own hand snapped up to hold mine and slipped a couple of fingers in between my palm and the front of her throat, like she was making sure I wouldn't grip tight enough to choke her. Somehow, that made the whole experience that much more potent. She trusted me to keep my control, but was also prepared to react if she felt threatened.

My release slammed into me, shooting straight into my brain with the most potent feeling of relief mixed with carnal satisfaction I'd ever felt in my life. It was like taking that first gulp of air after being underwater, the feeling of depriving myself of something and getting it back all at once, sending my senses reeling almost to the point of blacking out. Haron was right on the edge of falling over into that pit with me. I could tell by the way she clenched so deliciously and began to tremble. Her free hand slipped down between us, the back of it sliding against my tensed abs, and that was all it took to snap me from my stupor.

I wanted to be the one to push her over that edge to insanity. I wanted to be the only one responsible for her coming all over my cock.

“I don’t fucking think so.” I nipped her jaw and pushed her hand out of the way before those creeping fingers made their way to her clit. “This pussy is mine.”

Haron threw her head back, pushing it as far as she could into the mattress as her back bowed up to make as much friction as she could, and laughed. She laughed like I’d said the most absurd thing, even as I continued to pound the rest of my release into her.

“Then fucking do something with it, little princeling.”

The fact she didn’t deny my claim brought a triumphant smile to my lips that her eyes locked onto. Instead of pushing herself to her own orgasm, she wrapped her hand around my own throat to mimic my own. That was all the permission I needed to plunge my own hand down and press the pads of my fingers against her clit. It was already so slick they slipped smoothly across the nub, and her answering gasp had saliva pooling in my mouth. How she brought out equal instincts to tear a claiming bite into her shoulder and drive my cock impossibly deep threatened to make my thoughts scatter completely.

“Ungh, gods!”

That. That was it. That feminine cry from Haron’s lips decided for me. Every muscle in her body seemed to contract as one, squeezing me so impossibly tight in her channel that my next thrust hardly drew me from her. The taste of blood flooded my mouth, and I realized I’d bitten the inside of my cheek to keep a beastly howl from erupting past my clenched teeth. Instead, my hips snapped forward to finally bury myself all the way inside her, just as the last of my release shuddered through me.

Her responding groan was so enticing I wanted to eat her whole.

Instead, I settled for running my tongue up her neck until I reached her mouth, still

gasping for air, and hungrily kissed her swollen lips. Haron wrapped her arms loosely around my neck, her face holding the softest, most satisfied expression with a heavy-lidded stare. My hips tucked closer to hers, unwilling to let myself slip out of her warmth just yet.

“That,” she gasped, once she could break loose from my lips. “Was well worth the risk of being eaten alive.”

I froze. My eyes narrowed slightly as I glared from above, braced on my elbows to keep from crushing her. Although at this very moment, Haron could probably use a little smothering. A disbelieving snort left my mouth, and I rolled my eyes. “You’re insane,” I muttered.

“Probably.” She propped herself up on her elbows to kiss the tip of my nose. “Now let me up, so I can clean myself a bit.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” A wolfish grin spread across my lips. I lowered myself down slowly, making sure every inch of skin on the fronts of our bodies rubbed on the way, until my hands gripped her hips, and my face was just above her enticing cunt. Keeping her interested gaze, I ran my tongue through her folds all the way up to her clit, applying just enough pressure to make her squirm in my tight hold.

“I’ll be sure to clean you thoroughly.”

Chapter Ten

Haron

Today, I finally had the opportunity to visit the remnants of Julra and the Clifftombs. Requesting approval from the

rest of the Council was challenging. They feared the land was tainted, cursed by whatever twisted magic the

Golathian spellcasters set loose on the world. Sinna insisted on joining me for the short journey. She said she had to

see for herself the remains of her country. She needed closure, to accept the royal family she clearly loved was truly

gone.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 39 of Ber's First Reign

I thought it was considerate enough to give Jinon a couple of days to recoup from his little party before paying him a visit myself. This time, I was much more confrontational as he stepped into his study, dressed in his night clothes as if going to bed soon. Since leaving Irin sprawled on his bed early yesterday morning, I tried to keep my head low and my presence absent from The Hanging Cat, in case he came looking for me again. I couldn't afford to be distracted, even with the promise of good dick. Most of the past two days were spent searching the surrounding Ber's Forest for more poorly hidden bodies. If Trisne's body was more than a one-off result of a ritual, I would have a much larger problem on my hands than a neglectful father. There hadn't been others tucked away in the forest to rot... yet.

Despite the current setting, my toes curled in their boots just thinking about my night with the little princeling. There were no regrets to be had, but I certainly couldn't afford to be led astray from my true mission.

What was wrong with having a little fun, though?

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The delicious recollections were rudely interrupted with the study's everflame sconces flickering on as a body entered the doorway.

“Good evening, Jinon.”

He hadn't seen me sitting behind his desk, still covered in the shadows I manipulated to hide myself, so he rightfully screamed and fell against the wall by the door with a hand pressed to his chest. His beady little eyes landed on me soon enough, and immediately his face turned a ruddy red.

“What the... who in the gods' hell do you think you are? How did you get in here?”

“The same way I did last time.” I leaned forward a bit, just enough for the moonlight to fall across my face for him to see. “I recommend you call off your guards before they end up as revenants shambling through your house again.”

Whatever color he'd managed to collect in his rounded cheeks promptly drained out. At least he was quick enough to realize I wasn't fucking around. Just in time, too, as a heavy hand pounded on the study door. “Sir?” the gruff voice called out. “We heard you yell, are you alright?”

Jinon glared at me balefully. “I'm... I'm fine. Just thought I saw something run across the floor.”

I tried my best not to laugh at his response. Regardless, it was enough to satisfy the questioning guard. The rattling of his armor grew fainter as he moved back down the hall to his post.

“What do you want?” Jinon hissed. “I know all about you, Haron Val Toric! How dare you break into my home a second time. Just wait until the patrol hears—”

“You’re not going to say a damn thing to anyone,” I interrupted him. From inside my traveling coat, I pulled the bundle of letters I’d stolen from his desk and dropped them with a dull thud on his desk. “And we both know why I’m sitting in this chair.”

He sputtered, his face turning the same dark red shade as his night robe. “I...I don’t know what you’re talking about, necromancer!”

“Oh really? So, when I hand over this very incriminating evidence that your daughter’s life was threatened for over a month, you won’t look guilty for not reporting that? I know this country doesn’t give a shit about its women, but even that is punishable by the law. And should I include the location of the unmarked grave her body was very poorly hidden in?”

Showing my hand now was less than ideal. I had hoped to chase out Trisne’s killer by obviously poking around Jinon’s ball. None of my traps had been sprung yet, so I had to resort to more brutal forms of hunting. And Jinon was about to make the perfect bait.

“You... you have no proof! How you can accuse me of killing my own daughter is outrageous! Gilamorst will benefit from ridding itself of a madwoman like you!” The conviction in his voice was sadly lacking.

“Oh yeah? And who’s going to do that? You?” The laugh I barked made Jinon flinch again. What a weakling. “What makes you think I’m not acting under Prince Irin’s orders? Don’t you think a bridal candidate gone missing wouldn’t catch his attention?”

His eyes widened so far I could see the whites all the way around. One of them was

even twitching. He may have stopped breathing from the way his face was starting to turn purple now.

Ah, the first scent of blood.

“See, that’s where you messed up.” I shoved the massive desk away with a strong kick, sending the legs screaming across the stone floor until it hit the carpet Jinon stood on. “It would have been a lot less suspicious to just let Trisne go on her way to the Covenant Library and kill her outside the city limits for the animals to take the body. But putting her in the Royal Council’s sights? Of course, they will be alarmed when she disappears. The pool of eligible noblewomen is already shallow enough—I’m sure that has nothing to do with the mysteriously high mortality rate of baby girls in this wretched city—so to put her up on the chopping block only to let her be raped and killed is a bad look for you, Highlan.”

Jinon was a jittery mess at this point. His hands clenched the sides of his breeches like a child being scolded, and his pudgy face was all screwed up like he was about to cry. Pathetic. “He didn’t give me a choice.”

“Who?” I roared, shaking the glass windows violently in their frames with its amplified rage. “Who. Killed. Trisne?” I bolted from the chair so fast it toppled back and stormed to the displaced desk. My hands wrapped around the end closest to me and I threw it clear across the study to the right wall. It slammed hard enough to punch a hole straight through the plaster and break some of the bricks that made the fireplace beside it.

Then I used those hands to twist into Jinon’s collar and lift him off the ground. His toes in their shiny boots barely scrambled across the floor as he thrashed in my hold. My grip was tight enough to be unmovable, even as he clawed at my hands in desperation. Sweat, tears and snot now dripped down his face in the most unattractive sniveling.

“I... I cannot say.”

A dark patch now spread across the front of his loose pants and tracked down his left leg. There was no pity in my heart for men like him, so willing to toss away his children as soon as they were no longer useful. In his eyes, Trisne was dead to him as soon as she revoked her name from the council's list to marry Irin. That was why he hadn't bent to the blackmail or reacted to the news of her assault.

“You cannot say, or you will not?” When he hesitated, I shook his limp body violently. “You already knew Trisne was dead, or at least assumed, when you sent your little knight looking for me. So, tell me, you do not know who killed her, or you will not tell me?”

“I don't know! I don't... I don't know who it was!” His wailing made me sick to my stomach. I dropped him right onto his ass, and he looked up at me with a combination of fear and anger. The urge to kick his teeth in almost overtook me.

“Last question,” I snarled. “Who is Forol Hent to you?”

Jinon's chest rose and fell so fast I thought he was going to faint from hyperventilation. “Who?”

My hands curled into claws at my sides. His beady brown eyes darted to them, probably worried I would haul him back into the air.

“I s-swear, I don't know who that is! Ask my family, my staff, anyone! I have no idea who you are talking about!”

That little piece of information set my whole webs to tangled knots. If Jinon had no idea who Forol was, how could he be a close acquaintance? “I fucking knew it,” I spat. “I knew there was something wrong with him!”

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“If you want, I can help find—” Jinon began to simper. Ever the opportunist, looking for a way to worm into what he assumed was the prince’s good graces. I didn’t bother correcting him.

“You’re fucking useless to me.” I kicked his now-wet leg to the side to move it out of my way, stalking around him to the study’s exit. He needed to feel like I was done with him before he went running off to whoever was really pulling his puppet strings. “Give your wife my regards. She seems to be the only one in this house in actual mourning.”

Maids gasped and guards tensed as I stormed by them in the hallway toward the front door. I’m sure the word had spread about my last visit, and they wanted nothing to do with me this time. It was for the best; the rage and bloodlust pumped so thickly through my veins right now, I wasn’t entirely sure what I would do to the first unfortunate soul who got in my way.

Maybe I was too close to Trisne’s tragic death. Maybe I was acting irrationally when it came to finding her killer. But if it wasn’t me, who would find justice for her?

Chapter Eleven

Irin

I wish I had seen Julra in its prime. Even as a hollow shell of its former glory, I now understand the love and

admiration its people have, regardless of the harsh climate. Rolling hills covered the

land, now covered with the

green sprigs of new growth after the Chilled season. And the Clifftombs... I'm not sure if I could adequately describe

the majestic, stalwart beauty of the Julran palace. Backed by the Hiranian Sea, its architecture was all sweeping lines

and arches reaching to the heavens. The walls surrounding it seemed to have grown from the ground itself, built

with the very stone that made the cliffs it stood on. The drawbridge was closed, despite the refugees' accounts that

the Clifftombs was stormed. Was it possible there were survivors hidden here, after all?

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 39 of Ber's First Reign

If there was a way to get out of court hearings without maiming myself, I wish someone would tell me. Father used to love this part of being a ruler, having everyone in the land come crawling at his feet and simpering to get into his good graces. As soon as I was old enough to fill my time with tutoring, I would beg my instructor to schedule my lessons so I could avoid attending court with him. This was literal torture.

The only saving grace was being able to keep Behar at my side and Beolf's supportive presence by the column ten paces to my right. My fingers tunneled through the thick fur on top of Behar's head to scratch at his scalp, and his black tongue lolled out as he panted in contentment. Maybe it was a side effect of being

bonded to him as a beastwalker, but I was always more irritable and high-strung when I couldn't have him near me. It made for many miserable council meetings. They couldn't tolerate having what they called a "beast" in their precious sessions.

The burning memories of being with Haron filled the rest of my absent daydreaming as I tried to appear attentive to the whining nobles. Even three days later, her moans still rang in my ears and sent chills down my spine. That may have been the only time I was grateful for the beast and its heightened senses, because I got to experience sex in an immersion I never had before. And I couldn't wait until the next chance I'd get to drown in Haron.

"Your next guest is Highlan Gennel Rhen, Your Highness."

Something about that name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it. "Please send him in," I called from the throne, trying my best to hide my profound disdain at being pulled from my thoughts. "How many are remaining?"

"Twelve, sire."

Beolf tried to hide his laugh behind a cough and failed miserably. "Don't worry, Prince Irin. Your schedule is completely clear today. Don't feel like you have to rush through your visitors."

Behar whined as if sympathizing. The scathing glare I shot over my shoulder as the butler turned to let the Highlan in made his stupid lips twitch in his stupid beard. "Thank you for the reminder, General Zirch," I grated out between clenched teeth.

His response was cut short by the creak of the grand hall's doors echoing through the massive room. My shoulders threatened to climb up my neck from the nerve-grating sound. I must have done a good enough job, because the man who walked through had a pleasant—if not absolutely beaming—smile on his face.

“Your Highness.” He stopped and bowed low. It felt a bit ridiculous that he called down the hall instead of waiting to move closer before speaking, but such was common practice. “Thank you for the gift of your attention this afternoon.”

I waved a hand to invite him forward. “Of course. I am honored you took time to come and speak with me.”

That familiar twinge of speaking a half-truth twisted my stomach. As subtle as I could manage, I clenched my fist tight enough to send a shot of pain up my arm, in hopes that was enough to quell the reaction. The same ring I wore for the ball was set in place on my middle finger, its thorns digging deep into the sensitive skin. But now the sensation was coupled with a slight tingle, a taunt of heat, thinking of Haron pulling the ring off to admire for herself. And the night we spent after that... I had to catch myself from wandering down that lust-cobbled path, if I was going to bear another civil conversation with a noble.

This Highlan was not one I was familiar with, but that was true for half of the nobility. He seemed close to my age—maybe somewhere in his early-to-mid thirties—with the typical blonde hair and brown eyes of Resparian stock. His skin lacked the tanner shade of pure Resparians, making the freckles sprinkled along his nose even more prominent against the paler color. Gennel kept with the popular clothing trend of a loose, long-sleeved tunic cinched in at the waist with a vest corset. Intricately-stitched red berries and golden fall foliage lined its edges, and it was paired with tight-fitting leather pants and knee-high riding boots. A heavy cloak dyed a purple so deep it bordered black was pushed back from his shoulders and lined with dark trebregon fur. Its sheen caught in the bright light of the everflame chandelier and wall mounts and showed a brilliant multicolor shift across the dense hair.

Again, that nagging feeling in my mind grew even stronger, seeing that cloak. Trebregon was not a particularly popular fur choice this far south, due to its extreme density. Most of them lived in the north, closer to the border of the Hollows and the

ruins of Julra. A memory tried to break loose, but from where I wasn't certain.

When he reached the bottom step of the raised platform I sat on, the Highlan bowed low again. "I have yet to meet you in person, and I am very grateful to be received."

Surprisingly, that did not rub against my senses as a lie. I was shocked to hear a growl rumble from Behar, though. Confused, I glanced down to see what could be upsetting him. He was still sitting on his haunches, but his large, ridged ears laid flat against his head as his eyes stayed locked on Gennel. Behar's teeth were fully bared to the point as saliva began to pool and drip from his curled lips. Even as I watched in bewilderment, his hackles began to rise with every step Gennel took.

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He'd never acted like this during court visits before. Or ever, really. Gennel cleared his throat, obviously nervous of the huge rinhound currently growling at him.

"Thank you for waiting to see me," I finally answered, my eyes still on Behar and his strange behavior. I shifted on my throne, poised to catch him if Behar decided he wanted to lunge at our guest. "I admit your name and family are not familiar to me, have you recently moved to Gilamorst?"

He rose back to full height, an easy smile showing perfect white teeth brightening his face. If he was nervous, Gennel was good at hiding it. "I have resided in Gilamorst for the last five years or so, moving from the City of Scholars after studying under my father as a treasurer, may his soul rest in peace. But by practice, I am a hydromancer."

"My condolences for the loss of your father."

Gennel waved his hand as if shooing the words away. "No need, Your Highness. He was afflicted with a rather aggressive disease while we lived in the City of Scholars and passed before I moved away. Mother followed him shortly after, so in a way it was a blessing they did not live long without each other."

I hummed noncommittally. "I see. Have you considered joining the Gilamorst Hydromancy Guild?"

"I have, but my family comes from a long line of financiers, so I will likely stay with the Guild of Finances to honor my father's last wishes. I study hydromancy as more of a hobby since I have a natural affinity for it. But you may be familiar with my

mother's relatives, the Britons?"

That name did ring a bell. "Yes, yes, there is a Nebold Briton who leads the Necromancy Guild. That is interesting... you didn't want to pursue a similar field?"

Gennel's face twisted out of its pleasant expression into one of slight disgust. "Gods, no! Necromancy is..." He didn't even finish the thought. A visible shudder overtook him. "That is a rather unnatural magic practice, don't you think? The dead should be left well enough alone. Let them rest in Wira's embrace."

"I agree, but I don't take offense to those who study that field of magic. So, you don't have contact with your mother's family?" I leaned to the left and propped my chin on a fist as my leg crossed over the other knee, keeping my right hand on Behar's head to idly twist his fur between my thumb and forefinger. He was so tall, even sitting, that it wasn't much of a stretch to reach over the armrest. "That seems a bit extreme to cut off a whole limb of the family tree, especially since her passing. You haven't felt the need to connect with them while in Gilamorst?"

Gennel shrugged. If I was prodding too deeply into his personal life, he wasn't showing discomfort from it. "We are not particularly close, no. Mother was not a practitioner in general, so it made it even easier to separate herself from that side of her family."

"Understandable. Necromancy is not a proper profession for most women, I would say." As the words left my mouth, my thoughts turned to the only female necromancer I did know. Haron was a breed unto her own, even excluding her chosen field of magic. Looking at Gennel Rhen in all his prim manners and proper speech, I could not imagine someone like him being raised by a woman like Haron Val Toric. Just thinking about that scenario almost made me laugh aloud. "Did your mother study another branch of magic?"

“Absolutely not!” Gennel waved the thought away. “Women have no place in practicing magic. Their dispositions are much too unstable, too emotional, to be able to harness its unpredictable nature.”

I opened my mouth to agree, but thought again of the account Beolf gave in his brief—and apparently very traumatic—encounter with Haron at Highlan Pid’s manse. How he recounted the corpse she reanimated to attack the guards kept me up for nights after. Four people were gravely injured that night. Fortunately, the healers were called in time to save them from bleeding out, but two of those guards were permanently maimed—one had deep cuts across his face and the other lost half his hand from getting bitten off. She could be an anomaly, sure... but in my life the very few female healers I knew who served in the royal army were all very gifted in their field. Not that they received any kind of recognition or promotion for those accomplishments.

That was unheard of in Respar.

“And that belief is what brings me to the main purpose of my meeting.”

My eyes narrowed with suspicion. Behar’s growls grew even more threatening. “I thought you were coming to introduce yourself.”

“I was,” he answered innocently enough, but his eyes shifted nervously to Behar and back. “But I also have a concern to report regarding a certain... woman I heard about. One that goes by the name of Haron Val Toric.”

Beolf was having a harder time keeping his noises to himself. Another snort, poorly disguised as a cough because he's not that creative, had us both turning our heads to stare at him. “Sorry,” he tapped his chest with a fist. “Must be coming down with something.”

“What of this woman? Did she attack you?” I tried to keep my tone even and unbiased, despite the beast inside me wanting to rage against whoever thought to speak badly of her. For all her strong-willed mannerisms, I would never suspect Haron of attacking someone without provocation. Even when I first saw her at the guild, she didn't retaliate until the guild member laid his hands on her.

Gennel's head rocked from side to side. “Not personally,” he began hesitantly. “But I heard from some reliable sources that she brought a revenant to the Necromancy Guild's front door. Has the guildmaster not contacted you about this yet?”

“I hadn't heard about this incident from him, no. But I'm sure if the guildmaster thought he couldn't handle it himself, he would send a request. Would your reliable source happen to be Nebold?” I was careful to word my response so it wasn't a blatant lie. I had, in fact, heard about this. But it was from Haron, further undermining Nebold's schemes. While I didn't exactly agree with her methods, this was out of my jurisdiction until Nebold brought a formal complaint against her. Guild matters stayed within the guilds, unless there was a murder involved.

Although Haron seemed to be toeing that line, hauling a revenant to the guild's door.

Gennel shifted uneasily on his feet, the perfect picture of a concerned citizen. “Perhaps, although the source of my information is irrelevant. It's quite shocking to hear of a necromancer strong enough to actually animate a corpse. Doesn't that make you... uneasy?”

My eyebrow cocked. “How so? I trust the guild to be able to manage their constituents, and Haron has not given any indication of being out of control with regard to following the laws of Respar.”

“Of course,” he pandered. “But someone that powerful, especially a woman, would need to be closely monitored, wouldn't you think?”

“I could be wrong, but that decision ultimately falls to me and my council, if the guild requests assistance. Please trust in the fact I will keep Respar as safe as possible.”

It was brief, just a heartbeat’s time. But there was some dark, insidious emotion that flashed across Gennel’s otherwise friendly expression before he schooled it into an easy smile. “Of course, Your Highness,” he said with a slight bow. “I would never presume to overstep your authority. I’m sure Guildmaster Briton will follow the correct procedure to have that woman detained.”

“I’m sure he will.” I struggled to keep my voice even. “Is there anything else you would like to address?”

“I believe that is all. Thank you for your time, Prince Irin. I look forward to serving beneath your rule.”

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“Thank you, may the gods smile upon you.”

My answer was somewhat vacant as I kept my eyes on Gennel Rhen’s retreating figure until the doors shut behind him. Behar’s snarling cut off almost immediately after Gennel crossed the door’s threshold. My attention dropped to his tense body, now looking even more foreboding with his fur bristling and teeth still bared. It took him a few minutes to unwind, but finally he flopped down on the cool stone floor and rested his head at my feet with a huff. “Beolf, have the spymaster set someone on him. I want to know everything about this Rhen family. How have they gone five years without my notice?”

“Well, the Guild of Finance keeps their cards pretty close to the chest, and they mainly report to the Royal Council and not the king himself. I’m sure there are several silent contributors to the guild treasury that insist on being anonymous. Otherwise, those families would be in constant danger of being ransomed or killed to weaken competitors in other guilds.”

“Still, there should be a roster, no? Have a request sent to list all the investors of the guild treasury.”

Beowulf sighed heavily. “I’m sure the council has it, if you would leverage your advantage as the upcoming king instead of threatening them for information.”

“They would not give that up without something in return. I refuse to be the puppet that dances on their strings.”

“All the same, you may find them more willing to share what they know if they

didn't feel like their heads were constantly on the chopping block."

This time I growled, the sound low in my chest. Beolf remained unbothered, but Behar's ears rose to attention. "And what was your problem?" I asked the rinhound.

Behar lifted his head, as if knowing I was talking to him. His mouth opened wide enough to let his tongue flop out in a happy grin that showed all his menacing teeth. The way he tilted his head to the side with his ears perked gave the sense he was asking, 'what do you mean?' My connection to him wasn't as strong in my natural form, but I wasn't going through the immense pain of shifting just to see what pissed him off. Maybe Gennel was wearing a cologne Behar didn't like. Or he could have pets of his own and their scent put him on guard.

Regardless, I couldn't stay mad at him for any length of time. Especially not with that goofy, toothy smile.

"Your Highness," the butler called, and I wanted to cringe. "Are you ready for the next guest?"

Chapter Twelve

Irin

Sinna and I camped at the entrance to the Clifftombs, a spark of hope lighting from the realization someone had to

raise the palace's drawbridge from the inside. At first light, we walked all around the walls looking for some hint of

an alternate entrance. Sinna was correct about the wards. I am not unknowledgeable about wards and the breaking

of them, but these were constructed on a level I had yet to see in my 25 years of magic studies. Whoever cast these

wards would likely be the only one who could lower them.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 39 of Ber's First Reign

The twelfth and final name announced by the attendant was definitely the most welcome. It had been the only one I would actually look forward to seeing any time of day.

"Your Highness, Lady Haron Val Toric is your last guest for court."

I tried to hide the excitement that bubbled inside me, like a nest of bees had been kicked over in my stomach. Beolf seemed to notice me practically buzzing, rolling his eyes with a huff. His shoulder pressed against the side of the heavy throne as he leaned with his arms folded tightly across his chest. It was no secret he disliked Haron, but at least he trusted her enough to be at ease... mostly.

Behar, on the other hand, was ecstatic to see her. He bounded down the steps and trotted to meet her halfway down the red carpet runner with a wagging tail and tongue lolling out. The way he danced on his front paws until she bent to give him an affectionate pet on his scruffy head melted my heart to a puddle. After she gave him an acceptable amount of attention, Haron patted her thigh to encourage Behar to stick by her side as she continued on her way toward me. Behar kept his head tilted up and eyes set on her as he trotted along, eagerly waiting for more attention.

I feel the same, friend. We were both hungry for any scrap of recognition from her.

Even in the massive receiving hall, Haron's presence filled the space with her

radiating confidence. Everyone else who stepped through those doors gave sniveling, knee-scraping energy that left a dark stain on my mood. She was once again a refreshing gust of air that swept down the carpeted walkway, shoulders pulled back and head held high as she glided toward the throne. I could easily see the travel bags buckled to her belt and the sheaths for her sword and thigh dagger strapped to her person, but she moved so smoothly none of her baggage jostled or clanged.

Haron Val Toric may be the only woman in Respar who could attract me just as much with her silent conviction as she did with her sharp wit.

“Prince Irin.”

Haron stopped at the bottom step of the platform, and instead of dipping into the traditional curtsy, bowed low at the waist like a man. True, it would have looked out of place for her to do such a dainty move in her rugged travel attire, but nonetheless sent Beolf to openly choke on a laugh at her choice of greeting. Behar nudged her side again, thinking that she was bending over to pet him and making her laugh heartily. Haron dropped to her knees and buried both hands in the thick fur on either side of his neck to give Behar another thorough petting, bordering just on the cusp of rough as she shook his head with her scratching.

“Why I expected anything else, I don’t know,” Beolf coughed out. “That rinhound is a damn traitor, though.”

The smile that lit her face was equal parts ferocious and jovial. “Your expectations of me are none of my business unless I explicitly ask you. Right, Behar? Right?” Her voice became syrupy sweet as she turned her attention back to him, a stark contrast from the waspish tone she threw Beolf’s way.

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That broke my already-crumbling composure. A wild burst of laughter burst from my chest and bounced off the walls of the vast hall. It may have been the most joyful sound this room ever held. “Oh, dear Haron. There’s never a dull moment with you, is there?”

“Not unless you’re a stick-in-the-mud like your general.” She nodded in Beolf’s direction. Behar took the opportunity to give her a barrage of licks across half of her face. Haron scrunched her nose playfully and leaned back, trying to avoid his loving attacks. “Despite the enticing idea of rubbing Beolf the wrong way, I actually come with some information regarding my... investigation.”

Haron’s head tilted toward the hallway leading to my study, her thick copper-toned braid sliding off the opposite shoulder. The silent message was clear enough. This was a conversation for a private setting.

I glanced toward the high windows to check the time of day. From the dimming sunlight that gave way to the deeper reds and purples, it was already halfway through the evening transition. The double moons were barely visible at this angle—they promised a well-lit night with the full phase.

Two attendants appeared from behind the platform, likely signaled by Beolf that we were leaving. They bowed low at the waist and waited for orders. “Please bring two sets of dinner to my chambers.”

Haron scoffed. “Unlikely. I can eat my dinner in the study while we talk, if we must dine together for this meeting.”

“Then we can dine after we talk,” I fired back.

Haron rose from the floor slowly, eyes boring into mine as they narrowed to slits, as if that would magnify their intensity. I stared back with a challenge of my own. The attendants’ soft-soled shoes scuffed across the stone floor as they retreated to the kitchen. It was hard to tell how long our standoff lasted, but Beolf was the first to break the tense silence.

“Am I going to have to relieve you of your weapons, or are you going to play nice tonight?” Beolf was only half-teasing, I realized. He shifted from his casual lean, lightly resting a wrist on the sword pommel at his hip with an unspoken threat.

Finally, her gaze shifted to me. There was a cold gleam in them that promised some kind of retribution. “Fortunately for Irin, I still have use of him. But I’m sure he appreciates your loyalty, nonetheless.”

For anyone else, that kind of audacity would have them hauled off to the dungeon for some hard lessons in respect. How Haron managed to avoid the same treatment was a mystery to me, but part of it was self-preservation. It didn’t take a genius to realize Haron Val Toric was clearly a cut above the normal spellcaster. I was equal parts afraid and intensely attracted to that kind of power.

Also, Behar would likely never forgive me for taking away his favorite person. If I didn’t love the damn hound so much, I wouldn’t have cared. But I did. So Haron was safe for now.

“Leave her be, Beolf,” I waved him off and rose from the throne. It was nice to look down on Haron, for once. Even if the haughty angle of her chin didn’t feel like I gained much of a victory from the height. “Haron, after you.”

With a flick of her braid back over her shoulder, Haron threw Beolf one last scathing

look before leading us down the hallway to my private study. Behar padded alongside her as if wholly unaware of the tense set of her shoulders.

“Am I going to be paying dearly for this information?” I asked her broad back. I wished I was joking, but there was always a price for something from Haron. Unfortunately, it was unlikely to be paid easily with drummons.

She tossed a particularly suspicious look over her shoulder. I didn’t like the bit of smirk on her lips. “To me? No. But HighlanPid may be belly-crawling his way over in the next few days. He may or may not think I’m working for you now.”

My feet halted in the middle of the hallway, shocked at her casual admission. Haron had opened the door and stepped through into the study without me. “Why does Pid think you’re acting on my behalf?” I asked.

If Pid thought Haron was acting on my behalf, rumors would spread like wildfire that I had a necromancer in my pocket. Meaning, curious eyes would be turned away from what seemed like inaction in investigating the supposed suicides of Father’s advisors. The council and nobles would assume I was using a necromancer in my own investigation.

My steps had slowed, lost in wonder at how well the recent turn of events played out. Then, Haron was no longer in sight. “Wait!”

She had already ducked into the study and went straight for the liquor bar, pouring goldtine into two glasses. The long coat she wore was tossed it over the coat rack by the door, and her figure cut a delicious shape beneath practical travel clothes—a simple white shirt beneath a stiff leather tunic cinched at the hips with her belt, paired with tight leather pants and scuffed riding boots. I made sure to close and lock the door behind me just in case someone decided to let themselves into our private conversation. Mainly, so Beolf wouldn’t barge in. I trusted the kitchen staff to deliver

our food to my rooms as I ordered.

She turned and walked past me, still standing dumbly in the middle of the room even as she pressed the other glass to my chest for me to grasp, and took a seat on one of the two overstuffed lounge chairs by the unlit fireplace. Only after she'd taken the time to settle into the chair and bring the goldtine to her lips, finally, her eyes lifted to meet mine over the rim of her own tumbler. Damn this woman and her singular talent of driving me insane. I could tell she enjoyed keeping me on the edge of interest.

"Well," she finally answered. Her head tilted to the side and those enchanting eyes slid away slyly. "I paid him a little visit regarding Trisne. And I asked about that Forol Hent man from the masquerade." A dark look passed over her face then, narrowing her eyes and furrowing her brows. "Turns out, Jinon doesn't know a Forol Hent at all. And he was adamant he doesn't know who could have killed Trisne, despite her life being threatened via letters for several moonphases. Since she was a possible candidate the council offered as your wife, I may have led him to believe I was looking into her death at your request."

Trying to keep the satisfaction off my face took all my concentration. Taking a sip of the drink gave me just enough time to compose myself. "You are a busy woman. Did you get what you were looking for, with your visit?"

"Not as much as I hoped. All my questions just lead to more questions, it seems."

"Why is her death so important to you?" The question rolled thoughtlessly from my mouth. As soon as I spoke the words I regretted it, watching Haron's scowl darken even more as she continued to stare into her goldtine. "Was Trisne... important to you?"

I remembered the woman Haron spoke to with familiarity at the tavern, the brown-haired beauty she teased so easily. It was undeniable she was charming to both men

and women, but the thought of her having a relationship with Trisne did something painful to my chest. It seemed so easy for her to connect with people. As soon as she opened her mouth, people stopped to listen. I knew it was stupid to be jealous of a dead woman, one that was brutally murdered at that, but the question rattled in my head so loud I could barely hear over the noise.

"Trisne was..." Her voice trailed off, and Haron heaved a weary sigh and leaned back to rest her head against the chair to stare at the ceiling. My eyes locked on the graceful column of her throat as she swallowed before continuing. "Trisne reminded me of someone I loved very deeply. Someone who was also brutally murdered for petty reasons."

I waited, silently begging for more scraps Haron deemed to toss out about herself. She probably didn't realize how starved I was for any little bit of information. The hunger to know every part of her gnawed at my ribs. "Will you tell me about her, eventually?"

Haron knew I wasn't talking about Trisne. "Perhaps. I would not keep the truth from you if I could help it. There are just some things about me I... cannot share. Things you wouldn't understand."

That was the truth. And I could feel the tension that had been building in my shoulders release all at once, like I had released a breath held too long. But something else reared its ugly head in the back of my mind. A feeling of possession that bordered on blind rage, threatening to take control of all rational thought and find a way to lock her in my chambers.

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Need to trap her, need to bind her. Pin her down. The beast rode me hard. He had a very different idea of what it was to bind Haron to us, one that was much less humane than a contract we agreed on.

"Speaking of secrets," I winced at the horrible transition to a topic that had haunted my conscience for days. "I hope that, after our night together, you would be open with me regarding any... consequences?" Inwardly I was already kicking myself from the sheer awkwardness and stilted speech. Haron wasn't making it any easier. I knew damn well she knew what I meant, but nonetheless a little smirk pulled at her lips as her head tilted upright to look me over.

"Pray tell, what do you mean, Your Highness?"

She was going to make me spell it out for her. Damn this woman.

I took a steadying breath and plunged right in. "I just wanted to offer up my support in case our coupling ended... with a child."

She blinked. I blinked back. A knot of some rather painful and unpleasant anxiety caught in my throat and I struggled to swallow it down. I didn't have much experience to go off of in instances like this, since my butler usually escorted women from my room come morning, and he dealt with all the finer details of providing contraception and contact information to the royal healer.

What I hadn't expected was a raucous laughter to explode from Haron's lips, one so strong it rocked her back and sent her howling at the ceiling. She laughed so hard it sloshed the goldtine over the edge of her glass and sent small drips of it flying onto

the chair's armrest. With her free hand she slapped her leg and stomped her heavy boot on the carpet. And I still stood there, in the middle of this fucking study, watching this madwoman fall apart over something I agonized talking about.

Finally, after what felt like an age, Haron's mirth calmed to a more controllable level and she leaned forward, wiping tears from her eyes as she looked over at my stiff form. "Oh, little princeling," she sighed, sounding oddly happy. "If I could describe the horrified look on your face as you spoke of babies, it wouldn't..." She broke into another round of chuckling. "Oh, gods, I needed that! I don't remember the last time I laughed so hard!"

My jaw clenched so tightly I was sure a molar had cracked. "I'm glad you are entertained at my expense," I answered stiffly. While I was willing to give anything to wipe that sad look from her face as she spoke of Trisne, I hadn't anticipated offering up my own pride as tribute.

Haron chortled, yet again. She leaned an elbow on the other armrest and propped her chin in it, looking at me with some odd mixture of joy and sympathy. "I'm sure that was very hard for you," she said. "I'm very proud you were able to broach a subject like that yourself, instead of tossing me to the healer to deal with."

I was building myself up to a scathing response, hoping to gain some sliver of dignity back, when she continued. "No need to worry about an unintentional heir, little princeling. Or any communicable diseases, although that didn't seem quite as terrifying to you as a child." Haron shook her head and chuffed yet another laugh from her nose, bringing her glass up to take another small sip. "Not that it would be your business either way, but due to circumstances I brought on myself, I am unable to have children."

"What circumstances?" I found myself asking. And then I was kicking myself even harder for letting my curiosity take over. But despite how much I wanted to take the

question back, I held her gaze even as it narrowed on me. For some reason the answer meant more to me than whatever propriety I had left.

"As I said, it's not your business."

I couldn't keep the slight rumble of the beast's growl from my voice this time. I knew before I even spoke the words tossing around in my head that I would regret saying them. "I thought we had enough of a relationship to not keep so many secrets?"

"A relationship?" Haron sipped her drink again, then set the glass aside and leaned back to prop up her chin again. Either she didn't realize how close she was to being tackled onto the floor in an act of submission, or she didn't care. I could feel the skin beneath the stiff tunic I wore begin heating uncomfortably. Soon, heat would be pouring off me in waves as the beastclawed closer to taking control. "There is a working relationship between us. We have hardly known each other for a handful of days! Who do you think you are, to feel entitled to own every part of me?"

The teasing lilt to her husky voice heated my blood to boiling. I could feel my cock harden in a rush and make my already tight breeches even more unbearable. It took a great effort to walk over to the chair adjacent hers, to slowly lower myself into it and cross my legs in an attempt to keep the obvious sign of lust from her observant eyes. Between her mocking me just a few moments earlier and this indignant air she had now, all I wanted to do was toss her back in my bed and show her I held the upper hand in our relationship, working or otherwise. A small, rational part of my brain knew how ludicrous and unbecoming of royalty that would be. Unfortunately, that part was currently being gnawed on by the more beastly instincts in this moment.

"I hope," I had to clear my throat to keep the growl building in my chest from coming out. "I would like to think our relationship extends beyond what we can give each other. And certainly one that doesn't need to be inked on paper."

“Quite bold of you, to be so entitled to think I owe you an explanation for anything beyond our contract,” she answered. “How is the coronation planning going? And your wedding?”

If her intent was to pour a bucket of ice water on me, she certainly did with that topic switch. But that knowing smirk stayed firmly on her lips and those eyes that saw everything pinned me in place, like a rabbit caught in the deadly claws of a trebegnon, and I was staring up at her dripping fangs before the final bite. How our roles reversed so quickly sent me reeling back, a high-pitched whine beyond what she could hear squeaking from my throat. Behar, who had trotted off to the window where his bed laid beneath, lifted his head in concern.

My dignity—both as a man and a future ruler—was what kept me from shifting under her intense stare. “The coronation is going along smoothly, as far as I’m aware. I met with the royal jeweler a couple days ago to get fitted for my crown. As far as the wedding goes...” I cleared my throat again, this time in anger. “I haven’t really considered it much, beyond establishing it will be after the coronation.”

“So, you have not announced a decision on the future queen.”

It was not a question, but I answered anyway. Harshly. “No, and I fail to see what that has to do with anything we are pursuing.”

I kept the answer intentionally vague. It was up to her to tell what pursuit I spoke of.

Whatever warmth Haron had brought with her swept from the room when her smile dropped. If I wasn’t assured of her skills as a necromancer, I would have assumed she was an aeromancer manipulating the air. Slowly, she rose from her casual position to sit ramrod straight in the chair, and for the briefest moment I had the same demeaned feeling as when I was a child, standing in front of Father as he sat on his throne and looked down at me.

“Of course you wouldn’t see it, Your Highness.” She made the title sound like the most vile curse. “But it appears Trisne was targeted because she was selected as a possible bride for you, and her own father practically disowned her when she publicly rejected the nomination to study in the City of Scholars. I had approached Jinon to confirm my suspicions it was his piece of shit friend Forol Hent, only to find him vehemently denying he knows anyone by that name. Now I am concerned this murderer may target other bride candidates and am trying to eliminate my options by determining if you have narrowed your selection down.

“So yes, your wedding is very fucking relevant to me sitting here in your study now. And if your foresight extended any further than your dick, you would see that I would only seek your audience during court hours to discuss the ongoing issue of a noblewoman who has been brutally murdered. One that you have done little, if anything, to solve!”

The lashes her tongue gave me did an excellent job of cutting me down to a miniscule shape of a man. Even as rage bubbled in my chest at the indignation of being dressed down by Haron, shame built a painful lump in my throat that kept it from spewing out as a hateful defense. Instead, a low rumble of a growl rattled my chest, and my fingers curled tightly around the edges of the armrests.

It took an embarrassingly long time for me to find my voice again. “You do not... get to speak to me that way.”

“Why? Because it’s too honest for you? Tell me, little princeling, am I lying now?”

A snarl just about escaped my mouth at the demeaning nickname before I promptly choked on it in alarm. Tendrils of Haron’s red hair that escaped their braid were lifting from her face as if floating on the wind. Something charged the air and made my skin pebble along both arms as the beast reacted. Haron didn’t seem to notice the deep indigo aura enveloping her body, pulsing rhythmically like a slow, steady

heartbeat. Every one of my heightened senses burned with the overwhelming amount of raw magic now emanating from her still form.

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Danger! Danger! Danger! My mind screamed with every pulse of that wild power.

“No,” I answered, hating how small my voice was. “No, you’re not lying. You never have.”

The expression that ghosted across her face was almost too quick to catch, but it almost looked like... guilt. “I would not lie to you about this, Irin. And I hope the same is true for you.” Haron took a deep breath in through her nose and held it for a moment before exhaling slowly through her mouth, like she was centering herself. That threatening aura slowly folded in on itself until the oppressive feeling left the room. “Just because we fucked once doesn’t mean my goals have changed. Or that you have any semblance of ownership over me and what I choose to keep private in my personal life. Have I made myself clear?”

My head bobbed automatically. “Very. I’m sorry if I offended you. I was... out of line.”

Gods, that apology tasted bitter... but it wasn’t a lie.

Haron leaned back into the chair and plucked her glass from the side table. “Apology accepted.” The rest of the goldtine—not that there was much left—slipped past her lips when she threw the drink back, and she set the glass carefully on the side table. “I should go. I have plans later this evening.”

“Of course,” my answer practically fell from my mouth. “Will you be back tomorrow? Or sometime this moon phase?” That gave her seven days to cool off. I hoped it wouldn’t take that long for her to forgive me.

She pushed herself up smoothly from where her body had sunken into the soft chair cushion. The smell of damp earth, moss, and heavy fog—the scent I now associated with Haron—wafted by as she passed, and I found myself breathing deeply to trap it in my lungs. If I couldn't keep her here with me, I could at least commit her scent to memory to comfort me when I lay alone in my bed. Haron was already swinging her cloak around and pinning it beneath her throat by the time I rose to escort her from the study. Still, she refused to look at me. It was a risk, I knew, but I couldn't help reaching my left hand out to run the backs of my fingers down her arm.

Fuck my pride at this point. "Haron?" I asked softly. Her jaw muscle fluttered from how tightly she clenched it.

"I don't know," she finally answered, though I had almost forgotten my question of when—not if—she would come back. Her response wasn't a lie.

Haron pulled her arm from my touch and reached out to rip the study door open. If I didn't know better, I'd say it felt like she was running away. Fear and insecurity clambered around in my head and tinted my vision red as I stood staring at that door. Never in my life had I experienced the overwhelming urge to capture and...possess someone, like I did with Haron Val Toric. Not even when I'd learned who my mother was and approached her for the first time. Pila Monato was happy to operate as a stand-in for my wet-nurse on occasion. She would sit by my bedside, brushing hair from my forehead as she told those stories passed down by her Julran ancestors that lulled me to sleep. But when I'd turned to her for any kind of comfort or support, her gates had slammed shut as if responding to a violent siege. Like showing any kind of affection or motherly care in public was a weakness in her eyes. Maybe it was. When Father told me of her sudden death fifteen years ago—almost to the day, I remember it was the Chilled season when I turned eighteen—it was as if he'd told me one of the barn cats had passed. I was just as emotionless as he was, the both of us sitting at the small table in his private receiving chambers and sipping goldtine. Looking back, that was the first time Father sat down to drink with me

outside of a political meeting or meal.

As a man myself, I longed for a partner to share my burdens with. Someone who did not look at me and only see what they could receive from helping me. Someone more than what my mother was to Father, just a woman to help pass the time and give him heirs when his own wife did not. Queen Belva had died shortly after Pila was taken on as his mistress, her suicide a well-kept secret in the palace walls. The poor woman felt she was no longer useful to him. Her only purpose was to give him children, of which she tried for the better part of ten years into their marriage. My birth was practically her eviction notice.

Haron filled all those painful, bleeding cracks created by my cold and distanced upbringing. She soothed my soul with her unwavering pursuit of the truth and her unapologetic but empathetic honesty. Haron didn't need me. I was the one who sought her out, after all. But she kept pulling me in with some unnatural attraction I couldn't ignore. Never would I have anticipated meeting someone like her when I went looking for the country's strongest necromancer, someone so full of life and fire and driven to achieve what she set her mind to. It felt like an honor to be needed by Haron, to be wanted by someone so independently successful.

And I felt like I was letting her down.

Chapter Thirteen

Haron

Today is the one-year anniversary of the fall of Julra. The 30th day of the month of Hirath, right in the middle of the

Thawing season. That may have been the refugees' only saving grace that day, that the usual chill of Julra had been

chased away by the warming season of the Thaw. From what the refugees have said, Julra is a frigid and merciless

land, but beautiful in its inhospitality. A land that people are allowed to live on if they adapt or die if they do not.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 39 of Ber's First Reign

I knew the guild's summon would come within the moon phase, but color me shocked when a scroll waited for me at Gaion's bar by the time I made it back to the tavern this very night. I had to walk around the lower streets of Gilamorst to cool my head from my meeting with Irin. I was caught between the uncomfortable feelings of attraction and duty whenever it came to him, and there were times it was truly a struggle to keep my goals firmly planted in sight when he tried so earnestly to sway me to his side. I knew he wanted more from me. It just felt... wrong, taking advantage of his ignorance of who I really was to make this version of a woman that didn't really exist. There were things churning beneath what I thought was a simple discovery of truth about Trisne's death. Something I feared Irin getting involved in anymore than he already was, being associated with me.

Gaion's brows were drawn low before I even darkened his doorstep. He seemed troubled. And I wasn't in the right headspace to console him right now. "Is this for me?" I reached for the scroll, clearly marked with the Necromancy Guild seal, when his weathered hand reached out to grab mine. In the five years I'd known the crotchety old man, there were only a handful of times he'd actually touched me.

"Haron," my name rumbled low in his chest. "Girl, I'm worried for you. This is the second summons 'n three days. What kind o' trouble are you getting y'rself into?"

I sighed heavily. "It's nothing to concern yourself with. I promise, I can handle

whatever the guild throws at me.”

His brow drew even lower over those pale blue eyes. Most Resparians who had blue eyes claimed some Julran ancestor, and looking at Gaion’s made my chest warm in fondness. When I’d stumbled into his tavern five years ago—alone, with little more than the clothes on my back soaked through with the rain of the Growing season — he’d immediately taken me under his wing. He never poked into my past or tried to curb my sense of vigilante justice.

“This is something I have to face head on.” I laid my other hand over his, trying to be as gentle as I could in slipping the scroll from beneath his grip. “I’m pretty sure I know what it’s for, regardless. That crotchety old guildmaster won’t get the best of me.”

It was all a lie, of course. If this summons truly was about my stunt with Trisne's revenant, I would definitely be thrown in confinement as a wild practitioner. Turning away from Gaion’s prying eyes, I moved to the far corner of the tavern to tear open the sealed scroll. There was no point in taking it all the way up to my room.

Reading it, however, gave me an off feeling. For starters, Nebold always stood on formalities and long-winded elaborations. This letter was two short sentences, followed by his guildmaster seal. No signature, no explanation.

Come to the Necromancer’s Guild at first daylight. If you do not, you will be tried and sentenced.

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“Damn, maybe I did piss him off majorly this time.” I ducked my head to peer out the front window of the tavern. Light was just starting to color the sky in delicate shades of pink as it chased the inky darkness away. “I suppose now is as good a time as any to face that demon.”

“Haron,” Gaion called from behind the bar. He waited for me to turn and face him before speaking. “Just... keep yer wits about ye. Things are gettin’ unsteady in Gilamorst.”

Looking back at his clear eyes beneath those typically lowered brows, I sometimes wondered if Gaion had a bit of Hira’s blessing for future scrying. There were some times he just seemed to... know something was going to happen.

“Of course, old man. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

The goons from the first time I’d broken loose of the guild were at their posts by the main doors, and both looked equally frightened to see me cresting their steps. I waved the scroll in the air innocently, like one would a white flag.

“I come in peace.” I tried to smile without looking too menacing. I’m not sure it worked, because the man I’m pretty sure whose hand I’d desiccated looked about two seconds from pissing himself. “Please take me to Nebold. I have been summoned.”

They looked at each other, slightly concerned, before one stepped aside to open the door. As I drew close enough to hear him, the man said in a low voice, “Guildmaster Nebold has been... different since you brought that revenant here. He speaks nonstop of going to the Clifftombs in Julra and has been organizing a scouting team.” He

swallowed, the dryness in his throat making it click loudly. “Please, speak some sense to him. That trip is a death sentence.”

I eyed the nervous man. “What do you know of the Clifftombs?”

“My great grandmother,” he started. “She was a Julran refugee. She spoke of... powerful wards that kept them from returning after they fled during the Frigid War. Wards that would melt the skin and muscle from the body if they touched them directly. And she swore the battlefield still howls with the screams of the dead.”

He made Julra sound like a horrorscape. Slowly, so I wouldn’t startle the guild member who already looked a heartbeat from fainting, I laid a hand on his thin shoulder and squeezed lightly. He flinched hard. “She may be right about the wards, but Julra is a beautiful place despite its tragic past. I hope one day you are able to visit it without fear.”

My response stunned him to silence, stopping in the middle of the main hall to watch as I continued on to Nebold’s private study. Every step closer to that door and its tasteless carvings made my stomach quiver in... anxiety? Fear? Even if the guild member hadn’t warned me, there was something not right in the air as soon as I entered the hall. Something foreboding, like knowingly stepping into a predator’s den.

Finally, at the door to Nebold’s study, I raised my hand and knocked three times on the skull of one of the carved soldiers.

“Enter,” his voice beckoned, and I gripped the handle to push the heavy door open.

The deep red carpeting padded my steps as I moved through the doorway, letting the door fall shut behind me with a loudthudagainst its frame. Nebold was sitting hunched over his desk like usual, with neat stacks of papers circling him and a gold

cup full of pens at his elbow. He glanced up from under his wrinkled brow to address me.

“Haron.” He gestured with a bony hand to take one of the seats in front of his desk. “Please take a seat.”

Please? Since when did Nebold say please in the privacy of his study?

My eyes narrowed slightly, watching him cautiously as he straightened up and folded his hands calmly on top of the desk. The staff he usually carried with him was leaning against the edge of the desk within grasp, the gem mounted on top of it dull and dormant. The Wiran ruby it held was the first of many reasons I didn't trust him, knowing for a fact it could have only been found in the long-sealed ruins of the Clifftombs. For it to have escaped the Frigid War intact and been passed down a hundred years to his gnarled hands was suspicious all on its own. He knew someone who had been connected enough, if distantly, to have access to the Julran royals' treasury in order to steal it. The staff had been around as long as I'd been a member of the guild, so it was hard to tell how exactly he came to own it. And I was not delusional to believe he would honestly tell me if I asked.

The greedy bastard had a literal national treasure mounted on his fucking staff and every time I looked at it an indescribably rage filled me. But something was off about it now. Usually it had a red aura, even if he was not holding it.

Something was definitely wrong here.

“I'd... rather stand.” I took a couple steps further into the room and folded my arms, feet braced shoulder width in my usual sturdy boots. “Your missive seemed urgent. I'm curious why you summoned me back, instead of having me hauled off to the dungeons.”

Nebold's head tilted slightly, murky blue eyes shifting to the side as if recalling said incident with Trisne's reanimated corpse. That was also wildly out of character for him. Nebold had a running tally of every single transgression I'd made since joining this guild, and he definitely wouldn't have to take this long to recall one that happened within a moon phase. It would have taken him even less time to try getting his revenge for that kind of slight. The fact he wasn't already howling at me was unsettling.

Then his face lit with recollection. "Ah, yes, the revenant at the door. That was highly unprofessional, yes. Would you care to explain why you did something that horrendous in broad daylight?"

"It was a bit performative, I admit." I tried to keep my voice light and not give away my growing suspicion that this was not the Nebold I knew. "But I had hoped my message came across clearly enough that I wanted nothing more to do with this guild."

"So why bother coming for this summon?"

The question had me rocking back on my heels slightly. He lifted his hands until they were propped up by his elbows on the desk, and he tucked his knuckles beneath his chin while waiting for an answer. "Curiosity, I suppose. I had questions regarding Trisne's death, particularly about the state of her body when it was buried. Rather gruesome, wasn't it?"

A small smile pulled at his lips, and it looked incredibly unnatural on his face despite the conversation. It was almost one of... satisfaction. Like the face of an artist when someone complimented his work. "I see. Well, your questions regarding the woman will have to wait. I have a..." His eyes shifted again as he seemed to look for the right word. "Delicate mission I am assigning you to lead. It is extremely important, hence the urgent message. Important enough to put aside our differences for the

moment.”

“A mission?” I asked dubiously. “For a guild of necromancers? What, are you sending me scouting for more cemeteries? What kind of mission could you possibly have?”

The corners of his mouth tightened, as if he was struggling to keep the smile there. But his eyes sharpened to focus very intently on me. “Actually, it is a cemetery of sorts. Are you familiar with the Clifftombs?”

My blood chilled in my veins. I could feel my spine stiffen automatically in response to the question he intentionally phrased so innocently. “Who isn’t?” My answer was curt.

“Fair enough.” His hands lowered to the desk again, and Nebold proceeded to shuffle through a stack to his right until he pulled what looked like a map from the bottom of it. “I assumed with your... advanced studies in necromancy, that place wouldn’t be unknown to you.”

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I didn't like that tone of voice, that coy sense of thinking he knew me well. Uncomfortably so.

“So, you're trying to send some guild members on a research trip to what? Go look at the Clifftombs? I'm sure you know as well as I do that nothing is there.”

His head was bent to seem like he was looking at the map, but the look he shot me from under his brow again was admonishing this time. “Oh, I think we both know that is a lie.”

Shit.

I took a step back toward the door, and Nebold shot straight up from the chair, far more quickly than a man of his advanced age should. The man was practically hobbling and wheezing the last time I saw him, hardly able to stand on his own feet without the staff like he was now.

“Where do you think you're going?” His voice was smoother, less strained than before. Both his palms were planted on the desk and he leaned over it as if about to leap over the damn thing. “You know you cannot ignore a mission assigned by your guildmaster, don't you, Haron?”

“Well, you're going to have a hard time enforcing that. Technically, I'm not a member of your guild anymore.” I leveled my own glare at him. My arms had unfolded themselves and hung at my sides to give the image of casual ease, when really every muscle in my body was coiling to spring at the first sign of movement from him. “And if you know anything about the Clifftombs, you know it's warded to

the gods. Whatever treasure or scrolls you think are in there, it doesn't matter since no one alive can take them down."

Nebold hummed absently, still watching me like a trebegnon about to pounce. "Again, I think we both know that's a lie."

It was time to get the fuck out of here. This was not the Nebold Briton I was familiar with or wanted anything to do with. I turned just slightly to reach for the door handle when something flew just past my face and embedded itself in the wall behind me. Immediately I dropped to the floor and rolled behind one of the chairs as more projectiles flew through the air, and with a grunt I lifted the heavy furniture to toss over the desk where Nebold last was. A spat curse was shortly followed by the chair, shattering to splinters in midair. The distraction was just enough to allow me to pull the hunting knife strapped at the small of my back.

There wasn't enough darkness in the room to be able to blend into it fully, but with a quickly murmured spell I was at least able to flit through the shadows along the edge of the room toward the hallway. That was, until the desk that was previously on the other side of the room tumbled to slam against the sturdy doors, effectively blocking them from being opened.

"Shit!" I cursed loudly and spun to face my aggressor.

A brutal grin spread across his wrinkled face, twisting it into an expression I'd never seen before on him. "Always making things difficult, aren't you, Haron?"

This was less than the ideal situation, but with a madman trapped in the room with me and a literal crypt beneath the guild, I really only had one option to get out now. The dead kept in the catacombs beneath called to me, their voices starting in low murmurs and growing louder and more excited at the prospect of being set free. The thought of Nebold having bodies buried beneath the building was vile, and the

implications were even worse; I knew the practice had started during his fifty-odd years of leadership. Obviously, the threat of the guild unleashing a horde of undead stored in the basement would ward off most, if not all, scrutiny from the royals. He obviously banked heavily on the superstition surrounding necromancy that every guild member could animate the dead.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I asked through gritted teeth.

The imposter raised his thin shoulders, that creepy smile still on his face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. But soon, it won’t matter!”

With a strained yell, he lifted both hands and threw them at me, blasting me with a violent gust of air. The force of it threw me to the back wall, slamming my back painfully against the wood panels before I slid to the floor. For the moment, I would let him think I was knocked out. The churning of graves and toppling of coffins in the catacombs beneath our feet from my silent summoning had already begun. Creaking bones and the clanking of metal knocking against itself was faint at first, barely reaching the top of the staircase leading to the catacombs.

The screams began a few moments later.

Frantic shuffling and wailing echoed down the hall had my attacker’s head snapping to the door in concern, accented by the clambering of the undead rising up from the catacombs in droves. Their ire and malice at being locked beneath the guild would bear fruit tonight, and I would be enjoying the wine made from it.

“What the—” he began, as the chaotic noises coming from the hall drew closer to the study, when suddenly the doors bowed inward far enough to shove the heavy desk a good foot from them.

I took that opportunity to hop back on my feet and throw my own blast of magic in an

attempt to get him further from my escape. The wooden double doors rattled violently on their hinges, this time snapping to pieces. I turned to welcome the merry band of dead I'd risen from the guild's catacombs and came face-to-face with the last corpse I ever expected to see in the pack.

Nebold Briton. Eyes a cloudy blue, face sunken in with exaggerated wrinkles of decaying skin, and mouth gaping open in the loose, vacant way of the dead. He shuffled in with the rest of the pack of revenants slowly filling the study and clogging the air with the pungent smell of death, his withered hand gripping onto his staff holding the real Wiran ruby. Its pale red light cast a ghastly glow across his unnaturally pale skin.

If this was the real Nebold, who the hell was...

I hardly had a chance to finish my thought when something slammed into my side, knocking me down before I could turn to face the only other living person in the room. The side of my head cracked against the stone floor, hard enough to make my vision swirl. Fake Nebold sat on my back where he was perched and rained down his fists wherever he could get a hit in.

With a pained grunt, I pulled one arm above my head to gain enough leverage to roll over and knock my attacker off-balance. It gave me just enough time to focus and control the walking dead to grab for the imposter. Hands half-covered in skin, some entirely exposed to the bone, clawed at his clothes to drag him away from me long enough to get my bearings. He toppled to the side, stunned long enough for me to plant a brutal kick to his side and send him crashing into the legs of the shambling dead.

I stood shakily, favoring the left side of my skull that hit the floor, with my vision still slightly blurred. A massive cyclone of water sprouted from the center of the writhing mass of bones and knocked them back, almost sweeping me off my feet

again as a shin-high wave traveled across the floor to the room's edges. It drained out into the hall quickly, but it gave the asshole just enough time to make it over to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows and shatter it with the jab of an elbow. If he got out into the streets, he would be impossible to track down.

"Get the fuck back here!" I stumbled after him, disoriented and weaving through the bodies scattered around the study. "Someone stop him. That's not Nebold!"

Guild members edged through the doorway from the hall, eyes wide with fear and confusion at the scene. "Where is the Guildmaster?"

I jabbed my finger at the small hill of bodies knocked down with the imposter's magic. "He's dead." Leaning out the window, my head swung left and right to see if the man was in sight. "Fuck!"

The window was close to the mouth of the alleyway running alongside the guild hall. The imposter had already slipped into the crowd and likely changed his appearance. My fists trembled on the window ledge, and I gritted my teeth hard enough to crack a molar. In my current condition, it was hard to manipulate my magic to its full capabilities, and because of that, the fake Nebold had gotten away. Resurrecting the whole catacombs was foolish, but if I hadn't, we may not have realized the real Nebold was dead.

By the time I got my anger under control and turned to face the frightened witnesses, a whole crowd had shown up in the broken doorway to see what had transpired. Seeing them all just standing there, gawking at the bodies scattered over the floor and everything soaked with unexplainable water, just had my temper flaring again. I refocused my magic to animate the revenants again, causing their bones to rattle and make the guild members scream as one.

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“Move over!” I barked. “Unless you’d like to get crushed, hug the walls.”

The crowd listened, pressing themselves to either side of the hall as the dead marched past. Some covered their mouths and noses to keep the smell of death out, and others looked pale enough to faint. But all of them gaped at me taking up the rear of the group. I tried to move them as fast as possible, but with so many, it was a slow procession to the stairwell leading back down to the guild’s catacombs. The door that once closed it was now on the floor in splinters, the revenants marched over without a care.

I turned to three of the closest guild members, still hunkered against the wall and shaking, and gestured to the broken remains. “I recommend you get a craftsman over to make a sturdier door than this, perhaps with a ward? For a group of spellcasters who raise the dead, I would think it smart to keep the ones beneath your guild guarded. I’ll go find a patrol to report this mess to. I don’t recommend running your mouths about the late guildmaster until an investigation can be opened, but I doubt you would be able to hold your tongues so do what you must.”

They nodded woodenly. I was sure the trauma from this day would stay with them for the rest of their lives, but quite frankly, that was the least of my worries right now. My bigger problem now was convincing the guards I’d be reporting this to that I didn’t kill Nebold Briton myself. And finding out who did.

Chapter Fourteen

Haron

The Revolution of Julra did more than just create their country. Golath's resources and population were depleted,

leaving virtually no one to inhabit the forts or guard their southern borders. Nomadic tribes in what is now Respar

crept in, claiming more of the land for themselves leaving Golath with an even smaller country than when it began

the revolution. The City of Scholars was not established until the beginning of the Reign of Joles, marking the first

year in the 144-year reign. Beyond the 327 years documented in these libraries, all our information is second hand

from citizens who once lived in those countries. Could this loss of land had been what spurred the Golathians to

attack Julra?

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 39 of Ber's First Reign

It was dark already, far past the normal business hours of most merchants as I walked down one of the roads in the lower district. I was on my way to one of the more unconventional apothecaries, hoping to restock some materials in my standard kit. The House of Ber's Children shop owner was a kind old woman, Hiel Bitonal, and had become something of a regular of my services as well. She knew of my general avoidance of daylight and kept her shop open after dark to accommodate. I would have braved the painful brightness of the day to take care of this, but I was so drained from the encounter I stumbled back to the tavern and promptly passed out in my

room for a few precious hours. With everything that happened this morning at the guild, and the revelation someone who could impersonate Nebold was now running loose, the urgent need to make sure my supplies were topped off took priority. I couldn't just curl into a ball and hide myself away, waiting for someone to come save me. And I had a sinking feeling my life as Haron Val Toric would be coming to an end sooner than I'd hoped.

“A good evening to you, Haron Val Toric.”

Slowly, I turned to face the owner of the light voice, intentionally keeping my back close to the exterior of a nearby building. Everything had me on edge. As much as I hated to admit it, I was still pretty shaken up at the discovery of Nebold's death. Not that much love was lost between us, but still... there was something vile coursing through the veins of Gilamorst. I feared Trisne and Nebold were only a few of many victims to be taken by whatever roamed its streets.

“A good evening to you as well,” I answered politely enough, while watching the cloaked figure approach warily. They sounded familiar, but I couldn't place the voice precisely. Their aura, though, immediately brought me back to Pid's masquerade. That same slimy, disturbing feeling of something wrong moving across my skin reminded me of how it felt being close to that man Forol Hent. The one who didn't seem to exist anywhere outside of that night. Suddenly, every hair on my arms rose and my muscles locked in alarm.

A genial laugh came from the stranger's hood. “Such a cold greeting! Surely you could do better than that.”

My eyes narrowed. The person seemed male by the sound of their voice, but it held an airy and slightly lilted tone not typical of the harsher Gilamorst dialect common in the lower streets. So, he was either a Highlan, or someone not from this city. His dark cloak was loose enough to not give any indication of a silhouette, reaching all the

way to the ground with a simple silver brooch holding it together at the chest. It was hard to tell at my distance if this person was armed, but I could assume the answer was yes.

He continued walking at an easy pace, not fast enough to try to catch me off-guard but disconcerting all the same. Whoever this was, had no indication of stopping, and I was forced to step back to keep a reasonably personal space. My movements were stiff and jerking, my body and mind fighting on whether to run or stay and face the man. Casting a quick glance around showed no signs of someone else wandering up to potentially help. Instincts that had kept me alive this long screamed at me to get away, get away, get away.

"My apologies," I tried to keep the snide tone from my voice. "I am in a hurry, so I bid you a good evening."

"Hmm," the stranger hummed. He seemed to completely ignore my attempt to close this increasingly unsettling conversation. "Those eyes would give you away, even if I had no idea who you were. Blue and black? That is a unique combination. Or..." They moved closer just as I passed the opening of an alley between two closed shops. "With the dilation of the pupil blown that wide, a sign of rather advanced and prolonged corpse walking."

Shit.

I barely managed to dodge the short sword that flashed from beneath the man's cloak. Unfortunately, I leapt back into the dark alleyway, which seemed to be exactly where he wanted me. He was relentless, swinging his sword again and again as I moved just enough to avoid it, only able to pull my own sword from my hip by the third attempt and meet his with a loud clang. A bitter curse spat from my mouth as I was driven back further and further into the shadows with heavy blows of his sword. "Who the fuck are you?"

They didn't let up. These were the moves of someone well trained in combat. And he was so fucking fast! Unnaturally fast. I could hardly find a moment to retaliate, bringing my blade up along my right side just in time to block a particularly brutal swing. An unhinged laugh burst from beneath my attacker's hood as he pressed closer. Gods, he was strong!

"Someone who knows a lot about you, Haron." Clang. The sword strikes rang out through the alley, so loud in the otherwise still night. "And would take great joy in killing you for good." Clang.

Every strike of our swords forced me to take the defensive. I expected that from a man, but what shocked me was how light he was on his feet. He was very strategic in pushing me to the dead end between the buildings—no one would be able to see us clearly from the street—in the unlikely event someone was even walking around this area at night. That this person didn't seem concerned about being caught was concerning on its own.

"Well," I huffed. "That doesn't narrow the list down very much, does it?"

His sword whistled past my cheek in a vicious cross swing, and I could feel the skin split open on its sharp edge. This asshole was definitely looking to kill, not maim. "Trust me when I say I can cut the line!" The roar that followed his quip was oddly muffled, like he was shouting underwater. It was the first I'd noticed, but focusing again on the metallic strikes made me realize all our sounds were getting more dampened the longer we fought.

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If I had to take a guess, this was a skilled hydromancer. Manipulating the water in the air to muffle sound while fighting took an immense amount of focus and practice. That did narrow my list of possible enemies a bit.

If this guy was going to hide our little skirmish, I took that as permission to go all in.

He swung wide, leaving his whole left side open for me to spin under his arm and grab the back of his hood from behind. I used it to jerk him over my shoulder, throwing his bulk as I hunched over and as he howled with pain at the chunk of hair I took with the cloak. He reached up to snatch my wrist and twist it painfully to release my grip on the fall, bringing us both to the ground in a flailing pile of jabbing elbows and thrown fists as both our swords skittered across the ground. I managed to detangle myself first and pull a smaller hunting knife from the small of my back. His hand wrapped around my ankle, trying to pull me to the ground again.

"Fuck!" I spat and swiped my knife toward his arm, cutting another long gash along his forearm that made him flinch back enough to let go of me. He was back on his own feet in the next breath and we both danced out of range from each other, chests heaving and eyes burning holes in the other's faces.

His hood was down now, and the face it hid had me baring my teeth.

Gennel Rhen stared back at me, his blonde hair disheveled and ripped from the braid that had tied it back out of sight beneath the hood. An ugly snarl twisted his delicate features as he charged to deliver another powerful blow to my right side. That wrist throbbed painfully from where he wrenched it and made my block weak. I stumbled to the side, staggering my stance to favor that side.

“So, the head of the snake reveals itself,” I said bitterly. We circled each other in the wide alley, neither of us willing to blink or lose the advantage of distance. “I’m shocked you would do dirty work like killing me yourself.”

Gennel laughed, but it was more of a growl. “Trust me, this is too personal to let someone else do.”

“What the hell did I do? I barely fucking know you!”

“Cut the bullshit!” he roared. “A hundred years later, and you are still a fucking scourge of Ber’s earth!”

His words chilled me straight to the core, so surprised I almost broke concentration enough for him to stab me straight in the gut on his next move. I whipped my elbow up hard enough to crack his teeth together, and he stumbled back out of reach.

“What do you mean by that?” My lungs struggled to get enough air. I’m sure Gennel had something to do with that as well, making the air heavy and limited in this close space. I couldn’t see it, but I was almost positive there was a sphere of his influence around us that he was manipulating the water in. Too bad for him there was not much water in this hot land to use.

Gennel rubbed his jaw and turned his head to spit out a glob of blood. He must have bitten his tongue with the last blow. “My family has been looking for you for a long time, Haron. Or rather...Princept Morrette Hilj.”

So, the day has finally come. “Color me impressed,” I snapped. “I suppose you won’t be going into detail with your villainous monologue, will you?”

“Fucking spare me! The villain here is you, you fucking abomination!”

He lunged again, but I anticipated his emotional outburst and slid to the side just enough to step inside his left side. My blade swept across his chest as he passed by, and I spun out and away to face Gennel again. I knew it wasn't a fatal cut. The blade didn't have that satisfying feeling of cutting through soft flesh. It had scraped against something dense, like trying to cut a slab of rock. Briefly, I glanced down to check if the sword's edge had been damaged. It looked fine, so I gathered Gennel did something with his hydromancy to protect himself from being cut.

He whirled to face me again, and his secret was revealed in the gaping slash of his shirt.

The complete shock I felt manifested in a barked laugh. "Looks like we both kept our secrets close to our chest...my lady."

Where my blade had cut what I thought was skin wavered like a disturbed puddle. And beneath the watery layer was the thin cloth wraps of a chest binding. A binding that I was very familiar with in my old life, when I kept my breasts pressed tight to keep them out of the way of sword fighting and social expectations.

The fact that Highlan Gennel Rhen—supposed treasurer of all the male-run guilds in Gilamorst, and a noble on top of that—was a woman in disguise was the most twisted irony I could imagine. If she weren't trying to actively kill me, I would even applaud the deception.

Gennel huffed and scraped loose hair back from her snarling face. "It will not be an issue for long, because you're not leaving this alley alive."

The air grew heavier, to the point condensation began to collect on my exposed skin and soak through my clothes. It was starting to weigh me down, so I tossed the leather coat off my shoulders to smack against the wall behind me. "I don't give a single fuck whether you're a man or woman. I'm not even sure what your problem is

with me, exactly!”

"It doesn't matter, if I kill you anyway!"

I pushed the offensive this time, feigning a slash to the right for her to block and cutting low across the top of her right thigh instead. She bellowed angrily and swung at my open right side as well, except her weakened leg made her stumble and barely catch the next blow. My block was too slow and the blade glanced off hers. Bright pain flared across my ribs as her sword slashed through my leather vest and the thin tunic beneath it. I turned with the swing, elbowing her on her temple and causing her to stagger into the brick wall. I swung across her body, the sword going wide when she recovered and slammed her fist into the side of my jaw hard enough to make me see stars.

I tried to distance myself as much as I could in the narrow alley, desperately trying to catch my breath with heaving gasps that rattled with the collecting of water in the back of my throat. It was getting too difficult to get enough air in my lungs, likely from Gennel manipulating the water content in our small area. But magic did not create from nothing, and it did not destroy to nothing. She had to be using the water from her own body—or some hidden container on her person—to saturate the air. Which meant this was a battle against time. I had to end this quickly, before I drowned or got stabbed to the point I couldn't heal this body. How she sustained herself without sucking all the water from herself was a testament to the precise control she had over her hydromancy.

Another thought barged into my mind at the worst possible moment. There was another incident, very recently, that would have required this level of proficiency. “You were the one who murdered Trisne Pid, aren't you?”

Her bitter laughter was the only answer I needed. “Is that what you should be worrying about right now? Your priorities are horribly skewed.”

My vision reached a crimson so deep I may as well be looking through blood. I could feel the hair not bound by my braid lift from my head with the burst of unfettered magic coursing through my body. Rage the likes of which I had not felt for a hundred years almost dragged me under its influence and turned me into the berserker I kept locked away. Gilamorst was not equipped or wholly capable of handling that version of me.

Gennel didn't seem to realize the danger she was in. "Oh no, did you care for dear Trisne?" Her voice was lilting in a sing-song taunt. "Would you care to learn how long she survived without her liver? Or her lungs? I saved the heart for last, it was my personal favorite to harvest. All for a good cause, I assure you. I could even say I wouldn't be who I am today without her help. That ritual has been passed through the Werren family for generations, hoping to one day use it to finish off your despicable family!" A dreamy, demented look took over her face as she stared me down like I was a juicy steak she would devour. "Oh, the magic I could harvest from you..."

Slowly, not taking my eyes from her, I pulled the glove of my left hand off with my teeth. Her attention snagged on the action and Gennel tilted her head. From how saturated the air became—to the point water gathered in my mouth with every breath and I had to spit it out on every exhale—she obviously suspected something would happen and was trying to weigh me down further.

“What—”

I didn't give her much of a chance to respond. Blow upon blow was barely blocked by her sword as I swung with renewed strength. Every hit brought me a little closer to my goal, one that Gennel didn't realize until my bare hand snatched out and wrapped around her arm at the bicep. That moment of distraction when her head snapped down was enough to shove her, slamming her back against the brick wall hard enough to knock the wind from her lungs. My forehead drove into the side of her face to smash it against the brick as well.

The draw from my left hand was swift and efficient. Within the two breaths Gennel took before she could react, half of the muscles in her left arm from the fingers up to the bend of her elbow were withered and desiccated from the spell. The howl of pain and frustration from her lips made my ears ring, and she began to thrash like a wild rhinoceros caught in a leg trap. Brittle bone and drying skin began to crack and break apart beneath my relentless grip as the spell crept slowly up to the shoulder joint.

If the bitch was trying to drown me, I would dry her out in equal measures.

“Get...Off!” Gennel roared. She managed to twist her body just enough to push off the wall and knock me off-balance. Unfortunately for her, one arm was too dehydrated to be of much use at the moment, so the shove was weak. It would take more concentration than what she had to spare to try healing it now.

I swung again, cutting a deep gash across the top of her other thigh that had her crumpling to the ground. Those wide brown eyes rose slowly to meet mine, both of us breathing heavily from the exertion of our spellcasting and fighting. In that

moment, I saw the flip in her eyes from predator to prey. They darted around frantically to look for an escape route.

“This isn’t fucking over, Morrette,” she hissed. “I will bring Golath back to its former glory, and make sure every part of the Hilj legacy is destroyed for betraying us!”

With a snarled yell, Gennel swept her sword low across the ground aimed at my ankles, and I barely jumped back to avoid the tip of it. A massive cloud of fog burst forth from her hunched form and filled the enclosed space quickly. I could barely see the end of my arm but darted in the same direction I knew the alley’s mouth was to try and head her off. The form I thought was her hobbling body was nothing more than an illusion I swiped at with my sword, disturbing the fog with billowing swirls that swept around me as I spun to reorient myself. The air was heavy and humid, the thick mist seemingly unbreakable and getting harder to breathe. I had to get out before it smothered me or overheated my body.

“Gods, damn it!” I roared. My vision began to waver as I tried desperately to find the boundary of the space manipulated by Gennel’s magic. It didn’t sound like my voice was muffled like before, which hinted that she was already too far away to keep that spell active. But the night was still and stuffy as it was, adding to my discomfort and doing little to dissipate the fog.

Finally, after what felt like wading through a layer of hell itself, I stumbled out of the alleyway and gasped great lungfuls of air not oversaturated and trying to suffocate me. It took a good few minutes to recover and cool down. I had to lean back against the front of a store and close my eyes to keep the world from spinning and slow my racing heartbeat.

“Gods damn it,” I whispered again, tilting my head and opening my eyes again to stare at the star-speckled night sky. “Can you possibly cut me some slack?”

Neither the gods I cursed, nor any other benevolent entity, answered me.

Chapter Fifteen

Haron

I interviewed the royal staff from before. Her name is Sinna Val Toric. She was the nursemaid to the children and had

a son of her own that practiced swords with the Princept. She told me of how Morrette Hilj was a fire barely

contained in their body but also compassionate and loyal to a fault. They sought truth and justice above all else, and

even from a young age, shaped the changes of social expectations in their position as a child of royalty. It has yet to

be determined if the Princept escaped the Clifftombs.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 39 of Ber's First Reign

I had no memory of going back to my room. How I managed to make it back to The Hanging Cat was not an issue, but when I descended the steps slowly for breakfast the next morning, both Gaion and Jessella watched me as if I was about to bring the whole tavern down. Their heads were bent close together as they leaned over the worn wood of the bar, and when my foot hit the creaking bottom step, they both snapped up to stare with concerned looks in their eyes. Even with advanced healing, I'm sure I looked wrecked hobbling through the tavern door at an ungodly hour. I only felt slightly more alive today, albeit much less bruised and cut up.

“Good morning,” I croaked. I needed some water, or maybe an ale. “Are there leftovers from dinner I can scavenge for breakfast?”

Jessella was the first to unfreeze, cautiously approaching until she stopped a few feet away. My eyes narrowed in suspicion; usually she was running and leaping at me any chance she got. Now she almost seemed... scared. What exactly did I do last night?

“Hey...” she finally greeted me. “Are you... are you ok, Haron? Gaion and I were so worried about you when you showed up late last night looking like...” Jessella couldn’t seem to finish her sentence, but a violent shudder shook her body. Her eyes, usually a sparkling honeyed brown, looked shadowed and haunted now.

“Ya looked like a fuckin’ demon,” Gaion added. “And I’ve known some pretty vile demons, human-shaped or otherwise. What the hell happened to you yesterday to come in here with some wild, thrashing shadows knocking everything off the tables and walls? I never saw a magic like that in my life.”

No...

Knowing I was still under their scrutinizing stares, I hesitantly turned to look at the front of the tavern and see what the damage of my fugue state cost me. Deep gouges ran along the ceiling, walls, and floor around the entrance, like some massive creature with flailing claws had crawled its way through the front door. There was a distinct lack of tables along the path to the staircase, along with a vivid scorch pattern burned into the worn wooden floor. Two distinct lines with lighter waves of black around them, as if whoever had walked across the tavern had been on fire.

Gaion rubbed his forehead like he was trying to smooth out the wrinkles in his concerned expression. “You were... I tried calling out to you, but it was like nothing was going on up here.” He tapped his temple. “Luckily the tavern was empty since it was so late, but I am damn sure if someone saw you like that, they would have hauled

you straight to the warded dungeons where they put the wild spellcasters. Is that what you want people to think? You're so drunk on power you can do whatever you want without consequence?"

I blinked. "Pardon? Where is this coming from?"

"The notices from the guild? You coming in like the fucking harbinger of death? Rumor has it you threatened Jinon Pid with his life?" Gaion's face was turning an unhealthy shade of purple. "Gods damn it, Haron! How else do you think this is going to end besides getting put down like a rabid dog?"

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“I’m...” I couldn’t find the words. My mind was muddled, like I was wandering through a thick fog and couldn’t reorient myself. I had walked this path of self-preservation for so long, I lost my way from the reason I kept living in the first place.

Had I become the monster I hated?

“I need to go.” Dazed, I turned to walk from the tavern.

“No, wait Haron!” Jessella’s slender hand wrapped around my bicep, and she tried pulling me to a stop. I had a good five inches and a third of her weight over her, so the effort was mostly useless. “Just tell us the problem and we can work on it together! You don’t have to fight whatever it is you think you need to by yourself!”

The sigh that heaved from my chest came from deeper than my lungs. It left my very worn, tired, old soul. “Unfortunately, vilasch, I do.”

Prying her fingers from my arm was easy. But turning my back on the two people who thought they knew me, who thought they could support me in whatever I chose to do, was the hardest thing I’d had to do in this life.

“I need to speak with Prince Irin.”

The guard at the main gate looked me up and down twice. I had walked straight up to the palace from The Hanging Cat, not even bothering to bring my pack or belt, so I wasn’t sure what he was trying to find just from staring at me. “Do you have an appointment?”

I gave my most level, dead-eyed stare. “If I did, I certainly wouldn’t have stopped to talk to you about it. Please tell him Haron Val Toric needs to speak to him urgently.”

“Court hours have not started yet; you will need to come back—”

An annoyed breath hissed from my mouth. “Gods, you are less than helpful!”

It was more difficult to do in the light of day with no shadows to slink into, but I managed to turn myself insubstantial enough to slip by the guard and skirt around the thin line of shade cast from the palace’s high walls toward the hedges lining the main walkway. Immediately the pair of guards shouted in alarm and scattered to look for me.

Beolf led another small group of guards from the palace, flagging down the one who tried to stop me at the gate. “What’s going on here? Is there an intruder?”

The man was breathless from running around in his heavy armor. “Yes... sorry General. Some crazy lady who called herself Haron Val Toric said she needed to see the prince. Then she just... turned into a shadow snake and slithered past!”

Even from my shadowy hiding spot in the neat hedges, I could see Beolf’s frustration. His head tilted back, and a gloved hand pinched the bridge of his nose as his eyes scrunched shut. He was muttering something, but I was too far away to hear. After a few silent moments—the guards waiting as if hanging on their general’s every breath—he finally tilted his head back down to give the next command.

“Return to your posts, soldiers. I know Haron,”—unfortunate for the both of us— “so she may be willing to talk to me instead.”

Fat chance.

I wasn't going to waste my time with Sir Rocks-For-Brains. He already had a low opinion of women in general. Surely, he would just write me off as completely unhinged and throw me in a cell if I told him what I found about Gennel.

It was difficult to keep this shadow form—both because it was a bright morning, and my concentration was fragile and scattered—but I managed to creep my way down the hedge line toward the palace's main entrance. Instead of making a break for it, I waited for the opportune moment to sprint across the short but open space toward the opposite brick wall. The stable's doors were open, so any stable hand working there could easily see me from this angle if I didn't move my ass. Granted, they would only see a human-shaped shadow. It would still be wildly inconvenient.

My spell flickered, beginning to draw its power from me in massive draws like a man dying of thirst. Being a shadow in broad daylight was taking its toll on my energy. "Shit!" I hissed quietly and gritted my teeth against the uncomfortable draining sensation.

I had to drop the spell. It didn't stand a chance of holding against the direct sunlight pounding down on me now. Dying by spell devouring was not on my list of ways I'd like to go. So reluctantly, I let the shadowy cloak slip free and disperse in a sizzle to the burning light. The feeling of being out in the open, for anyone to see, made my pulse hammer in my ears and my stomach twist in painful knots. Regardless, I had to find a window to slip into before Beolf decided to look this way.

It took five sets of windows before I found one that was cracked open. Despite the several warnings and previous events of breaking in, Irin still hadn't reinforced the wards guarding the palace grounds. It was like he kept the door cracked for me to sneak through without openly inviting me inside. My teeth gripped the fingertip of my glove, and I yanked it off with a vicious tug of my head, then placed my hand against the weakward. It sparked immediately, like throwing water in a hot oiled pan.

“Oh hush,” I chastised the offended ward. “Maybe I am losing my mind, talking to inanimate magic wards now.”

Crack!

The ward gave beneath the press of my palm, shattering as if I’d broken the glass itself, and I hurriedly pushed the window open on its oiled hinges to slip over the windowsill. The room was dark, despite the light streaming into the stained-glass windows lining it, and after allowing my eyes to adjust, I realized it was Irin’s private study. I only recognized it from the looming, dark wood bookshelves laden with tomes and history books.

A light sound, like nails clicking along the stone floor, was shortly followed by a wet snout pushing into my hand. I looked down to see Behar’s huge, scruffy black head angled up at me with his tongue lolling out. His tail wagged so hard it shook his body. But if Behar was here, that meant...

“I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon, much less by breaking into my study.”

He was easy to miss, bent over his desk in the unnatural darkness. Today he wore a deep red vest over a simple black shirt, a silky black robe draped across his shoulders and hanging loosely from his arms. A massive book lay flat across the cluttered desk, the pages barely lit by a single candle at its corner. If I wasn’t so worried about him calling for his guards to haul me off, I’d make a comment to move the flame further from his book. It made me nervous seeing it so carelessly placed.

“Do you always sit in the dark like this?” I tried to ask casually and lean back against the windows. I hoped the move of closing the window and flipping the lock was nonchalant enough for him to not notice. Which, of course, was a stupid idea. Irin’s hearing was sharp enough to hear the lightclick of the latch slipping into place, just as Behar’s ears perked at the sound. Irin’s head lifted then, finally looking me straight

on. The candle's flame played delicious shadows across his tanned skin, casting half of it in darkness like he had two distinct halves. The one he showed me was amused, a slight smile crooking the left side of his lips. His eyes flicked across my disheveled appearance, likely able to see the faint traces of bruising on my face that hadn't healed yet, and that amusement slipped away to make way for concern.

“What happened to you?” He rose from the desk, pushing the book away slightly as he did so and knocking the edge of it into the candle. Irin moved around to place a hand on the back of one of the overstuffed chairs facing the desk. “Did someone try to chase you down?”

“Something like that,” I muttered.

Irin gestured to the chair he stood by, silently asking me to sit as he moved to take the one beside it. I appreciated that he didn’t press for more information, letting me start the conversation on my own time. Really, I wasn’t prepared to face Irin like this. I was hoping for a bit more time to collect my thoughts, despite the fact I’d broken into the fucking royal palace to talk to him.

Of all the lives I’d lived, my impulsiveness had managed to cling to me even now.

My steps were a little unsteady—I was still a little off from the drain of the shadow walking spell—as I moved across the study to take the seat angled toward his own. Behar pressed himself against my leg as if offering his own kind of support, staying with me even as I sat and plopping himself down by my feet with a little huff. Irin continued to watch with a look of deep concern as I sank into the chair and leaned an elbow on the armrest to press my fingertips to my temple. The pounding headache made it difficult to concentrate on anything.

“Do you always keep your study dark?”

It was obviously not the question he expected. Irin shrugged. “My beastwalker traits allow me better sight in the dark than in the light. Rin hounds are nocturnal creatures.” He gestured to where Behar was rolled on his side between us. “Besides, Behar only stays in the room if it’s dark. Otherwise, he would burrow under my bedsheets, and the maids are cleaning my chambers today.”

I nodded, but my brain couldn’t come up with a reasonable response beyond that.

Everything since confronting Gaion and Jessella this morning felt like an out-of-body experience, like I was just running on instinct to the one person I thought would take my words at face value. Someone who wouldn't look at me with horror in their eyes, or call me an abomination and kill me on principle.

It was hard to tell how long he let me sit in silence, swept away in the swirling dark waters of my thoughts and every choice that had led me to this very moment, sitting in this chair now.

“Haron.” Irin’s gentle voice drew my vacant stare back to focus. “You can tell me anything. You know that, right? I’m... I’m sorry if I made you think otherwise when you told me about Trisne’s—” he stopped, and I could see the hard swallow in his throat before forcing himself to continue, “—murder, and what Jinon admitted about Forol. I was shocked, and I acted poorly.”

I scoffed, resorting to bitter humor to see me through this painfully awkward conversation. “Well, you’re about to be even more shocked.”

Irin waited patiently, leaning forward slightly in his chair as if to reach out and touch my knee before thinking better of it. "Whatever it is, you can tell me. You can trust me."

His words lit a beacon in the muddled darkness I wandered through since last night. I wasn't sure what I expected from Irin exactly, coming here in this disheveled state. There was no way for him to know the magnitude of what that meant to me, showing him my weakness like this, but I desperately hoped it was the right choice.

“I was attacked by Gennel Rhen.”

Irin’s eyes widened in surprise, but he refrained from jumping in to fire off the questions I could already see piling up behind lips pressed to a thin line.

“Before you jump down my throat.” I pointed a finger at his face. “He was the one who attacked me! Oh, and to top it all off, he’s actually a woman!” I hoped I could get away with only revealing that much. If I had to tell Irin who I really was, he would definitely lock me in the dungeons under the assumption I’d lost my mind.

The silence that fell after my statement was not empty. I could see the buzzing thoughts in Irin’s eyes as he tried to understand the magnitude of it all. I was about a breath away from jumping up and bolting out of the window I’d crept into when he finally leaned forward again. He braced both elbows on his knees and threaded his fingers together as he stared hard at me.

“Ok,” he started, then shook his head. “Ok, um, so Gennel is running loose in Gilamorst, pretending to be a man, after trying to kill you last night?”

“Yes! I don’t know how she does it, but she’s an extremely skilled hydromancer. She uses some kind of...” My brain fumbled for the words to use when describing her magic. “It’s some kind of veil, maybe water, that she covers her body with and can change her appearance. And she can manipulate water in the air! I have... never seen anything like it. I think she gained her power from using some kind of ritual on Trisne to harvest her magic, along with gods know who else!”

Maybe that was the part that disturbed me the most. I had lived many lives, spending a hundred years studying everything I could about necromancy and meeting many talented practitioners, and I had yet to see a hydromancer who was able to create a whole illusion from water to that extent, much less concentrate it in the air to drown someone. The amount of focus it must have taken to control both spells while trying to kill me was beyond comprehension. And whatever dark ritual she used to gain that kind of power had to take a toll on her mentally. Gennel was quickly spiraling out of control.

Then another thought struck me dumb. The ‘Nebold’ I encountered at the guild who

attacked me was not the real one either. Could Gennel have been the one to kill and impersonate him? Was she the one I encountered in Nebold's study who escaped? Frustration sent a burning wave of heat up to flush my cheeks as I glared down at my lap, the wheels in my mind seeming to spin uselessly trying to piece everything together.

Irin's gaze drifted to the unlit fireplace behind me. He may not realize it, but when Irin was deep in thought, his eyes narrowed to slits and his lips pursed slightly. If I wasn't on a day-long panic attack, I'd think it was cute.

He finally spoke, obviously shaken. "That... that is disturbing. But I just don't see how it's possible."

"What do you mean? Do you think I beat myself up and came to you?" I gestured to my face. "There was no mistaking it, she found me while disguised as a man! I don't know what else to tell you to explain Gennel is not who you think she is. I think she could have even been the one impersonating Nebold who attacked me at the guild too! Who fucking knows!"

"Wait, you were attacked twice? By someone who looked like Nebold?" His voice rose, obviously thrown by the news. "Where is the real one? Is he... dead?"

My hands shook in my lap as I stared hard at them. I should have known just reporting the incident to the patrol would result in nothing. They couldn't even be bothered to bring that information back to their king, likely because it came from a woman's mouth. I surely hadn't bothered to stick around and check their investigation after they interrogated me. For all I knew, a warrant could be out for my arrest on charges of murder. How Irin remained ignorant of it all was just another reminder of how loose his reign really was on Respar. He probably let Beolf manage these things and was none the wiser. Indignant rage like none I'd ever felt boiled up from my chest and threatened to spew from my mouth. How a ruler could be so out of touch with

what was going on under his nose, in his very city, was infuriating!

Irin took a deep, steadying breath, like he was the one about to fly off his hinges. “So, whoever was pretending to be Nebold decided to attack you instead?”

“Well, killing me would keep anyone else from entering the Clifftombs.” As soon as the words left my mouth I choked on my breath, immediately cursing my scattered thoughts for not stopping me from spouting more incriminating evidence. Irin’s head tilted in confusion, but an intense fire burned in his eyes now. I just gave him a bone to chew on.

“What do the Clifftombs have to do with any of this? There’s no way anyone alive would be able to get inside, the last census from the Scholars reported its wards still held.”

My lips pressed together tightly, pinned my by teeth in a desperate effort to dig myself further into this hole I’ve made. Why I even thought to come to Irin was beyond me, this was all a profoundly stupid idea and I need to leave right now—

“Haron,” he began, cutting off my internal berating. Irin’s eyes bored into my own, like he was trying to dig straight into my head. “Why would Nebold, or whoever was pretending to be Nebold, think you could get into the Clifftombs?”

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My back practically arched as if I was a cat backed into a corner. “Do I look like someone who knows how a murderous woman thinks? She's a fucking lunatic!”

“We don't know for sure if Gennel was the one who attacked you as Nebold. And that didn't answer my question.”

“It did!” I tried desperately to derail him from this detail he'd latched onto. “Even if I can't prove Gennel did anything to Nebold, I'm telling you to your face she tried to kill me last night! What more do you need to bring him... her into custody? Who's to say she's nobility at all? Has anyone checked the legitimacy of her claim of inheritance as a Rhen, regardless, if Gennel is a man or woman? Where is the rest of her family?”

Irin pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut, letting his head hang loosely on his neck. “This is... a lot, Haron. Accusing Gennel of trying to kill you is one thing, but saying he or she has been disguising themselves as nobility this entire time? Maybe you mistook what you saw in the alley. It could have been dark, and your senses were overwhelmed when you were attacked—”

I scoffed, not able to even comprehend the delusion he was trying to blanket this whole situation with. “That's what you think? That I was so frantic I couldn't tell that Gennel had fucking breasts? And glossing over the fact someone—whether you think it's Gennel or not—has attacked me twice in as many days? Is this how you serve justice?”

“Look, Haron,” he sighed heavily and lifted his gaze back to mine. Irin looked so tired and worn to the bone, over more than just this. “I just find it incredibly difficult

for Gennel to have lied straight to my face without me knowing. Maybe there's an assassin in Gilamorst who looks like him, which is a problem on its own—" I opened my mouth to interject, but Irin held his hand up to stop me. "—yes, I understand. But it would be a serious allegation to haul someone who everyone believes is a Highlan in for interrogation. He said his parents had died before he moved to Gilamorst. I checked the records of the nobles' families, and there is an account of a Vornat Rhen who moved to the City of Scholars to study financing in the Covenant Library."

I was baffled by his level of trust. "So, you'd take the word of this alleged man who says he's a relative of a Rhen who moved away, and he conveniently died before he could confirm Gennel's birthright?"

"I could tell he spoke the truth," Irin said plainly.

"According to what, your truthsayer powers? The ones you unnaturally suppress by practicing beast walker magic? I'm sure that doesn't affect its fallacy at all," I scoffed, not wanting to believe he would write me off so easily just because his special senses told him otherwise. Not that he knew how fallible those truthsayer senses actually were. I knew it was unfair for me to be angry with him, but I couldn't hold back the rampant fire already scorching its way through my veins.

"It's the same with you! You say you moved here five years ago to join the Necromancy Guild, and I took your word because my truthsayer ability assured me. Are you saying I shouldn't trust you, either?"

Disdain dripped from my words like venom from a snake's fangs. I was just waiting for a reason to strike. "You really are quite ignorant, even for a royal."

Irin blew an angry breath out of his nose, then pinched the bridge of it again. "That's not what I'm saying! But if he were that conniving and untrustworthy, I definitely would have sensed it. So far, Gennel has been nothing but honest when we

spoke. I just find it very hard to believe a woman would have that kind of capability as a spellcaster, to keep a farce like that going for so long.”

But then Irin’s brows creased, as if a thought popped unbidden from memory. Maybe something that contradicted his argument. I doubt he would share that with me, if only to save his delicate ego.

“Right, right! So just because she’s a woman, Gennel is entirely incapable of casting complex magic that she likely got from killing people, and fooling the likes of you!” My eyes rolled so hard I was afraid they would cramp in my head. “Never mind the fact you haven’t sensed a lie from me either, yet here you stand doubting threats against my life! I’m trying to warn you of a dangerous, shapeshifting practitioner using rituals to steal magic from innocent people like Trisne, and you’re shoving your head so far up your own ass you cannot even see the truth!” By the end, I was fuming, not even bothered by who could overhear our argument. Actually, I wished someone would come and bear witness to Irin’s immeasurable stupidity. He was lucky he was out of reach. I was close to wringing his neck to save us both from his willful ignorance.

“Haron,” Irin began, hands out like he was approaching a wild beast. “Let’s just settle down, you’re being irr—”

I jabbed my finger at his face. “You better not fucking finish that sentence.”

“Irrational,” he finished anyway. His brow was drawn low over those honey-toned eyes, darkening them considerably. “I wouldn’t have to say it if you were acting like a rational person!”

One of us was bound to catch fire, with how intensely we stared into each other’s eyes. I wasn’t entirely sure why I was so adamant about Irin believing me. It went beyond simple justice. I wanted him to see, really see, what was wrong in this

backwards country he was about to officially rule. And it felt like taking down someone like fucking Gennel Rhen was the first step to dismantling the ridiculous concept that women couldn't be so nefarious and powerful. Never mind the fact I thought I'd proven over and over that gender had nothing to do with magical capabilities.

I thought we were the same. I'd fooled myself into thinking we had similar values when it came to finding the truth, no matter what. And now I felt like a fucking idiot putting all that faith in a flawed, totally normal human like Prince Irin Gailish. He hadn't seen what I'd seen. He didn't know anything beyond the walls of the palace he was raised in.

"Fine. I'm done."

Irin's mouth opened as if ready to counter but sputtered out quickly. "Wait, what?"

I was already reaching for the door leading out into the hallway. My fingers just barely brushed the cool metal of the knob when he snatched me back by my elbow. Still, I refused to turn and face him again. He didn't deserve any more of my attention.

"Haron, can we please..." Irin's plea cut off in a very animalistic whine. He sounded just like his rinhound when he was frustrated. And he thought women were unstable? He was the one struggling to keep his human form! "I don't want us to part like this. It feels like... it feels like you're going to do something dangerous. I... I care about you, Haron. Please...just stay and talk with me."

The laugh that came from my lips was dark and bitter. He hadn't even bothered with apologizing for his narrow-mindedness and skipped straight to begging. With strength Irin obviously didn't think I possessed, I ripped my arm from his tight grip and yanked the heavy door open. "If you cared about me as you say, you would listen

when I tell you Gennel is a lying snake and a murderer you are willing to protect. Our values are obviously not the same. Our contract is void.”

The poor maid walking along the left side of the hall almost got barreled over with how quickly I marched from Irin’s chambers. Her exclamation told me Irin had also left the room and was chasing me out. “Wait, Haron! Gods damn it, woman, I said wait!”

“Prince Irin?” A man’s head popped out from one of the doors I had just passed by. “Oh, perfect timing! The council is all here now, and we’d like to review your bridal candidates if you—”

That well-timed distraction was all I needed to swerve out of his reaching hand and burst into a full sprint toward the grand foyer. Beolf was just rounding the corner, possibly going to whatever meeting Irin was supposed to be in, and a colorful curse burst from his lips as I barely avoided tackling him to the ground.

“What in the Gods’ names, Haron? What’s this about you breaking in? We’ve been looking all over—”

“Beolf!” Irin yelled, clearly pissed off now. “Catch her!”

“Not in your fucking lifetime!” I hollered back, already reaching the main doors to the palace. Beolf’s clunky armor clattered after me, clearly too far behind to have any hope of catching up. It was entertaining listening to him clang around like a kettle full of rocks being shaken.

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Instead of heading straight for the main gate like they expected, I darted around the line of tall shrubbery alongside the wide walkway and used their minimal shadows to my advantage. A cacophony of clambering armor and yelling from the guards passed by in a stampede, shortly followed by Irin himself, storming down the path. I was sure he would head over to The Hanging Cat first, then check the guild. I just had to wait them out long enough to get out of Gilamorst and through Covenant's Crossing to the north, then head east toward Julra.

I wasn't going to let the likes of a delusional prince slow my progress in finding who exactly Gennel Rhen was. But I would need to go back to the place I'd been avoiding for a hundred years, and I was dreading the implications of cracking those seals on my secrets.

Chapter Sixteen

Irin

Today I was approached by one of the necromancers who studied under Princept Morrette, one who chose to stay in

the City and become a researcher. Her name is Beta Gin-Allan, and she had just begun her studies in necromancy.

The day Golath invaded Julra, Beta saw Princept Morrette at the front of the infantry line, with a small group of

undead they had raised to assist the Julran army. In the end, she saw the Princept get

overwhelmed by a platoon of

Golath soldiers as the rest of the refugees escaped. She stated if it hadn't been for the Princept, there would have

been no chance for their escape. It sends chills down my spine to think that there is someone powerful enough to

raise the dead and command them to fight. Given the opportunity to continue their studies, how far would Princept

Morrette have been able to push a power like that?

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 39 of Ber's First Reign

“Gennel is gone.”

Sett, my spymaster, kept his head high and feet shoulder-width apart, hands held behind his back in a rigid posture. His eyes missed nothing, taking in where everything was placed on the desk I sat behind. Particularly, his eyes lingered on the sharp letter opener just to the left of my folded hands. The sleeveless black tunic tucked into skintight leather pants left nothing to the imagination, showing every ridge and line of muscle earned in hours of hard training. But he stood so stiffly he could have been a statue, face emotionless, as if waiting for my judgement on if he kept his job.

I didn't blame him for being tense. I was sure I sounded a bit erratic when I sent him to investigate Gennel and Nebold on nothing more than suspicions. It felt unbalanced, knowing things Sett didn't and sending him in blindly. I hadn't even shared the revelation that Gennel could be a woman with Beolf, and I told him practically

everything. If Sett was right in his report, Gennel may have already been spooked and slipped out from under our watch with a different appearance. The implications were nerve-wracking to think about.

“Did it seem like he left in a rush? Anything left out, or haphazardly placed?”

“No,” he huffed out in a bitter laugh. “The place was immaculate. No one seemed to be bothered by his absence, so it appeared as if he had left on a planned trip. His staff didn’t know where he went, either. Apparently, that’s not uncommon for him to leave for entire moon phases.”

Trying to keep the rage down was like trying to stop a raging river by standing in the middle of it. I was very close to being swept away entirely, and I wasn’t sure when I would get my footing again. “How can he just be gone? He’s the treasurer for all the guilds. You would think someone would have a clue where he went!”

I was too bitter to admit I was probably supposed to be one of those people who knew. Sett was wise enough to keep his mouth shut.

“I have more to report.”

In a rather unsophisticated manner, I slouched lower into my chair and proceeded to pinch the bridge of my nose. It was a challenge, but I focused on the steady whooshing of breaths in and out of my nose to try to calm myself. “What else could be wrong?” I asked drolly.

“Guildmaster Nebold Briton, of the Necromancer’s Guild, is confirmed dead. His body was found in the guild’s crypt.”

Shit. “Go on.”

Sett's brow crumpled, obviously thrown by my lack of a reaction to the news. "The guards on patrol in the guild sector mentioned it to me in our briefing this morning, so I assumed they had told General Zirch. Haron Val Toric was the one who found his body and reported it."

My head was spinning, full to the brim with stress and confusion, to the point everything else was drowned out. It felt like I was on the edge of a cliff, teetering over the edge to a full-blown panic. Even trying to focus on Sett now was like listening to his muffled voice from underwater.

The guilt was eating me alive, realizing Haron could have been right about it all.

"Haron claimed she was attacked by someone she thought was the guildmaster and raised the entire crypt beneath the guild to defend herself. As it turned out, the real Nebold's body was among the group of the dead. Whoever attacked her managed to escape from the study window."

"Gods..." Even hearing the information for a second time had me reeling in disbelief and confusion. The fact Haron wasn't a blubbering mess when I last saw her was a testament to her grit. Alongside concern for her well-being, my admiration for her swelled in my chest. "Did you manage to speak to any other witnesses of the incident?"

"I did more than that," Sett answered. "I infiltrated the guild myself and searched the entire building. The wards are startlingly weak, as if they had been tampered with. The stories of the guildmembers who witnessed Haron's mass resurrection aligned with what Haron had reported to the patrol, that the imposter had sealed the study, attacked her, and she defended herself by raising the dead. That's how Nebold's corpse was found."

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“What set the imposter off? Why would he just attack her when he obviously had a good cover?”

“According to the members, preparations were being made to explore the Clifftombs in search of some tome they thought was still there.” Sett rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Guildmaster Briton—or at least, the imposter—was trying to force Haron to lead the search party. Obviously, that ended poorly.”

The same questions kept eating away at me. “Why... why would anyone think Haron could access the Clifftombs? The wards there are so powerful, only the caster would be able to—”

My thoughts came to a screeching halt. They tangled in the words running out of my mouth until the all fell to the ground, immobilized. Sett stared at me curiously as I stood, probably gaping like a fish, as all the pieces of the puzzle that was Haron Val Toric snapped together to reveal the bigger picture. A picture I now felt incredibly stupid for not seeing earlier.

What were the chances of the ward's spellcaster surviving long enough to have offspring? Specifically, a necromancer known to have stayed behind in Julra when it fell and had the chance to put up those wards. I was the least knowledgeable in necromancy, but maybe there was a way that kind of information can be passed along from the grave. It would likely be through a generational connection, to be able to reach a span over a hundred years since the ancestor's death.

Could Haron... be related to Morrette Hilj? Could she have spoken to the princept's spirit and learned how to break the Clifftombs' wards? It didn't seem impossible given

her magical aptitude.

"How long do you think Nebold was dead?" The question came from numb lips, my eyes set on the wall across the room as I tried to rationalize this new possibility.

Sett answered warily, "When I visited his home to ask the attendants about his absence, they could not confirm exactly how long he had been gone or when they last saw him. They all had vague recollections of seeing him but couldn't give much detail beyond four days ago. I suspect their minds have been manipulated."

A chill was beginning to creep down my spine. "Any suspicions of who could do something like that?"

"Mind manipulation?" He shrugged, then began pacing a few steps back and forth in front of my desk. I'm not sure Sett wholly realized he was doing it. "Maybe a skilled hydromancer? There is an obscure sub-skill that specializes in advanced potion making, some of which could trigger memory loss or substitution. I would have to consult with Dayer to what extent a potion like this could accomplish."

"You are a hydromancer. How do you think this could be accomplished?"

Sett paused in his pacing. "My skill lies in manipulating my appearance, using a very thin layer of water over my skin and bending the light it reflects. I can change most of my features to an extent, but there's limitations. I'm unable to change my proportions, for example, or add onto my structure from what's already there like a bust or wider hips. I could speculate that total body augmentation would entail light bending coupled with a water barrier to give a more solid appearance, but the sheer amount of magic it would take to maintain would be beyond anything I could imagine. That kind of power would be... unnatural."

As he spoke, I felt the dark chill of dread sinking low in my stomach. At this rate I

would be entirely frozen by the end of this conversation. “So, you’re telling me there’s a way for someone to change their entire appearance with hydromancy, to the point it would be difficult to detect if it was real, and use potions to fabricate everything else about their story?”

“With enough years of practical study, it could be possible.”

“What if...” I couldn’t bring myself to finish the question.

What if Haron was right? What if Gennel could become anyone? Surely there was a limit to her power, that it was impossible to impersonate someone to this degree. What if... what if Gennel realized Haron could contact someone from the Hilj royal family? Is that why Gennel tried to kill her?

“Although,” Sett carried on. “I would add the caveat that this particular blend of hydromancer skills would be both unlikely to master and difficult to maintain long term. There would have to be extensive rituals involved to collect that kind of power.”

“Extensive in what way?”

“Well... they would likely be sacrificial in nature. Therefore, I doubt it would be guild sanctioned.”

I could hear my heart pound in my ears, drowning out whatever else Sett was saying. It was in front of my face the whole time. Even worse, this horrific truth was one Haron tried to tell me over and over, that Trisne’s death was more than just a murder. That her body showed signs of organs and pieces taken from her while she was still alive. A living sacrifice, kept alive far longer than she should have been, likely to be used in several consecutive rituals.

Haron was right. And I'd ignored her.

"Find Haron Val Toric. Bring her in under the assumption she is being questioned for Nebold's death, if she fights you. I believe she is in danger, and I don't think she will be taken in willingly."

Sett's eyebrow lifted skeptically. "Should I go with a patrol? You make it sound like I'm capturing a feral practitioner."

It didn't happen often, but Sett was usually the one to help neutralize those kinds of spellcasters, so I understood his confusion. "No, and I doubt she would take kindly to a group of soldiers showing up at her door. But I think she would be even less likely to respond well to myself or Beolf retrieving her, so I rely on you and your tact to convince her to come into custody. This is incredibly important. If she is going to the Clifftombs, I don't think we will be able to catch her once she leaves the city walls."

At that, Sett's stiffness softened a little. An understanding look crossed his stoic face. "You care for this woman, Prince Irin?"

I wasn't entirely sure how to answer such a direct question. She definitely got under my skin like no other person I'd ever known, man or woman, and took over more of my absent daydreaming than I would care to acknowledge. Haron was a walking contradiction, her history unknown to me, but still incredibly honest with anything I've asked of her. Maybe she wasn't really Haron at all, but I couldn't bring myself to admit the alternative until I looked her in the eye again and asked the question that burned in my chest now.

Who are you, Haron?

"Yes. I do."

Chapter Seventeen

Haron

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Sinna Val Toric's account of the Frigid War's battlefield will haunt me for the rest of my days. I have kept an

addendum in my desk with the more gruesome details, but what I will write here is that Golath showed no mercy to

their neighbors. The spellcasters of Golath studied darker sides of magic meant to maim and destroy. Princept

Morrette was last seen in the middle of the battlefield, armed with the traditional twin blades called Julran fangs

and killing as many foes as they could. Alas, even two years later there is no proof that the Princept survived.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 39 of Ber's First Reign

This marked the first time I'd ever crept into The Hanging Cat.

It was more of a pain in the ass than I'd originally anticipated, since there were only two entrances to the whole damn building, and both were under Gaion's watchful eye. I'd hoped staying away for three days would throw Irin off my trail, but it seemed he sent his annoyingly talented spymaster to collect me. I would only catch occasional glimpses of him around corners or lurking in shops I passed, but unfortunately for him his disguise was useless now that I'd had that same experience with Gennel. I knew what to look for, the auras that encased their bodies and sat close

like a second skin instead of emanating freely, was a dead giveaway. How two hydromancers in this city had that skill and I was unaware rankled me.

I'd booked some rooms in different taverns around the lower streets and popped into some stores, until I finally managed to sneak out the back of one and into an alley that connected alongside The Hanging Cat.

Finally, my luck has been resurrected.

The back door led through the kitchen, which opened up right next to the bar where Gaion would likely be, making that entrance unusable. The front door was obviously out. So, I had to jump the rooftops like a stray cat and hope I could open my room's window without breaking it. Waiting until nightfall let me slip through the shadows with my magic but unfortunately made me insubstantial as a ghost in the process.

Therefore, I had to drop my cover and get in with my solid body without falling off the building.

Now I sat perched on the edge of the tavern's roof above my bedroom window, chewing over my choices while blessedly invisible. Admittedly, I didn't think this far ahead when I decided to sneak out of Gilamorst and go to the Clifftombs myself. I spent the rest of the day after that disastrous meeting with Irin sitting by Trisne's grave, wondering how my life had come unraveled this quickly by investigating the woman's death. It was sheer luck I saw Sett questioning a store down the street from the cemetery before he saw me, but it wasn't long before he caught onto me and started this whole chase through the city.

"Ok, you can do it." I blew out a heavy breath through pursed lips and shook out my hands. "Just step on the ledge. That's it. Stop being a baby."

One hundred years of life, and I somehow hadn't shaken my deep fear of heights. It

took everything in me not to look down as I turned slowly and pushed my lower body off the clay tiles of the roof, sliding bit by bit while holding onto the tiles to drop bit by bit until my feet could find something solid to stand on. I thanked the Old Gods it was late enough at night for no one to be on the street, watching me dangle off the ledge and flail frantically.

Then one of the roof tiles shifted, loosening my grip until it slipped off.

“Gods damn it!”

My right foot hit something solid, and I frantically tried to reach out with it to step on what I hoped was my window’s ledge. I couldn’t keep my hold on my left hand much longer, and with another vicious curse, flung myself from the roof’s edge to the narrow piece of wood. After some interpretation of a birdflapping its wings, I managed to recover my balance and press myself tightly to the window, gripping both edges of the frame for dear life.

Thud thud thud thud. My heart beat wildly in my chest and my heavy breathing was so loud it was all I could hear. I hated the tears that pricked my eyes out of fear of slipping off the ledge. I may technically be immortal, but it would still hurt like a bitch to fall on the unforgiving street and have to pick myself back up.

But I had to keep going. There really was nowhere to go but through the window.

“Gods damn this stupid frame!” I hissed, jiggling the window to try and pop the simple latch on its sash. After ruining the day any window was invented, and some rather aggressive shakes, the latch finally popped free before I had time to fall off the second story.

Desperately my hands scrabbled along the glass to find a lip to pull the window up with. At the smallest possible gap to slip through, I crammed myself through the hole

and practically rolled onto the floor. It took a good couple of minutes of me lying on my back, staring at the tiny cracks running along the plaster on the ceiling, before I could get my frantic breathing under control. I thanked what little luck I had that the tavern's patrons were loud as a riot downstairs, keeping Gaion and his staff occupied while I banged around up here.

My pack was still slumped in the corner of the room by the door where I threw it last. I hastily rummaged through the old chest of drawers for a couple sets of spare clothes to stuff in the weathered sack, then snatched my belt from the top of it to wrap around my waist.

“What else, what else?” I hummed to myself. It was a quick survey of the room, but enough to tell me there was not much there to take. Satisfied with my hasty but thorough packing, I moved to the door to peek out and see if I was able to sneakdown the hallway to the window at the end and climb out. It faced the back of the building, so I was much less likely to make a total ass of myself trying to climb out.

“Is Haron Val Toric here?”

An unfamiliar voice boomed over the raucous laughter and hollers of the tavern, dimming it slightly with the new guest. It was deep and commanding and seemed particularly urgent. My guess was it belonged to the royal guard regarding the report on Nebold's death. Irin would have been less than pleased to find that information out from someone other than me. Now he'd sent someone to come haul me off and interrogate me in the dungeons.

So much for that sliver of good luck I thought I had.

“I already told ya, I haven't seen her since three days ago,” Gaion's gruff voice could barely be heard. “I have your message to—Wait, where d'ya think you're going?”

“Oh, shit.”

There was only one place Gaion would take offense to someone just barging in, and that was the guest rooms on the second floor. The floor I was currently standing on, with my room being the second one on the left from the staircase. Whoever was about to come up here would see me as soon as they climbed the eighth step.

He wasn't fucking taking me alive.

I hurried with quick, soft steps down the creaking hallway to the end, where a massive bay window looked out to a small garden Gaion kept for the kitchen. Off to the far right, barely visible from the window, stood the small stable where my kistral was penned. In Julra we used to ride them barebacked, and I hoped that skill was not lost when I snatched the poor beast up to ride out.

With some measure of forethought, I kept a coil of spare rope in my hand instead of packing it and tied one end to the closest doorknob. There was no mistake the knob would break off when I put my not-insignificant amount of weight against it, but the theory was it would slow my fall enough to not incapacitate me at the bottom when I rappelled down the back of the building.

My foot was planted on the windowsill outside the window when the man reached that eighth step. His brown eyes widened in an otherwise serious expression, and they quickly took in the rope tied to the door, and me holding it as I stood perched on the windowsill.

Don't think about falling, don't think about falling.

It took a few moments for him to take in the whole situation, and I damn well took advantage of his shock to give a smarmy salute and push off the ledge to drop down. My heart practically leapt into my throat out of fear. This had to be the single most idiotic thing I'd ever done, and that was saying a lot.

"Wait! Gods damn it, stop!" His footfalls followed me out and I felt the rope yank

back, as if he grabbed it to pull me back up.

I glanced over my shoulder to check my distance to the ground. The sight of it still made my stomach churn uneasily, but I was close enough to land without breaking bones... probably. Hopefully.

Guess we'll find out.

The fibers burned my palms as soon as I loosened them enough for the rope to slide through. The immediate slack that slithered back through the window was complimented by the oof and a heavy thud of the man hitting the hall's floorboards. I must have underestimated the distance a bit—a sharp pain stabbed up from my left ankle verified that when it took the brunt of the fall, and I stumbled gracelessly. Thank the gods no one was around to watch me stagger and nearly trip while hobbling toward the stable. It was not my finest moment.

“Haron? Stop there, I'm Sett with the Royal Guard!”

I didn't stop.

Sett cursed loudly. I wasn't going to break my single-minded focus on getting to the stable by checking whether he'd jumped from the window, too. Since I hadn't been tackled in the next five seconds, I assumed he'd taken the front door like a normal human. Stumbling through the stable doors, I thanked whatever Old God took pity on me for placing my kistral in the first stall to the right.

I don't think Maura, the stubborn thing, was going to give as much mercy. She reared her long neck back in retaliation when I threw her stall door open. Surely this was my sister's revenge from the grave for naming my precious mount after her.

“Come now, Maura,” I tried to soothe her through gritted teeth. My ankle was

screaming now. “Please don’t be difficult this time.”

The beast was much too intelligent for her own good. She eyed me warily, likely noticing I lacked the tack and saddle I usually offered for her to sniff and proceeded to snort in my face. Sett was surely almost here, so I bypassed our usual song and dance and practically flung myself over her sturdy back. Predictably, Maura was not pleased.

I still managed to toss my injured leg over and right myself, despite her fidgeting. “Hya!”

Maura slammed herself into the gate just as Sett skidded through the open stable door. He was hit squarely in the chest hard enough to knock him on his back with a breathless wheeze. Maura’s plate-sized hoofs narrowly missed trampling his leg as we sprinted past his prone body.

Despite the fact I’d likely rolled my ankle, and the Royal Guard was going to be chasing us down the whole way to Julra, I could feel a reckless smile spread across my lips. “The next apple tree we find, I’m picking them all for you, girl!” I patted Maura’s neck affectionately as we raced toward the northern gate of Gilamorst toward Julra.

I couldn’t let my heart pull me back to the palace. I had to recover my tome from the Clifftombs, before Gennel managed to kill me. I didn’t think she would take failure as an option twice.

Maura the kisteral endeavored to be just as stubborn and conniving as Maura the sister. The lack of tack to manage her head was part of the problem, but most of it was likely due to the urgency she could sense from me pushing her to run half a day’s distance from Gilamorst. Now, we stood in an unfortunate farmer’s cabbage patch, and Maura seemed set on finishing an entire row’s worth of heads. Our only saving

grace was that it was the middle of the night.

“Let’s go!” I said as loud as I dared, which wasn’t more than an angry whisper. She continued to ignore me, munching away on her sixth cabbage while I stood impatiently on the edge of the patch. Trying to drag her away without tethers proved less than successful, and I had a huge bite-sized bruise on my shoulder for my efforts.

Maura wasn’t taking me with her on this thievery.

She gave another snort that sounded insulting. “I guess I’ll just go leave some drummons on the farmer’s doorstep, you ungrateful beast. Why my feed wasn’t good enough for your exacting tastes is beyond me!”

Stomping off didn’t give the desired effect. My left leg nearly buckled with a stab of pain as my ankle retaliated. The muttered curses spewing from my mouth would have mademothers cover their children’s ears as I skirted the small plot of land and walked up the dirt road leading to the farmer’s log cabin. Its simple construction reminded me of another time I’d stumbled up to a similar cabin, one that belonged to the family of the girl whose body I’d borrowed for the past five years. Sadness clenched my heart tight, remembering the family home completely ransacked and half-charred.

The mother, chopped to pieces and scattered across the property.

Her husband, the farmer, strung up on his scarecrow post and burnt to little more than blackened bones.

And their daughter... She was barely alive when I found her limp body on the blood-soaked ground behind the cabin. Her blue eyes were so vivid and burned with a vengeance I was all too familiar with, even as that light dimmed and snuffed out. Those eyes looked like mine, as I watched the life leave them and my soul seeped into the first of many bodies I would inhabit over the century. Her ravaged body

looked like how I felt. The last heir of a country so brutally destroyed there was nothing left behind but a battered form.

I think that was when my sense of justice flared into life again.

Ramy Gulom, the daughter's name, I learned shortly after I took it over. It was the last words screamed from the raider's throat before I cut him open to bleed out on the forest floor just outside the City of Scholars, just like the rest of his sick group of outlaws. Just like he did to Ramy's family.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:13 am

It seemed fitting that I was returning to my homeland in a body that had survived so much trauma at the hands of greedy men and took her payment in blood.

Chapter Eighteen

Irin

I learned of a treasure the likes no one in the City could fathom hidden in the Clifftombs. Sinna was hesitant to speak

of it at first, but I assured her the palace was so heavily warded there was no way to break in. She spoke of a tome

that was believed to be gifted by Wira herself to the Princept. Its cover is textured black leather of some unknown

beast, covered with runes unlike anything written by man. And in the center of the cover, a massive red gem is

embedded, faceted in a way to absorb all the light that hits it. It is called the Tome of Wira, and the only person

known to wield it with any amount of success was Princept Morrette.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 39 of Ber's First Reign

Books and scrolls sprawled across the vast surface of the large table, laying out all my research documents on Julra and its royalty. Over five hundred years of genealogy and historical families were spread out before me, courtesy of an urgent request to the City of Scholars, and only one family remained mostly unknown in my vast amount of resources. From what I could gather, the Hiljs had once been royal advisors to the Werren royal family of Golath. Something had caused them to lead a rebellion against the ruler at the time, King Nonel, and broke away to form the country of Julra. I couldn't speculate the reason. So much history had been lost, unrecoverable after the Frigid War, leaving too many holes in my understanding of who Morrette Hilj was.

Judging from the tragic outcome of the engagement ball, it seemed like Golath used this marriage as an opportunity to take all of Julra over, along with its ports and trade relationships. Flipping through some other old maps showed Golath used to be a single large country, until the Hilj family created Julra and took its seaward borders. Judging from the state of Golath now—a desolate, frigid wasteland where Respar sent its most vile prisoners to die—it was evident why the country would have been desperate to gain back that access to the sea. I'm sure it was aslap in the face to the Werren royal family, having that much land taken from under their feet.

Between this one dedicated tome from a historian that once lived in the City of Scholars—and even his knowledge was mainly from word of mouth from Julran refugees—and the few scrolls the Resparian royal family documented, the Frigid War was a mystery in itself, with no document definitive in precisely how it started. High Scholar Yuret Wend, the man who dedicated his life to studying their history, had noted the country was well advanced in magic practices. So much so that it is generally believed Julran refugees brought the majority of knowledge regarding magic to Resparian tribes, and that was how this country's magical practices and guild system were created.

So how did such an influential person like Princept Morrette seemingly disappear

from history's eyes? And how did such a seemingly powerful country fall in one war?

A heavy knock at the door of my private study startled me, arms flailing and papers scattering across the broad desk as I cursed harshly. "One moment!" I called out and hurried to set my stacks back to rights.

Beolf's gruff voice answered. "No rush. I just wanted to debrief you for patrol reports."

"And?" I tried to keep the urgency from my voice, but I felt my hand wrap around something slim without looking at it. I needed something to hold on to, something to keep my anxious fingers busy.

Beolf sighed, rolling his thick neck as if working out some stiffness. He meandered over to the liquor bar and pulled two glasses from its shelf, along with the decanter of goldtine, to fill them. I watched, wary, as he brought both glasses over and took the seat across from my desk, hovering one cup over the cluttered surface until he could find a clear patch of wood to set it. Then he leaned back and took a hearty drink.

"Haron is gone, Irin. She's not within a half day's ride north or east. I suspect she rode through the night. She's got to be past Covenant Crossing at this point."

I stared at him, unblinking. It could have been seconds or hours, I couldn't tell. But Beolf began to fidget uncomfortably after a while, taking another sip of goldtine as if to calm his nerves. "Irin, I know that look, don't even—"

"Send a scouting party."

He tried to repress a groan, but it came out anyway. "Come now, you can't think to intercept her after this long—"

“Isn’t she riding by herself?”

A fiery, frenetic energy began to buzz in my chest. Unthinking, I lifted what was clutched in a death grip and turned to stab it into the desktop by my untouched glass. It rattled as if nervous. Breathing heavily, I opened my grip one finger at a time to reveal a letter opener embedded in the wood.

“We need to find her, Beolf! We need—” Breaths came in wheezing gasps, and a numb hand slammed onto my chest to twist in the loose nightshirt that covered it. My head began to spin, and my vision blurred, turning everything in the study into a smudged mess of color.

The chair across from me clattered against the stone floor from the force of Beolf leaping from it as he hurried around the desk. The cool touch of his hand around the back of my neck was a balm to my feverish skin, and he bent to kneel low enough to look up at my face. I hadn’t even realized my chin had dropped to my chest, so caught up in the violent whirlwind of emotions that threatened to tear me to pieces. Like everything that had happened, the last month finally came crashing down on my head, and the stifling terror of losing Haron was going to smother me.

“Irin!” Beolf’s gentle shake, his hand a reassuring grip against the back of my neck, pulled me from my downward spiral. It hadn’t happened in a long time—not since we were adolescents—that he had to pull me from one of those frenzied panic attacks. “I’m here. You’re fine. Everything will be fine.”

Desperation made me reach out with both hands to cling onto whatever I could, latching onto his tunic and trying to steady the panting breaths that did little to actually give air to my lungs. He kept his hand where it was and murmured the same comforting words over and over, even though I was sure he knew I wasn’t listening. But I held onto him and focused on the smooth cadence of his voice until I could finally steady myself.

“Beo... I’m,” I struggled to get the words out. Even so, he waited for me to speak, eyes soft and understanding. “I’m sorry. I just—”

A wry smile twisted his lips, though most of it was covered by the scruff of his full black beard. “I know. Despite her being a pain in my ass, I have seen how much you care for her. She’s...” Beolf stalled, then chuckled. “Haron’s the kind of woman I think you need, Irin. And she’s the kind of ally any ruler would want in their pocket. I’m not privy to all the dark history she seems to have, but I have the same feeling as when I first met you as kids.”

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I scoffed, but my voice was still shaking and fragile as the thinnest glass. “You just said she’s a pain in your ass. Are you lumping me in with her on that particular quality?”

His warm eyes crinkled at the corners. Beolf gave my shoulder a friendly slap before grabbing it again. “Of course you are. But I wouldn’t want either of you any other way. Now,” his tone changed, shifting to a more serious note. His hand slid off my hunched back to slap against his thighs before rising up to full height. “I’ll send the notice out tonight for a squad. We can ride at first light tomorrow and head out toward Covenant Crossing. Whichever way she’s going, we’ll be able to pick up her path unless she decided to travel through Ber’s Forest. If that’s the case, we may have a harder time finding her.”

I braced my right elbow against the armrest to cup my forehead in a palm, suddenly drained of energy after that wild ride of emotion. “She’d likely take the eastern path from Covenant Crossing and go along the God’s Spine up toward Julra. The only thing past those mountains is the Hiranian Sea, so unless she plans to take a boat, I doubt she’d try to climb them.”

He nodded. “Agreed. I’ll take at least five of our most experienced trackers. Maybe even a couple practitioners from the Terramancy Guild in case we lose her trail. With your permission, I’ll send a request as soon as I leave here, offering the standard rate to hire them.”

"Request approved. Please send my regards to Guildmaster Woren."

Beolf, ever loyal and resolute, snapped a salute. “Yes, Your Highness. We will find

her. Don't worry."

"Just... don't hurt her. Bring Haron back in one piece, or as much as she allows."

I cursed my soft heart as soon as the command left my mouth. For all her brashness and rambunctious behavior, there was that fire in her eyes that drew me in like a moth. Every part of me—the king and the man—craved Haron with a passion that bordered on pain. And it sickened me to think she felt betrayed by my careless indecision. I hoped she would let me make it up to her, maybe even for the rest of our lives. But we had to find her first.

Knowing Haron, she wouldn't make it easy for us.

Respar was a young country, just over a hundred years old since it was recognized as such by the City of Scholar's census. As such, the Gailish had yet to be dethroned as the ruling family. With that came a very single-minded set of beliefs that aligned with the nomadic tribes the founding members joined with to create Gilamorst. Despite that, it was the Julran refugees that made up half the lineage of Resparian citizens. Very little was preserved of their history or culture beyond that, swallowed up by the tribes they melded with.

"The Tragic History of Julra" by High Scholar Yuret Wend, a well-known and respected researcher, laid open across the center of my desk as I bent over it. Father never approved of my studies regarding Julra or its neighbor Golath, despite the blatant truth that our ancestors were theirs. "Reading the history of failed countries is a waste of time," he would gripe.

I begged to differ.

Knowing how those strong countries steeped in centuries of knowledge could collapse so entirely was extremely important, in my eyes. Just thinking of how much

was lost of both their cultures made my stomach churn in despair. How much more advanced could our own studies in spellcasting be, if we knew what those countries held in their libraries and the heads of their most talented practitioners?

There could have been a solution for the side effects of my own truthsayer power. Beyond the scraps passed by word of mouth from a few displaced refugees from the Frigid War, we had no way of knowing what was lost.

My own mother could trace her family all the way back to minor Julran nobility. That trait alone was what made her desirable to Father as a consort. But my fondest memories—maybe the only ones worth remembering of her acting like a mother—were when she would tell me fantastical tales passed down from her mother and her mother's mother. Tales of practitioners who could create entire structures from the earth or move the rain to fall over a field of crops. Some could even make giants out of ice and bring down massive balls of fire onto a battlefield. Finding accounts in Yuret's research that validated those stories only made me more ravenous to learn more about Julra. Mother's family only claimed minor nobility, no direct relation to the Hilj royal family, but I always wondered if my ancestors ever met them. Was Princess Maura as elegant and dainty as the portraits showed her? Was the lesser known Princept Morrette as wild and strong-willed as the refugees told Yuret in their accounts?

A little smile came unbidden to my lips, thinking of someone else who was wild and strong-willed. Haron had fairer skin compared to the more pure-blooded Resparians like Beolf. She could have some traces of Julran heritage in her family like I did. Maybe that was the only connection she needed to reach out to the dead princept. My thoughts turned to our last meeting, and my mood tumbled into a dark depression. It had been two days since we had our falling out and she reportedly left Gilamorst. The only thing holding my sanity together at this point was the frantic effort to research everything I could about the Clifftombs, Morrette Hilj, and Julra, until Beolf could return with news from the scouting party he's taken to look for her.

Engrossed as I was in the text, the heavy knock at the door startled me from my focus. I glanced up at the clock hanging beside the closest bookcase to my left and sighed heavily. It was half past noon, and the council meeting I had already pushed back three times was in fifteen minutes.

“Come in.”

The door opened slowly, just wide enough for a guard to partially step in and bow his head. “Your Highness, Head Councilman Juril has requested your presence in the meeting hall.”

More like, he sent someone to personally escort me so I couldn’t wave them off again. I would not be led like a child, unfortunately for him. I was sure he was looking forward to the power high watching me be led into the hall.

“I am aware. The clock says I have another ten minutes. It’s not like the room is across the palace.”

In fact, it was just at the end of the hall from my study.

“Sire, the butler is quite insistent he wait—”

My patience was already thinning. “Send him in.”

“Sire?”

It was moments like this I missed Beolf’s unwavering loyalty. He would have told the guard and butler to fuck off in no uncertain terms before they even knocked on the door. “I think you heard me. Send in my escort.”

The guard looked nervous but promptly slipped from the door to allow my next

victim inside. “G-Good day, Your Highness,” the new man stammered. “I... I was asked t-to fetch you for the council’s meet—”

“Do I look like I cannot read a clock?” It was unfair to chew on the butler, I knew. But if there was one thing I could not stand, it was being interrupted in my reading. And for the likes of Councilman Juril and his lackeys? Even more detestable.

“I.. uh... yes, Sire.” Now the butler was clearly sweating, fidgeting with his hands under my unblinking stare. He was absolutely drenching the white collar of his uniform. “Uh... Councilman Juril was just concerned you would forget about the meeting again and sent me to make sure you attended.”

I spent my entire childhood schooling my face, hiding my thoughts from Father, and the court, and the boring conversations at social events. All that practice was put to good use now. Slowly, I rose from my padded chair and moved around the bulky desk until I stood toe-to-toe with the taller man. Eventhough I had to tilt my head back, there was no question between us who held the upper hand.

“You’re dismissed.”

He was likely expecting me to rip him to shreds, so the instant relief that flooded his face was almost comical. The hop in his step as he moved out of my way reminded me of small prey when it realized the hunter missed his first shot. Shock, mixed with self-preservation and gratitude he got to live another day, moved the butler’s feet quickly down the hall in the opposite direction from the meeting. The sharp turn on my heel to the left startled the guard who was posted at the door, the one who let the butler in.

“Let’s go,” I snapped.

Sure, it was petty dragging along my own escort. But I was feeling particularly uncooperative now. His skin flushed a red visible even beneath his deeply bronzed complexion, clearly uncomfortable with being pulled into this little power struggle. “Should I send for General Zirch, or...”

“No, you are fine. I just need a witness.”

The guard’s nervous swallow was an audible gulp.

Our short walk in silence did nothing for the guard’s growing nervousness, his blatant fear tainting the air and setting my beast to stirring in my chest. It was an instinctive reaction for a predator to become excited at the sight of prey. Having it so close beneath my skin would certainly help with the conversation I was about to have with the Royal Council. As we reached the door, the guard made to open it for me, but I cut him off.

Low murmurs from the men gathered around the table cut short as soon as I stepped through the doorway. Seven heads were bowed together and watching them all pop up at my appearance would have been comical if I weren't so pissed off. Councilman Ittman was the first to speak, clearing his throat and standing from the long table as the other six straightened in their chairs. He was at the end opposite the one I was expected to take, closest to the door.

"Your Highness," he welcomed me in. "We are honored you were able to attend this meeting. Please, sit."

My eyes narrowed at his pleasant expression. Ittman was not being as subtle as he thought with that little barbed greeting. He was the only one who appeared mostly at ease, hands now tucked behind his back, with a casual smile on his youthful face. They all wore the matching council robes over their regular clothes dyed a deep red to show their service to the crown and separate themselves from the rest of the nobles, even as they were selected from those families.

They didn't know it yet, but I planned to change that as soon as I was officially crowned king.

Ittman's crinkled eyes moved to the guard behind me, and he made a gesture of dismissal with a hand. "You may go, we have—"

"No," I said plainly. "He's fine to stay inside."

With measured steps, I stalked across the expanse of the meeting room to take the offered seat. The slight thud followed by the rustle of a uniform told me the guard closed the door and took up a post beside it. The irritated twist of Ittman's face was fast, but not fast enough.

"But Prince Irin, there are sensitive matters we need to discuss, and I don't think it's

appropriate—”

The chair dragged loudly over the rough stone floor, cutting off his whining with a screech. “I read the agenda you sent a few days ago. I’m aware of what the council would like to discuss.”

It was the same things they’d been wanting to discuss since Father’s death almost five months ago. Just a hundred and thirty-eight days, and the council was already pushing to move on to crowning the next ruler they hoped to manipulate. I already made all the decisions a ruler did, and there was no civilunrest in Respar to validate a rushed ceremony. The common period of mourning was one hundred forty-four days, to reflect the number of days Joles spent creating the world, and the royal council could hardly keep from frothing at the mouths trying to put me in their throne of schemes. Father didn't care what they did as long as the country didn't burn, and I was reaping the consequences of his thoughtless actions. The royal treasury kept losing money, spies were rampant in the castle halls, the Guild of Finances was doing gods knew what with their own influence and backers, and we were now dealing with the possibility of imposters to the noble families and a murderous practitioner roaming the city.

Yet, every discussion since then had been over whatever details they wanted to verify that I’d already confirmed at least twice for the coronation, and who I would choose to marry from their stack of nominations hand-selected from the pool of nobility. It was a clever game of distraction I was no longer interested in playing.

Looking at the room full of old men so disconnected with the world outside the upper echelon of Gilamorst made me long for the beginning days of the Royal Council. An adaptation from the nomadic tribes that joined Julran refugees to make Gilamorst, the Royal Council used to consist of the general, merchants to represent the economic population, and representatives of the spellcaster guilds.

Over the span of only four generations of rulers, that tradition had deteriorated quickly to only cater to Highlanders with a thirst for power and deep pockets.

Lost in my mourning of times past, I failed to hear what Ittman was going on about until he raised his voice slightly. “Your Highness?”

I took a deep breath through my nose. The scent of insecure men in this room was enough to make my bridge wrinkle. “Yes, please continue.”

“We were hoping you could give us some insight into your selection of a bride?” Ittman prompted. He pulled his own chair in and sank down, setting his arms on the table with hands clasped in front of him as if patiently waiting for an answer he already knew.

My mouth opened to give a scathing response, but Haron’s words stopped it in my throat. She was absolutely right to be frustrated at my inaction in favor of avoiding a solid commitment on the matter. The men waited, staring at me like their very lives depended on my answer. For some, it did. Several of those women were connected to the council in some form or another, mostly relatives, that they perceived would get them one step closer to practically sitting on the queen’s throne themselves.

“There will not be a selection.”

The air may as well have been sucked out of the room, with how the group collectively gasped at the response. Not one of them had the balls to speak out against me first. But I could see the arguments they wanted to say in the fiery gazes the councilmen lit in their sunken eyes. This was why I wanted the guard to stay in the room. I wanted to snuff this conversation once and for all and wanted a witness to keep the councilmen from twisting my words and sneaking around with their own agendas.

"Your Highness, I come with troubling news."

My hazy gaze, lids heavy with lack of sleep, lifted to the scout waiting patiently by the door for permission to step further inside the small meeting room I took over for my own purpose. Scrolls, maps, and pens lay scattered across the round wooden table, all the chairs moved to the left wall to allow for ease of movement around it. I had directed Sett to send anyone with a report on activity at the Golrath border to me in Beolf's absence, either out of paranoia or a need to feel involved in getting back control of this chaotic situation. The answers to my problems seemed just as far away as when I'd started this gods-damned research project three days ago. Why did Gennel run? Who killed Nebold? Why did Haron feel like she had to leave? What was her connection to the Clifftombs? What if she was attacked by bandits, or a Hollows hunting party, or a wild animal?

I was locked in place, surrounded by an army of questions attacking me all at once. Every time I swung at one, another blocked the blow and demanded my attention. The restless nature of the beast I tried so hard to suppress was beginning to gnaw at its cage, tired of being held back from chasing after Haron as its instinct demanded.

With a sigh, I slumped into the only cushioned chair nearby and pinched the bridge of my nose between two ink-smudged fingers. Black marks probably streaked all over my face from where I'd rubbed it furiously in frustration, but I was too far gone to give a damn about looks. "Carry on, soldier."

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The scout—he barely looked old enough to claim adulthood, with a youthful face tanned by days spent in the sun—nodded and stepped further into the large study on silent feet. He was obviously just coming off the assignment, still covered in road dirt and mussed from traveling non-stop across the kingdom. A faint dripping sound filled the tense silence between us. Dripping that seemed to be coming from behind the man’s back. Behar seemed keenly interested in our guest, rising from his plush bed under the double window to circle around the scout and sniffing intently. Then a low growl rumbled as he paid special attention to the sack I noticed tucked behind his right leg, held in a shaking hand.

“The camp I joined during my reconnaissance was attacked while I was scouting the woods bordering the Hollows. General Rimman had mentioned reports of unusual activity before I arrived, so I attempted to track the most recent sighting about a half day’s ride from where the Hollows and Julra met. But...” The young man gulped audibly. “I couldn’t... I couldn’t just leave his head there. Those tribesmen were... the things they were doing to the soldier’s dead bodies was horrific.”

He shuddered violently. Suddenly, it became very clear exactly what was in that burlap sack. Or more specifically, who.

“So, the camp was slain by Hollows natives? And you felt compelled to bring the general’s head into my study?” I tried to keep the disgust from my voice. He was obviously rattled by what he had seen and had to suffer alone with those thoughts the whole two-day ride by kistral back to the palace.

“They were... doing unimaginable things to the others,” the scout continued, as if I hadn’t asked anything. The man plainly struggled with trying to recall what he saw,

his face losing its color as his eyes set somewhere beyond my shoulder. "Somekind of ritual... cutting pieces out of soldiers and... they were stillalive!" he choked. "That was... the most brutal I've ever seen the tribes act."

I moved quickly to the door, ushering in one of the guards to take the sack I assumed held the general's head from the traumatized man. He flinched as the other guard rested a comforting hand on his shoulder and tried to pry the bag from his clenched fist.

"Did you notice anything else? Obviously, that behavior was more aggressive than normal, but did it seem like it was started by something or someone else?"

The scout's head dropped so low his chin rested against his chest. For how long the silence stretched on, I didn't think he was going to answer at all. But finally, after pulling in a deep, shuddering breath and letting it out, he did answer.

"There was... someone in the hills. Someone riding a kistral and dressed in a cloak that looked to be lined with something dark, maybe trebgnon fur? They looked to have come from the same direction as the Hollows tribe. And... I think a chieftain was with them. He was dressed very differently from the rest and had these... unusual sigils painted in white on his bare chest. It was terrifying just looking at him."

His description scrambled my thoughts. "The person in the cloak. Did you get close enough to see their face?"

The man shook his head slightly. "Sorry, Your Highness. I couldn't get close enough before... everything happened at the camp."

My thumb had drifted to my lips to bite at the nail, an unfortunate habit I carried from my youth. Instead of answers, all I had were more questions about what the hell was

going on in the north. Surely the City of Scholars would send word if they felt a hostile attack was imminent. We rarely had encounters from the Hollows tribes in the last ten years or so. They certainly didn't participate in organized attacks, nor were they particularly known for joining tribes.

Lost in my thoughts, it wasn't until a slight rattling of metal against metal pulled me back to the study. The sound was coming from the scout, now violently shaking so hard his armor was making noise. "I'm... I'm sorry, Prince Irin. I can't—"

"You're dismissed," I cut him off. He was obviously about to fall apart. "Take a few days' leave and see a healer. I will send word if I need further information. Thank you for your service."

The scout practically sprinted from the study, leaving me to stare blankly into the lit fireplace as confused thoughts and questions tumbled around in my head like leaves in a windstorm. First Haron running, now the Hollows tribes attacking, and everything that had happened in the last moon phase—it all seemed to rip me from my moorings and set me loose in the storm. My worry for her safety grew and festered into a thing that could kill me.

I had to figure out what Haron was hiding from me, and what exactly she was trying to accomplish by running off on her own. And now time was my enemy.

Chapter Nineteen

Haron

There is still a shroud of mystery surrounding what happened to the Hilj family on the last three days leading up to

the momentous Frigid War. From what Sinna and other royal staff refugees

witnessed, the murderer of the Hilj

family appeared to be Prince Ettion Werren of Golath. There was no love lost between Julra and Golath, but Ettion's

marriage to Maura was meant to begin mending their tumultuous history. Did Prince Ettion act on his own? Or did he

kill the Hilj family on orders from Golath?

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 39 of Ber's First Reign

I thought camping in Ber's Forest for a couple of days would shake that hound Beolf from my trail. From where I was positioned, I could keep an eye on who came and went from the north and east gates of Gilamorst and traveled north toward Covenant Crossing. It was the only logical way to go if Irin assumed I was heading to Julra. What I didn't anticipate was Beolf coming out the very next morning with a whole fucking infantry of scouts and cavalry to run my ass down. I had barely made it halfway to Covenant Crossing when he caught up to me, and that was with me leaving before the crack of dawn.

"Halt, traveler!"

The litany of curses running through my brain miraculously stayed there, even as I pulled Maura's reins to slow her down to a walk. There was no point in trying to outrun him now. That would only make me more suspicious and possibly end with an arrow in my back. I'd have to find a more creative way to lose the dolt before retreating to Julra.

Beolf came up alongside my left, and another spellcaster blocked me in from the

right. Then he reached his armored hand out to rip the hood from my head.

“If you touch me, I guarantee you will lose that hand.” I glared at him from the limited shade, squinting in the bright sunlight even though my head was entirely covered. He was wise to snatch it back before I made the appendage rot.

Instead, he snarled a command. “Haron, get your ass back to Gilamorst immediately. Prince Irin is worried about your safety and sent us to escort you.”

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“How courteous of him,” I spat back. “Do me a favor and tell Irin to kindly fuck off.”

The man on my right gasped dramatically. “You donot speak of His Highness in that way! Who are you to drop his title and say such vulgar things?”

I finally turned to address him, an eyebrow raised in irritation. “Who are you?” Looking back to Beolf over my shoulder, I asked the more competent of the two. “Who is this guy? Does Irin have enough bootlickers in the palace to spare this one?”

Beolf rolled his eyes so hard I hoped one of them would pop straight out of his skull. His heavy sigh was response enough he was already fed up with me. “This is Dayer Montemen, and he is one of the prince’s magic specialists in hydromancy.”

“I see. So, he’s your scryer whenever you need to report that you’re dragging me back.”

Dayer sputtered, and Beolf sighed again. “We don’t want to drag you back, Haron. As I said, Prince Irin is worried you are in danger and asked us to ensure your safety. If you would stop acting like a feral animal, I can let him know you will be safe during your travels wherever you need to go and then return to Gilamorst.”

I wanted to snap my teeth at him like the animal he accused me of being, but I didn’t think that would help my case much. I needed to get out from under these goons if I was going to make it to the Clifftombs unhindered. Gennel had already showed her hand; no one was trustworthy anymore. Any one of these soldiers Beolf dragged along with him could be her in disguise.

“Fine,” I pretended to fold. “Can we at least stay the night in Covenant Crossing before turning back? I’ve been riding along time as it is, and my kistral needs to rest. We are already practically there.”

“I would prefer to rest there as well,” Dayer chimed in. “Camping outdoors is not something I particularly enjoy. And that would give me an opportunity to contact the prince and let him know Lady Haron is in our custody.”

Beolf’s head tilted to the sky, obviously judging the time of day and how far we would have to travel to Gilamorst versus Covenant Crossing. It was almost three-quarters of a day’s ride back at this point, and the sun was already starting to creep close to the horizon. We were almost an hour out from the inn.

“Let’s carry on, then,” he finally conceded. He clicked his tongue and urged his mount to a faster trot, expecting us to follow along at the new pace. I wanted to stop just to spite him. Unfortunately, my plan to ditch these two couldn’t happen until we made it to the inn and tavern in Covenant Crossing. I would play nice... for now.

My reprieve of silence didn’t last long. “So,” Dayer began, still trotting along on my right as we caught up to Beolf. The rest of the squad fell into a loose formation behind us on the wide road. “Would you care to enlighten us exactly where you were off to? And why you thought running from Spymaster Sett was a good idea?”

“Obviously, I didn’t want to talk,” I muttered back. Dayer didn’t seem to hear me, since he carried on with his monologue.

“You know, the lands outside Gilamorst are dangerous for a lady to travel by herself! There could be bandits out here just waiting to do horrific things to you! And if you made it any further north than the City of Scholars, you would certainly be caught by one of those hedonistic tribes from the Hollows! Everyone with common sense knows the northern border is dangerous.”

“The farm I’m from is north of the City. Trust me when I say it’s not as uncivilized as you think.”

He seemed to turn his nose up at that bit of information. “I remain unconvinced.”

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to not rise to that particular jab. The sharp, metallic taste of blood was telling enough how difficult a feat that was.

“Prince Irin assumed you were traveling to Julra,” Beolf interjected, likely to save Dayer from getting tackled to the ground by my waning self-control. “What could you possibly be looking for there?”

Dayer scoffed. “The only thing left in those desolate wastes is the Clifftombs. And you would have a better chance of calling down the Old Gods than try to get inside those wards.”

“That name sounds familiar,” Beolf mused. “But I’m confused why they would be warded so heavily if the country has been dead for over a hundred years. Is there some significance to them?”

Dayer sputtered wildly beside Beolf. “Do you not realize what the Clifftombs are?”

“I’m going to guess tombs. How close am I?”

“Julra is known as the cornerstone of all magic practices in Respar, practically the origin of it! Everyone knows the Julran refugees were the ones who brought the practice of spellcasting when they fled their own country. I can hardly imagine the wealth of knowledge being kept in the ruins of the Clifftombs! I’m sure Lady Haron is of the same mind.”

Beolf shrugged. “Wouldn’t the City of Scholars have copies of all those records? I

thought that was their job.”

“Not necessarily,” I answered. “The City of Scholars was more of a country unto itself when Julra and Golath existed. They didn’t get involved with either country in an attempt to beneutral. All those stodgy researchers cared about was making their own discoveries, not really collaborating with outsiders.”

“Huh,” was Beolf’s stellar reply. “So how did the scholars get so much information about Julra if they didn’t interact with them?”

“Mostly from investigative trips to the country during their censuses, but also from first-hand accounts of refugees after the countries fell. Many of the citizens escaping the Frigid War stayed in the City of Scholars and became researchers themselves. The rest kept traveling south to join with the nomadic tribes and eventually created Gilamorst and, by association, Respar.”

Dayer nodded. “That’s absolutely correct! Your knowledge of our history is quite impressive, Lady Haron.”

“I’m not a lady. And it’s not exactly hidden information. Some people are just willfully ignorant as to Respar’s origins.” I threw a pointed glare at Beolf. "Some people think the gods themselves carried down Resparians a hundred years ago and called it divine intervention."

“So, what happened to the people of Golath?” Beolf asked. He either actively ignored the jab or let it sail by him unbothered, both of which annoyed me to no end.

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I kept my eyes on the road ahead, squinting against the morning sun even as my head was covered with the deep hood. It was getting painfully bright already, and the day had hardly started. The left side of my head was already throbbing, with how sensitive that eye was. “Golath was a much smaller kingdom population-wise, so most of their people were wiped out by the Frigid War. Whatever was left scattered and made tribes, mostly out of survival. The Hollows—or what used to be Golath—is a harsh place to try to live in.”

I could feel Beolf’s stare burning a hole in the side of my face. As nonchalantly as I could, I adjusted my hood to keep more of it hidden from his prying stare. “How do you know all this about a couple of dead countries?”

An unladylike snort escaped my lips. “Because I read, Sir Rocks-For-Brains. I’d encourage you to try it, but I worry you’d hurt yourself. I don’t want that on my conscience.”

Someone from the small group accompanying Beolf and Dayer tried to smother their chuckle with an unbelievable cough, and Beolf turned to throw a baleful look at whoever it was. Otherwise, we rode the last hour in silence until the group stopped at the wooden gates of Covenant Crossing past midday. The banner carried by one of the soldiers was enough to grant us immediate entry, and without speaking, we maneuvered the narrow streets to the only inn and tavern in the small town. Beolf wasn’t very forthcoming with his plan, but it seemed we were going to stay the night here and likely head back to Gilamorst tomorrow.

I wouldn’t be joining them, if I had a say.

Soon, I will be home.

True to Resparian culture, it didn't take long for me to be approached for nothing more than a body to stick a cock in. Even though I obviously traveled with Gilamorst soldiers, that wasn't enough to indicate I was a woman of merit or a spellcaster.

However, this time, that ignorant belief was pivotal to my escape plan.

A beefy hand wrapped around me from behind, pulling me away from the bar and into the arm of a drunk patron. "Well," he drawled. "Aren't you a nice piece of ass? How much for the night?"

I gritted my teeth, both to keep my rage in check and so I could focus on not breathing through my nose. This man smelled absolutely rancid. Quickly my eyes darted to take an inventory of where my escorts were, particularly Beolf and Dayer. The rest of the squad was scattered throughout the packed tavern, and Dayer was a few seats away at the end of the bar, having an animated discussion with another scholarly-looking man. I assumed Beolf went out to take a piss or check the mounts, since he wasn't anywhere in the room I could see.

Slowly, I turned my head until my chin touched my shoulder, trying to act as demure as possible as I regarded the man's scruffy face. The lecherous grin with missing teeth would have been indication enough of what he wanted if he hadn't said it outright. His hand fumbled higher up my body like he was going to grope my chest.

I caught the wandering hand and pinned it to my stomach, hoping it came off as interested instead of disgusted. Otherwise, I feared I would rip the man's arm from his body. "I could be persuaded with the right offer. What did you have in mind?"

Just get him outside. I just need him outside, I mentally urged.

“Come with me, and I’ll see what I have in my saddlebags to trade.”

This guy must have thought I was a complete idiot. It was the oldest trick in the book to lure a woman outside the tavern, pin her in the back of the barn to fuck her, and then ride off before she could report the asshole. I was sure it wasn’t his first time doing the same, considering how confident he seemed to be about bringing me with him. I’d make sure he never laid hands on a woman again.

I forced a fake giggle and turned in his arm to drape my own around his shoulders. “Sure. Let’s see what you have.”

The innuendo may or may not have been lost on this idiot, but nonetheless, his smile widened, and he stepped back to pull me toward the door. Trying to appear eager, I looped my arm through his and practically dragged him from the building and around the corner toward the stables. Fortunately for me, there was no one outside or in the general vicinity of the tavern's yard, having gone inside to eat dinner or drink. If anyone were to come up on us, it would seem like nothing more than a romp in the hay.

“This way.” His voice went low and gravelly. I’m sure he thought it sounded attractive, but really, it was more like a bear choking than anything else. “You’ll have the time of your life, wench.”

“Of that I’m sure,” I purred.

We rounded the corner to the barn wall furthest from the tavern door. His arm jerked from my grip then slammed across my throat in a choking press against the stables’ rough exterior. A pained hiss left my lips as he tried to crush my neck with his burly forearm, my hands snapping up to grip it hard enough for blood to spring beneath my sharp nails. The man flinched back with a curse, and that was all I needed to slip my arm beneath his by the elbow. With a tight spin and duck beneath his arm, our roles

were reversed, with me smashing his face against the wall and my full weight braced against his back. Between his inebriated state and the painful twist of his captive arm, he soon realized how fucked he was.

“You crazy bitch,” he spat. “Hel—”

I didn’t really want to break his neck. It was such a pain in the ass to heal that when I transferred bodies. But alas, the sound of it snapping beneath my hands and the subsequent choking sounds that came from his foul mouth were a small consolation for my rough treatment. His hulking body slumped to the ground limply, and I crouched by his head, watching the life bleed from his eyes with an elbow propped on my bent knee and a fist pressed under my jaw.

When the last breath rattled from his lungs, I rose up and moved around to grip his ankles in preparation to drag him onto Maura. She was less than amused watching me drag a lifeless body into her pen. She snorted her displeasure when I tacked her up with gear stolen off a nearby hook, and gave the command for to lower herself toward the ground to pull him up.

“Oh, come now, it’s like you’ve never seen a dead body,” I hissed at her. Maura’s ears flattened as if she were disagreeing. “Don’t be a pain now. I need your help!”

She stared back at me, but if a kistral could look baleful, she would be the picture of it. I kept my pack tucked in the corner of her borrowed stall, covered with hay to prevent it from being stolen. I pulled it out from the hay and strapped it on the side of the saddle alongside the man’s lolling head. From the sack I pulled a thin blanket and unrolled it with a snap to lay over the man’s body and tuck beneath to look like he was nothing more than some extra supply bags that I’d covered up. I was sure Maura could sense my urgency, and for once actually cooperated when I threw my leg over the dead body and settled into the saddle before clicking my tongue to get her up.

"C'mon, girl, let's go home."

Chapter Twenty

Irin

It has been 20 years since the fall of Julra, and there is word from our census scouts that a new settlement is

growing to the south. Perhaps the Julra refugees found allies in the nomadic tribes and joined together to create a

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new country. Or maybe there was a settlement there before, and the refugees added to it? Again, I wonder how

much more knowledge we could account for if we explored more beyond the high walls of the City. One census every

40 years does not seem adequate enough to capture the geography of Erewen or its people.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 59 of Ber's First Reign

It was the morning of the sixth day since Haron fled Gilamorst. Almost a whole moon phase of not knowing where she was or if she was even still alive had me almost frothing at the mouth in fear and anxiety. Even the maids were too afraid to enter my quarters now, sending my food in with the guard instead to avoid my foul mood. Every question was answered with a snarl, every report that didn't involve finding her was waved off. Never in my thirty years of life had I ever cared about the wellbeing of another person to this degree. And I may never again.

This was more extreme than concern. This was an obsession. One that I would gladly entertain as long as it brought Haron back to me in one piece. Currently, Sett was facing the brunt of my tirade as I stormed down the hallway from our original meeting place in the war room toward the main hall.

"Gather a whole battalion, whoever can mobilize by sunset. If we ride through the night, we may be able to catch Haron close to the Julran border."

“Prince Irin, I think we should—” Sett began.

Half out of my mind with rage and panic, I whirled on my most competent soldier beside Beolf and roared in his face. Somewhere along the way, I had partially shifted, fangs growing enough to crowd my mouth and pull my lips back in a snarl. Parts of my body twitched spastically as I tried to hold the rest of the transition back. Maids scattered and butlers pressed their backs up against the wall as I swept past. The guards may have been the least fazed, but they still shot uneasy glances at their next-in-command, as if silently asking if he needed help. Sett waved them off, just barely catching up to me as I rounded the corner from the hall toward the palace entrance. He was the only one brave enough—or maybe dumb enough—to grab onto my arm that was slowly sprouting thick black fur.

“I don’t give a fuck what you think right now, Sett! Get the soldiers together, or I’m riding out on my own!” The words were garbled, hardly human, but still clear enough to get the message across. Behar panted at my side, obviously distressed at my frantic state of mind. I knew, in the rational part of my brain, that this was completely unhinged behavior for a prince. Even for me, who barely toed the line of etiquette. This was probably the first time I’d showed my beast form to anyone beyond Beolf. And Sett seemed rightfully disturbed by the violent outburst.

“Prince Irin,” he bit out my title, more of a reprimand than anything. “Could you please collect yourself enough to not run off with not even half of a plan? It will take a few hours to gather supplies, map a route, organize the troops—”

“Then do it.”

Sett huffed a heavy sigh through his nose. His infinite amount of composure seemed to have finally thinned. “Can you at least pull yourself together a little bit? You’re scaring the staff.”

The beastly part of me did not like that idea at all. She's mine, mine, mine.

His strong grip latched onto my arm and dragged me into an empty room, one of the many receiving rooms scattered throughout the main hallway of the castle for private meetings. Sett kicked the door shut behind him and shoved me further into the room, leaning against the door with his arms crossed as I turned on him with a vicious snarl. Claws were growing from where they'd pushed my fingernails out, and fur began to sprout from my skin and rub uncomfortably against my clothes.

"This is coming from a sense of self-preservation, but I'd say going after Haron would be akin to running straight into a trebegnon's maw. Easily avoidable, and completely stupid if you do it anyway." Sett stabbed a finger in my face, and I snapped my teeth mere inches from it. "Get Dayer on a scrying glass first, see if he and Beolf caught up to her before tearing out the gate like you're possessed. The woman jumped from a fucking second-story window instead of being taken into custody, so I doubt you coming after her as a feral beast walker will convince her to return to Gilamorst with you."

My very bones vibrated with the need to sprint from this room and chase Haron down. Even being who I suspected she was, every fiber of my body screamed at me to go protect her from anyone who even looked at her wrong. The rational part of me knew Sett was right. But that part was currently being cornered in the back of my mind, hunkering and hiding from the beast currently taking charge.

"Get... Dayer... Now." Every word was a struggle to speak through the partially elongated snout trying to erupt from my face.

Sett simply nodded. "If I leave to get a hand mirror and water, can I trust you to stay and keep calm?"

A deafening roar ripped from my chest, loud enough to make the delicate crystals

hanging from a small chandelier above us rattle slightly. That must have been answer enough, since he heaved a great sigh and slipped through the smallest possible crack in the door. Restless energy charged me, setting my feet to pacing back and forth from one wall to the opposite, hands flexing in an attempt to focus on anything besides sprinting from this room to go after Haron.

Suspecting what I did now about her Julran heritage, I could see why she didn't want to divulge her past. The Clifftombs held untold riches and invaluable tomes, and if anyone knew she could access them they would try to exploit her. Just like the fake Nebold and Gennel, maybe one in the same. My stomach still churned after finally getting the patrol's report after she was gone, validating her claims of being wrongfully attacked under the pretense of meeting the guildmaster. She had been right there in my grasp, sitting in my study, and I let her slip through my fingers.

It was a monumental effort, but slowly I regained more of my humanity with every slow, deep breath I used to center myself again. The process of reverting back to a human-shaped Irin was more difficult, but mentally I was more sound when Sett returned. Instead, I had taken to pacing anxiously in front of the study's unlit fireplace.

“Thank you for your patience, Your Highness.” His hands were full, one with a plain silver hand mirror and the other a pitcher gathering condensation on its metal surface, so he leaned back to bump the door shut again.

My eyes narrowed at his expressionless face as he moved through the room to the small couch. “I don’t need you patronizing me, Sett. People have lost their heads for less.”

While it wasn’t a lie, we both knew Sett was safe. He was much too valuable as a spymaster and substitute rational thinker when Beolf was away. I tried not to brood too much when I took the seat beside him on the uncomfortably hard couch, where

Sett already laid the mirror flat and poured a thin layer of water on its reflective surface. It must be his personal scrying mirror; there was a slight lip along the rim to hold the water within the frame.

My knee bounced impatiently as Sett pricked his finger with a small blade and squeezed a few drops of blood into the water to activate the mirror. Admittedly, I didn't know much about hydromancy to recognize when the receiving mirror would respond, so it only took a few heartbeats for me to lose my composure.

“Are you able to contact Dayer?”

Sett shot me the side-eye of a tolerant older sibling, not a subordinate. “He is likely not holding his mirror, waiting for someone to contact him. But if he is able, Dayer will sense the connection and activate his own, so we may speak to him.”

I was about to snap back at him when the mirror flashed a bright blue and the water's surface rippled. Sett leaned forward to look into it. “Dayer, can you hear me? Are you able to speak now?”

The image shifted, briefly showing what seemed to be the inside of his satchel before a dizzying kaleidoscope of colors blurred in the mirror as he pulled it out. Then his youthful face showed in the frame, his jaw covered with a light brown scruff from several days of not shaving. For someone who was very meticulous with his appearance, it was a testament to how intently they had been searching for Haron without rest. Even his hair looked a bit askew, usually tamed into a braid draped across his shoulder. Now strands flew in every direction, the majority of what used to be tied back loose and fluttering in the wind.

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“Your Highness!” Immediately his free hand flew to try to smooth out the more wild bits of his wavy brown hair. “Hello Sett, is everything well in Gilamorst?”

We had to bend over the mirror lying flat on the short table in front of us, close enough to catch both our faces in the frame. “Overall, we are well, but Prince Irin was hoping for an update regarding Haron’s location.”

Luckily, he was the one taking the lead on this conversation. My emotions were still tumultuous at best, even though I’d managed to change most of my appearance back to normal. I could still feel the pointed fangs in my mouth, my tongue running over their tips in agitation. Just sitting here was about to break me.

Dayer sighed heavily, his head tilting to where I assumed Beolf was. It looked like they were slowed to a trot on their kisterals, but with only the clear sky and a hint of tree line in the background, it was hard to determine where exactly they were riding. They had to be somewhere in Respar, though; in the Chilled season, it was the only part of Erewen that wasn’t covered in snow.

“Our search has been...” he began but seemed to be struggling with how to word his response. “Fruitful in some ways, but barren in others.”

“Just tell me if you found her!” I finally snapped, that low growl coming back into my voice in an instant.

“Oh, we found her alright,” Beolf called over from his own mount. Dayer tilted his mirror to show Beolf’s exceedingly pissed off scowl. He wasn’t wearing his helmet or fur-lined hood, so it was easy to see his brow drawn low. “The problem is, we lost

her again. And then we found the body of who we thought was Haron Val Toric, with a rather bitchy message for you, Irin.”

That was... a lot to take in one sentence. “Pardon, can you explain what the hell you mean by ‘you lost her?’”

Beolf sighed heavily and reached a gloved hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose tightly. From the sliver of Dayer’s face that was still visible in the mirror, he looked extremely worried about Beolf’s response. “We caught up to her on the way to Covenant Crossing just over two days ago. It seems like she had camped out in Ber’s Forest until she thought she wouldn’t get caught on the road, but we found her trying to take the main road early in the morning. Then she convinced us to stay the night there and managed to escape.”

My vision began to wobble and darken at the edges. I was about to either burst from my human skin entirely or pass out, neither of which was a desirable option. “But you found her again, right? Surely you wouldn’t let her escape twice, Beolf.”

He looked rightfully admonished, refusing to look at Dayer’s mirror directly. “As I said,” he rubbed his beard in agitation. “We found the body of Haron Val Toric, but... she was dead. Even beyond that, the body looked like it had been rotting for months instead of hours, even though there was no way she had more than a day’s lead on us. It was... not what we expected.”

“She’s a necromancer, Beolf. I’m sure she has ways of manipulating a dead body’s deterioration. What was the message you said she left?”

Everyone in the conversation looked confused. Sett, Dayer and Beolf wore matching looks of confusion over my driving questions. “Prince Irin,” Sett began gently. “If they found Haron’s dead body, that likely means—”

“She’s not fucking dead! Just tell me what the message was!” I didn’t have the time or interest to explain that she may be more powerful than any of us could expect. Haron could very well have learned to jump bodies, if Morrette had taught her from beyond the grave. And I didn’t have the time to go through all the theories of how exactly she was able to accomplish that.

Stiffly, Beolf reached into one of the bags strapped on the side of his saddle and pulled out a rolled-up letter. Pulling the letter open and clearing his throat, he read it aloud. “It says, ‘If you want to hide your dirty secrets, shove them up your ass next to your head. They will never see the light of day there.’”

The tension of the silence that followed was wound so tightly, it would likely take someone out when it broke. What no one was expecting, however, was the howling laughter that sprung from my mouth. The force of it had me rocking back in the seat and tilting my face to the ceiling. I laughed until I cried, both out of relief and some kind of unhinged challenge to the beast’s instinct to hunt Haron down myself. Sett watched with sincere concern as I came completely apart at the seams.

“Prince Irin.” Beolf was the first to break the awkward silence after delivering that kind of message. His rough voice was hesitant. I’m sure they all thought I’d lost my mind by now. “I’m not very knowledgeable on necromancy, so I’m throwing this out as speculation, but... can a skilled enough necromancer use dead bodies for their own? As in, is it possible we are looking for someone else who Haron is possessing?”

The discovery was too fresh in my own mind to offer up as a rational explanation, but of everyone here, I felt like I owed Beolf some kind of answer. “I don’t have definitive proof... but I have reason to believe Haron is able to transfer bodies in this way. Or rather, transfer from one corpse to another.”

I couldn’t tell him Haron possibly had a connection to the known creator of necromancy. She could have access to all sorts of knowledge on necromancy we

couldn't comprehend, if she were able to contact Morrette from beyond the grave. Sett would likely detain me under the assumption of insanity if I voiced my theory aloud. Even without that snippet of information, all three men stared as if I'd started speaking in tongues.

Of course, Beolf was the first to speak again. "Gods damn it, I knew that woman was a pain in the ass!" He urged his kistral ahead of Dayer, obviously trying to get some space to throw his own tirade out of earshot. He wasn't doing a very good job of moving far enough away. We could still hear him bite out some rather creative curses on Haron's whole lineage from a ways up the road.

"Um... Your Highness?" Dayer's voice was small and timid from the short table. "What would you like us to do? We have been scouting along the eastern and western roads from Covenant Crossing but have not been able to pick up Haron's location again."

Finally recovering from my manic episode of laughter, I sighed and wiped the tears wetting my cheeks as I sat back up on the couch. "Oh, I know exactly where she's going. Plan to meet us on the eastern side of Covenant Crossing this evening. I'm meeting you with a brigade, and we will ride to the Clifftombs."

Energized with newfound purpose, I rose from the couch and stalked from the sitting room ahead of Sett's rushed dismissal to Beolf and Dayer. I was almost to the main entrance to go to the barracks myself when he finally caught up, pulling lightly on my elbow to slow me down from a near-sprint.

"Your Highness, let me organize the troops. I will fetch you in two hours' time, I swear it."

He wasn't expecting me to spin on him so fast. I gripped the top of his tunic with both hands to yank him close to my face. Sett's brown eyes widened in shock as I

growled, “You better have the troops assembled at the northern gate within two hours, or you will be missing your head and your prince.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Haron

More refugees have left the City of Scholars to travel south. Word has spread about this new settlement, Gilamorst,

and the ruling family named Gailish who have created a system of sorts to organize and govern the

spellcasters there. It’s clever, really, and a remnant of the old Julra system of guilds. A small group of Scholars

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chose to join the refugees to study this new city further. I look forward to seeing if the revival of Julra will rise from

this new empire.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 59 of Ber's First Reign

I pressed my palms flat against the familiar dark sea-sprayed stone that lined the Clifftombs' solid main gate. Compared to the light brownstone of the Resparian Royal Palace, the Clifftombs was its dark and moody counterpart, a study in blacks and greys as it jutted out over the edge of the Hiranian Sea. Even after all these years, the wards managed to stand the test of time, standing just as strong as the day I'd casted them before shutting myself in the castle. While the castle itself still stood proud, the hamlet around it was completely ruined, with little more than some jutting bricks and half-standing walls to even indicate there were houses at one time.

The solid metal door barring entry responded with a low hum as soon as my skin touched it, glowing softly as if welcoming me home.

In a roundabout way, it was welcoming me home. After a long, long time of being gone.

The wards' magic reacted strongly to mine, pulsing its blue light for a few beats and shifting to the continuous indigo hue of recognition. Metallic sounds grated from inside the doors, grumbling from a century of disuse before they shuddered violently and cracked open. Even the magic-driven machinations inside the door still worked,

another small boon that I wasn't expecting. Bit by bit, the heavy doors creaked open to show the barren courtyard they hid. Vibrant wiranblood bushes once lined the dark stone walkway, neatly trimmed and maintained, but left to their own survival they had grown rampant through the small court, almost entirely blocking the main entry to the palace with their thorny brambles. Like they were trying to guard the castle in their own way.

Maura, who had been standing rather quietly at my side until now, gave a little whinny and pranced with excitement at all the verdant greenery. Wiranblood bushes were a particular favorite of kisterals. I patted the side of her neck fondly. "Alright, go at it. You earned a good dinner."

The stubborn creature threw her head and gave a snort, as if to say, 'I was going to eat, with or without your leave.' Then Maura flicked her tail and trotted over to the nearest bush to munch happily.

Picking through the wild brambles proved more challenging than I anticipated, but eventually I made it to the main doors, half my borrowed pants shredded from the long thorns latching on as I waded through. The gears in this set of doors churned and grated as loudly as the first, squealing their protestation at being forced to work again after a century of disuse. Stepping into the vast entry hall, a full-body shudder rocked through my body as I breathed deep of the air, refreshing and familiar even if it carried the staleness of a tomb. Nothing remained of the tapestries and deep blue banners that carried the Hilj crest, all but dust scattered across the floor after a century rotting away here.

"I'm home." My voice was foreign, the deeper rumble of the man whose body I took over, and it bounced against the bare walls in a haunting echo. For a moment I could almost imagine Father's booming voice call back in greeting. So many memories haunted these halls...

I had meant to go straight to the library, but my feet carried me through the main entry to the wide double doors in the back, ones that matched the front doors perfectly with their dark grey metal and swirling filigree designs etched into them. They swung inward much easier, likely because they were not as exposed to the harsh elements, and for the first time in a hundred years I stepped into the Julran throne room.

The last time I stood here, it was to clear this room of dead bodies. Bodies that fucking warmonger Ettion Werren had created when he massacred every attendee at their wedding celebration. It had been my last order of business, before locking my own body away in the family crypt below and escaping in another corpse. Part of me had wanted to find his body among the others. I wanted—no, needed—the assurance that he was dead. I spent all this time researching, hunting, trying to find any trace of his whereabouts. If Gennel was truly his offspring, I had to wonder if maybe he was also some sort of shapeshifter and passed that knowledge down his lineage. I guess, in a sick sort of way, I was a shapeshifter as well. We could have danced around each other for years and never known it, as desperate as the other to find and not be found in return.

Emotion the likes I had not felt since the Frigid War rose up, clogging my throat and making my eyes burn with the threat of tears.

"No, nope, not now," I hissed angrily and rubbed my face with both hands. "Keep your shit together, Mor. Just for a bit longer."

The pep talk didn't do much for morale, but it was enough to pull me from the throne room and hurl me down the closest hallway to the right. I couldn't forget what I came here for. I couldn't let myself get swept away now. With the carpets as old and deteriorated as they were, they did little to soften the harsh footfalls from my heavy boots as I stormed down the hall to another set of double doors. These were not quite as elaborately decorated as the others, but still constructed of the same solid metal

that guarded every other precious room in the castle. The wards on them were just as strong as the exterior gates, and it took a lot more focus to fight through the grief and growing fatigue to dismiss them.

"Certainly not Highlan Pid's windows, that's for sure."

A cool breeze blew past as I pressed through the doors of the old library. The wards certainly did their job of preserving this space, with not a speck of dust or aging in sight. With every step, each of the layers of protection fell away, leaving behind a shimmering blue powder to cover the floor, desks, and countless rows of shelves bowing with heavy tomes. Time had stopped completely here, leaving the delicate and immensely valuable sources of knowledge untouched by mold or disintegration. I didn't expect the pang of bitter nostalgia to sting quite as much as it did. My chest ached for all the lost history that couldn't make it to this library in time to be saved. All the ancestral tomes kept in the homes of Julran families, knowledge of magic that had been passed down through the generations of talented spellcasters that had been lost to raids outside the Clifftombs' walls. The sense of loss was just as strong now as it was a hundred years ago.

Uncomfortable with all the emotions bubbling up in my throat again, I shoved my hands deep into my coat pockets and moved through the stacks by muscle memory. In the very back, nestled beneath the floor-to-ceiling windows of glass stained the palest purple, was the familiar pile of fluffy pillows stacked as haphazardly as when I left last time. To my right was the most painful focal point of the whole room, but with excruciating slowness, I turned my head to look at the giant family portrait of the royal Hilj family. The artist had taken great care to capture all their elegant and sharp features, their pearly pale skin offset by thick blue-black hair and captivating grey eyes. The shadowed folds of their indigo clothes gave them an expensive weight, and the shoulders of all the family members were capped with the traditional silver pauldrons that connected smoothly to the snug-fitting Julran collars covering them from shoulders to chins. The protective armor that gleamed around their throats

was covered with delicate filigree to denote expert craftsmanship afforded by a high status. A man and a woman stood behind their two adolescent children, identical crowns of twisted silver adorned with sparkling red gems resting across their brows. The young girl—practically a woman in her own right—was an exact copy of her mother, with black waving curls draped across the shoulder tilted slightly toward the viewer's perspective and her swan-like neck emphasized by the armor that wrapped it. She sat in an elegant pose—hands laid daintily over one another on a flat lap with her feet tucked to the side—on a stool hidden beneath the voluminous skirt in high fashion of old Julra. Beside her stood another tall adolescent, a long-fingered hand resting on the girl's shoulder. They had an easy smile that carved twin dimples in their pale cheeks and lit a mischievous fire into those bright blue eyes, the other wrist laid on the hilt of a sword peeking from beneath the deep purple waistcoat on their willowy frame.

I brushed my thumb over the nameplate mounted beneath the portrait, more to feel the cold metal against my skin than to brush away the nonexistent dust. 'The Royal Hilj Family, from left to right: King Vin Hilj, Queen Mila Patroc-Hilj; front: Princess Maura Hilj, Princept Morrette Hilj,' the plate read. My thumb rested on the last name.

“Hello,vilaschs.” Even the Julran word for ‘my dearest’ sent a pang of loneliness to my heart as it echoed through the vast library. I remembered Mother calling that out in this very room when I came back from riding with Father, the both of us tracking melting snow throughout the palace despite the maids’ admonishments to find her here. So many wonderful memories, blessedly untarnished, flickered across my mind's eye as I took in the dark study again.

What I had traveled all this way for sat innocuously on a small pedestal, safely held in a crystal case as if it were an exhibit piece meant for the Covenant Library. It was a national treasure in its own right, but its importance had long been lost to history. It took a place of importance right in the middle of the library. Even stepping near it, I could feel powerful magic tease my senses through the thick walls of its case, like the

burn of breathing too deeply of frigid air. My left hand curled into a tight fist, and without giving myself too much time to think of the pain punched a hole straight through the side of the crystal case. A brief flash of purple responded to the violent attack on the wards protecting the case. They were never meant to stand this long. Just like everything else in this dilapidated kingdom, they were abandoned and forgotten, holding on by their own indomitable strength. Once the case was broken, a low hum filled the study. Its resonance seemed to settle in my chest like a deep purr. If I could give an emotion to the simple, leather-bound book resting in the shattered glass, it felt like the tome was... happy. Like it had a life of its own.

Drip, drip, drip.

The light patter of liquid hitting the stone floor drew my attention to the hand I'd punched the case with. Uncurling it, I examined the split knuckles, now dripping sluggish, deep-red blood. "Might as well put this to good use."

I reached back into the broken case, slowly stretching my bloody hand toward the dormant tome resting on a purple cushion. As my hand moved closer, the thrumming power grew stronger until it practically vibrated in my chest. Little droplets of blood dribbled across the cushion, and the tome flared to life with a blast of magic that shattered the rest of the crystal that housed it. Shards flew everywhere, slicing skin on my face and arms from the blow.

An excitement that wasn't mine lit me up from the inside. The promise of slaking a thirst so deep and ravenous made the thick tome tremble, the Wiran ruby flashing unnaturally as it recognized its owner even in this body. From beneath my feet, a low rumble shook the library floor, subtle at first but quickly growing to match the tome's voracity until shards of crystal danced across the stone. It was the call of the restless dead, welcoming their last remaining ruler home.

"I know, I know." The gruff voice of my borrowed body was not as comforting as I'd

like. “Let’s go put ourselves back where we belong.”

The massive Wiran ruby—easily the size of a fist—pulsed a bright red again, its rhythm quickening as blood dripped closer to it. On the first droplet to hit the textured leather cover, the ruby drew it in to quench its century-long thirst. This was the main reason Wiran rubies were not ideal pieces for jewelry; their vampiric tendencies made for better magic amplifiers than decorative gems. Just like Wira herself, they took their payment for power in blood. If left unattended, or with someone weak like Nebold, they would eventually dull and lose their magic completely. I had spilled a lot of blood to keep this one satiated long enough for me to come back to it.

A lot of Golathian blood, specifically. Whoever was unlucky enough to have been captured during the Frigid War was left in a large tub with my tome, their throats and wrists slit deep enough to pour out their lifeblood and allow the Wiran ruby to drink up.

A sharp blast shook the study, very different from the rumbling purr beneath the palace, and knocked me from my vacant thoughts. Someone was knocking at the front gate, none too politely. And I had a feeling it wasn’t Beolf and his merry men.

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“Looks like we have visitors.”

As much as I would have liked to take my time waking my tome, time was of the essence. I pulled my bleeding hand back and reached for the dagger at my hip, cutting a deep slash across the meaty palm of this body and planting it firmly on the Wiran ruby. It drank eagerly, not letting a single drop trickle onto the leather, and as it did, the book began to tremble. By the time it had its fill, the page edges were tinted red as if every one was dipped in blood. That was my cue to pick the Tome of Wira up and tuck under my arm as it thrummed happily.

“Come here,” I cooed, as if talking to a favorite pet. “We have people to kill and dead to raise.”

Walking along the Clifftombs battlements brought a refreshing clarity to my exceedingly scattering mind. This last transfer was the worst by far. Coordination of this body was beginning to dwindle, and it was getting harder to focus my mind on even the simplest task. I needed to place my soul back in my original body soon, or I feared there would be little to put back.

Whoever was trying to break down the drawbridge wards was going to see a very unhinged and merciless side of my magic. I just had to get over the nausea already bubbling in my stomach at the thought of looking down off the wall.

Another heavythudslammed against the ward, and I took a steadying breath before leaning over the parapet just enough to see below. If I hadn’t already been gritting my teeth out of fear, I’d be grinding them now at the outrage that was turning my blood to acid. All along the other side of the deep moat spellcasters were scattered, dressed in

ragged furs and carrying crude weapons strapped to their backs as their hands wove elaborate patterns in the air. Pale red auras enveloped their arms from elbows to fingertips, and it seemed like they were collecting magic, sending it to one person directly across from the closed drawbridge. He was dressed very differently from the rest, probably marking him as someone of higher rank among the tribe. The head of a great beast decorated his own, covered in snow-white fur with hollowed eyes and a mouth filled with sharp ivory teeth. The rest of the pelt draped over the man's broad back, leaving his torso exposed in nothing more than a long-sleeved leather tunic left open at the front. Sigils painted in white covered every inch of bare skin across his broad chest. His whole body practically vibrated while he held his arms outstretched, that red haze covering all of him, and he swayed to an unheard rhythm.

Even as I watched, one of the other tribesmen at the edge of the group dropped to their knees, hands clutching at their chest with scrabbling fingers before falling face-first into the snow. That ominous glow left their body, and they fell still. This magic was far beyond their very human, very mortal capabilities.

"Shit," I cursed.

The next blow they dealt could take the whole wall down, if it was strong enough to suck the lives out of those spellcasters. Another two fell to the ground in the next breath. The man in the middle glowed even brighter.

I had to take out the whole fucking mob to stop that spell.

My neck popped when I rolled my head on it, loosening some muscles that had tightened in my shoulders while watching the tribe lay siege to the drawbridge ward. The Clifftombs had never fallen from invaders, even in the Frigid War, and I would be damned if it fell while I stood on its walls. I pulled the Tome of Wira from under my arm and hefted it in one hand; the weight satisfying in my grip as it fell open in a flurry of pages. The tome knew what spell I needed. Or rather, what spell it allowed

its power to be used for. Cheeky thing.

Blood from my cut hand smeared across the pages before being sucked in, and the archaic symbols of the Old Language sparked alive with their own purple glow. A low hum filled the air as the tome's spell charged, pulling its power from the blood sacrifice and settling an oppressive weight around my shoulders. It was almost... like a dampness accumulating in the bitter cold, or a sodden blanket being draped over me and left to stiffen in the freezing wind.

My eyes snapped open—I hadn't noticed they were closed—when a voiceless command resonated in my head from the tome. I did what it told me to, sweeping my hand swiftly off the pages like brushing away dust. A deafening boom nearly ruptured my eardrums as a massive blast of magic arced from it, slicing through the group below like a farmer's scythe through dead stalks. As one, the group fell to the ground, limbs splayed as they fell where they stood. All except one in the very back, high up on a hill just outside the old hamlet, sitting on a kistral now exposed once their cover was blown down. Their hand was raised in front of them, fingers splayed wide, as blue sparks of magic sizzled in the air around them. The spell I'd cast had rippled across the ground and slammed against a shield, a rather powerful one at that.

It felt as if our gazes were tangled, like I was looking across the battlefield and staring into the eyes of the opposing general at war. Like the Frigid War all over again, but this time I was much stronger and my opponent was wholly unknown to me. Finally, after what felt like hours staring each other down, the cloaked figure pulled their kistral around and retreated through the broken streets of the Clifftombs' borough toward the surrounding hills.

I wasn't fooled. This was just the first battle. But next time, I would bring an army that couldn't die.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Haron

Someone interesting came to the Covenant Library today. A man by the name of Olin Remana, perhaps no older than

30 years. His age would have indicated he could be a citizen of either Golath or Julra, but he refused to divulge

his origins. He was, however, very interested in the last census, particularly the maps drawn by the scouts detailing

the developing city to the south. I had confided in Sinna later about the stranger, and she mentioned her deceased

son's name was also Olin. Olin Val Toric.

-*"The Tragic History of Julra,"* by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 59 of Ber's First Reign

Gripping the Tome of Wira gave me the strength to step up onto the platform my stone coffin sat on. It was almost effortless to shove the lid off in this borrowed body—the brute was all muscle and no brain when I met him. The body inside looked like a sleeping princess waiting for true love's kiss, lying in the cold space with a serene expression. The only detail that broke that illusion were arms folded over the chest tightly gripping the Julran fangs I favored fighting with. Even now, I could still remember how difficult it was fighting against the weight of death just long enough to lower myself into my resting place with those weapons. How the thin body of the maid I took over shook on unsteady legs as I gawked at the success of the transferal spell. Then, how it took another hour struggling to close the lid with my flawed control over my new body.

For all the times I've dragged my battered, weary soul from body to body the last hundred years, the sense of relief that rose up from my chest at seeing my body brought tears to my eyes. It wasn't a purposeful reaction, but like my very soul wept in relief. I looked exactly the same as when I'd abandoned my shell for one of the dead maids I'd hauled with me to this hidden crypt. Again, I had the Tome of Wira to thank for granting me enough power to preserve my body with another of its spells.

That first time I ripped my essence from my body and placed it in the maid's corpse would haunt me for the rest of my days. Every body has its last moments burned into its brain, and everytime I inhabited a new one I relived those memories. Something I was not aware of the first time I transferred, and was wholly off-balanced by the sensation of being stabbed again and again until finally having my chest crushed in with the heavy stomp of a boot. While the original damage had been healed when I inhabited it, the pain inflicted on the maid's body was jarring and wholly unexpected.

"Welcome home," I murmured, leaning over the edge to gently brush the backs of my borrowed fingers against my own cold, pale cheek. Azapof residual magic zipped up my arm from the contact. "Let us begin, then."

The transferal itself was not an elaborate ritual. Most of the challenge was maintaining enough focus to not let my soul slip from my grasp as it was placed inside a new body. Problems usually arose when the corpse was fresh enough to still cling to its own soul—like the body I currently held—and I had to forcibly shove it out to make room for my own.

Now, a tugging feeling from deep in my chest encouraged me forward. Like a rope tied between my soul and my body was being pulled taut, reeling me in slowly but relentlessly.

With a small knife tucked into the belt of my borrowed body, I sliced both palms deep enough for the sluggish, dark blood to pool in the palms and drip down my

arms. I lifted the Tome of Wira up and opened the heavy book, flipping through to find the ritual I'd memorized so long ago, still burned into my mind with the fire of survival and desperation. The spell was nothing more than words spoken in the Old Language of the gods and a blood sacrifice. The power I needed laid in the Tome itself. The tome I'd written by hand, page by tattered page, and bound myself with twine made with my own hair. The tome I covered with leather from the nearly-extinct trebegnon I'd hunted and killed on my own. The tome that held the largest Wiran ruby known to Erewen, made with my blood and strength of will performing thecreation ritual for two moonphases and nearly starving myself to death in the process.

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This tome was my life's work and my lifeblood all in one. My greatest achievement and most effective weapon. And this tome had brought the downfall of my entire country on the heels of a greedy prince who wanted it for himself. He thought killing my family would break me enough to give it up. Ettion Werren paid for that with the existence of his country as he knew it. Now it seemed history had come full circle, with his distant relative trying to kill me in a dingy alley in Gilamorst. This time, I would make sure to eradicate the entire fucking bloodline.

I laid my hand across my body's chest and bowed my head to the tome, focusing all my energy to flow through the tome and out of my hand as a closed system, amplified by the blood and innate magic held in the pages.

“P'talin ge fulroth mes Wira het mislama. Tul inirish h'nem il verrek ga Genma, ed retaniek gil turon gal metcha'tak. Halen tiv culramat val Morrette Wirannev Hilj, et manesh yil vinam'ashekt.”

May Wira hold my soul in her hands. May she find me worthy to enter Genma, when my work in this world is done. In life and death, I am Morrette Wirannev Hilj, and no man can take that from me.

The incantation was short, but its effects were immediate. Two voids formed on my chest, in this body and the body beneath my right hand, the skin giving way to allow my fingers to pass through. Instead, I reached into the hole in this chest until my fingertips brushed something cold and thrumming. Blood smeared across my palms acted as an oil of sorts to let my hand slip through the space easier. My soul numbed my fingertips with its energy as I wrapped them tightly around it, and slowly began to extract it from this borrowed body.

As soon as it cleared my chest, I could feel the chill of death creep in. There wasn't much time to transfer my soul before this body failed me.

My tome thudded heavily on the floor, too heavy to hold now. I stumbled against the coffin and leaned against it for support to gently lower my hand to the void in my chest. It pulsed with an unnatural light and crackled with indigo energy that arched out and danced across the skin of my original body as if trying to escape. My hand sunk to the wrist, holding onto the beating core of my soul until it settled in place. It was home.

I was home.

The edges of my visions faded to black. My knees buckled, arms slipping from the edge of the coffin, and the dead weight of this body pulled its hand from my chest as it fell to the floor. And with that loss of connection, the old body returned to its state of a lifeless, soulless corpse once again.

Air wheezed through my throat and my eyes snapped open, my lungs burning and starved for air not given in a hundred years. It was like breathing in dust and sent me gracelessly hacking as I weakly pulled myself up with the lip of the stone coffin. The Julran fangs shifted and fell off the top of my body, sliding into the space between my hip and the edge of the small space. No matter how many times I did this—even when coming back to my own body—it was a disorienting experience, basically ripping my soul out of its old carrier and setting it in a new one, like a gem in a jewelry mount. A low groan left my chest, and I closed my eyes against the violent swirling and harsh colors bombarding my eyes in their adjustment. I had to rest my head on my arm draped over the lip of the coffin and just let myself settle in this body again.

Finally—when it didn't feel like my head was going to burst from pressure or have my chest collapse from lack of air—I lifted my head and pulled myself further out of

the coffin. Heavy black hair trailed along behind me, even when I swung my feet over and half-rolled out. An odd side effect of my possession, so be sure, and not one I was expecting to deal with right out of the crypt. I had gone to rest with a practical shoulder-length cut, just long enough to tie back in a fight yet short enough to push out of my face and call it styled. Now it pooled in the bottom of the coffin a good length and a half of my body, and I was by no means a short person.

“How inconvenient.” The sound of my voice was grating and dry from disuse. “How is it I still have to deal with haircuts after escaping death for a hundred years?”

I reached back inside and pulled one of the pair of swords out, and gripped the bulk of my hair to drape over one shoulder and pull tight. The sword had dulled with a hundred years of disuse, making sawing through the chunk of hair troublesome and leading to a choppy and uneven cut. I would cut it shorter, but with how jerky and stilted my movements were, I was just as likely to stab myself in the throat as cut my hair.

At this point, looks were the least of my worries.

On shaky legs, I bent low and ripped a strip of cloth from the man’s shirt. It was a trick I’d learned on the battlefield—winding a cloth tightly enough to create a makeshift twine, sturdy enough to bind a wound or tie back unruly hair when needed. Clumsy fingers made it more of a process than it had to be, but eventually I was able to knot the fabric tight enough to hold the thick black hair back.

My eyes fell to the dull blade held in my shaking hand. It would be more practical to just take the man’s short sword to fight with... but I’d be damned if I left my beloved fangs here to rot any longer. The metal was still good, likely affected with close proximity to the magic that preserved my body. It was just the edges that needed sharpening.

“This is going to be a bitch to do,” I muttered to myself and reached in for the other sword to its mate. Then with a groan, I bent down to grip my tome by the thick spine. Even that weight made my muscles burn with the strain. “Here’s to not slicing off a finger in the body I just returned to.”

From above, another shudder rocked through the Clifftombs signaling another assault to the walls. I leaned back against the coffin and let my head fall back, already feeling the drain of performing so many gods-damned miracles today. "Gods help me," I whispered, hoping that one of them would hear me and take pity. Then, with another heavy sigh, I pushed myself up and stumbled toward the steps up to the main level.

I had to ready myself for one last war.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Irin

It has been 30 years since the fall of Julra, and still I find myself no closer to learning everything I wanted to know

about the mysterious country. For all the tragic accounts I have heard, I cannot regret that the death of a country

brought me Sinna Val Toric, now Sinna Wend, and my beautiful daughter Janna. My wish is for this book to one day

help rebuild this wonderful culture. For now, I consider this book complete, until further information comes forth

regarding Julra and its people.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 69 of Ber's First Reign

There were no amount of private sword lessons, no amount of magic tutoring, no kind of experience that I could ever garner in my short life that could have prepared me for the sight that lay before us. The hill our troops crested gave us an excellent view of the absolute carnage taking place in the valley below. From my back, the rattling of armor and gasps of shock were interspersed with retching from the front row of the cavalry. These were seasoned men, trained and raised by the sword and hardly strangers to battle.

But this sight... it was like hell had broken open and spat out its prisoners.

Most of the corpses still had Julran colors, stained pieces of dark blue gambesons barely clinging to their bones through the missing pieces of tarnished armor. Some I could even see the blows that had killed them, from dents in helmets and jagged holes pierced through, along with several missing limbs. Others didn't even have their heads, but still swung their halberds and scythes with shocking accuracy. Arrows flew from the walls of the looming castle across the valley, easily picking off the Hollows tribesmen as the undead archers kept a heavy barrage from atop the Clifftombs' walls. It didn't matter where the arrows landed, really. The reanimated army didn't even react to friendly fire.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:13 am

They just kept swinging. Hacking away at whoever stood in their way that could bleed. And I watched in horror as those freshly killed tribesmen rose again and turned on their own. This was the most literal definition of a bloodbath I could ever have imagined.

“How...” Beolf was at an obvious loss for words. He brought his kistral up to the right flank of mine, staring out at the massacre. “How can this even be possible? The amount of magic one would need to control all these is... impossible.”

“Obviously not impossible.” My voice shook, slightly muffled by my helmet. Behar stood at attention near my mount’s left front leg, ears perked and tail still with his eyes trained on the mass of bodies. His teeth were bared. “This is what a necromancer with limitless knowledge can do. Fucking Gennel!” If I ever found that conniving bitch again, I would lop her head off myself.

“It’s unlikely she will survive, if she’s out there at all. But I think I found your necromancer.”

Since she left that body with the charming little message for me, she wasn’t really the Haron we knew anymore. I wasn’t entirely sure what name to call her now. There was definitely some kind of disturbance among the chaos of full-blown war. A small cluster of undead moved steadily through the battlefield from one side to the other, like a morbid entourage guarding someone in the middle. And that someone—I couldn’t tell exactly who through the thick swarm of bodies—swung two wickedly curved blades each the length of my forearm and twice as wide. They flashed silver swiping through the air in-between the undead, slicing off any part of a body that came close enough. And above the whirling cyclone, high enough to be out of reach

even if someone was thrown, floated a thick tome laid open as if it were innocently set on a desk. The cover was pitch black, a void against the bright noon light, with a blood-red gem easily the size of two fists inlaid with crisscrossing silver wires like a cage. Some kind of scrawling script spiraled out from it, pulsing deep indigo with the same tempo as the gem. The eerie glow covered the whole battlefield, and it seemed that wherever it touched, the dead rose. And right in the center of the back cover was the family crest of Hilj: a skull set atop crossed swords with wiranblood flowers circling its head like a crown.

“If you think she’s under the massive floating tome that looks like it came straight from a nightmare, you’d probably be right,” I answered solemnly as we watched her cut a path across the valley with my beast-sharpened eyes. “She’s not being very subtle, is she?”

Even in this morbid situation, Beolf snorted a bitter laugh. “When has she ever been subtle? Lucky for us, she isn’t, since she is probably leading us right to Gennel.”

He pointed to the northeast, where another large group of Hollows warriors tried desperately to defend their vantage point on another hill. They had no organized formation, but were clearly trying to protect someone at the top. From my limited studies on the savages from the Hollows, every tribe had a sort of hierarchy of their own with two leaders, a head chief and a shaman. Shamans typically wouldn’t fight, but they were believed to bear witness to whatever gods they worshiped now. It was impossible to think this was just one tribe, though. How Gennel had brought them together under one banner was a mind-blowing feat all on its own.

“I’m sure Gennel is hunkering down with their shaman, too afraid to fight in the war they started,” I snarled. “We would get slaughtered trying to enter that fray. I have half a mind to just turn around and fuck all the way off to the palace.”

“You would be satisfied with turning tail now, after seeing who could turn their eyes

to the south? How would we get back to Gilamorst in time to rally the army, before these tribes came banging on our walls?"

Curse Beolf and his level-headed rationale. "Gods damn it," I spit harshly. The kistral beneath me skittered to the left with the unintentional squeeze of my legs and Behar shifted his stance to follow. My eyes stayed locked on the slow bubble of undead and their master as she continued her personal warpath to the adjacent hill on our right. "Fine, we can try to intercept her on the southern side. I'll leave the strategizing to you."

"Understood." Beolf whirled around on his own mount and plucked a red and white striped flag from his saddlebag, raising it high in the air. Murmurs rippled through the formation, passing the message along for unit leaders to fall out and meet him at the front line.

We'd only remained undisturbed this long because of the utter chaos and bloodshed sprawled across the valley. The Hollows tribes didn't seem to have any organization or structure in their own fighters, or if they did, it had been shattered against the dry bones of the risen dead. They didn't even have suitable armor, clad in breastplates made of what appeared to be human rib bones and long loincloths stretching to their knees. At one point, they had been white, but most were now drenched in blood and torn apart.

Just as I turned to join Beolf and his commanders in their planning, a cacophony of war cries screamed from the eastern hill and rolled across the valley. Their violent yells sent a wave of cold shivers straight through to my bones. A massive wave of white-painted bodies waving bone clubs and spears sprinted down the steep slope to crash against the wall of violence. I watched in mortification as the undead turned on their new victims with brutal efficiency. Then, from the cluster of bodies beneath the hovering tome, one slung a tall shield across its back and bent low, facing the oncoming Hollow tribes as it hunched down and braced its bony hands against the

ground.

Deep blue fabric fluttered in an elegant arc, following a body that launched itself in the air off the back of the soldier. A tall woman flew through the air like she had wings, swords raised high overhead, as she braced to land in the fray on a vicious downswing. From my vantage, only her profile was visible—and barely at that—but the wild grin that spread across her lips was unmistakable. And wrapped around her neck and shoulders was a very recognizable Julran collar, just like the one on the painting of Princept Morrette in the Necromancer's Guild and my tomes. Wherever she had come from, she was obviously not dressed for war. Beyond the collar protecting her neck, there was no armor to speak of on her body. In fact, her clothes looked very ceremonial and not at all practical for mobility, with cuffs on her biceps attached to blue silk meant to drape around her back like a shawl. Even as I watched in jaw-slackened horror, she used that fabric to loop around a man's throat and, with an intricate twist, flip him onto the ground before stabbing through his chest.

Gore sprayed with every swing, splattering across her face, and even then, that unhinged smile remained. Maybe it was the disbelief of seeing someone act like a total berserker excited to hack into people, or the mesmerizing grace in which she threw herself into the battle, but for a brief moment I truly feared Wira herself had descended from Genma to fight among us.

“Maybe she doesn't need our help.” Beowulf had moved back to my side as his commanders dispersed to pass their message down the lines. “Looks like that hellion is having a good time dismembering people.”

“She may kill Gennel before we can get to her.”

A small group of Hollows cannibals at the base of our hill finally turned their attention to us, partially in an attempt to escape the horde hacking them to pieces. My kistral snorted in fear and tried to rear its front two legs, pawing at the air with its

massive cloven feet. We were stable enough balanced on its other two sets of legs, but I still gripped the reins tighter and attempted to turn its head to the side and back in control to keep Behar from getting kicked.

The unit to my left—fifty men strong—immediately shifted as one to form a wall three rows deep to block the oncoming savages. My kistral shot off to the right and raced along the top of the hill and down the southern side of it straight into the valley. Colorful curses flowed freely from my lips and I struggled to loosen my feet from the saddle to jump if I needed. Behar easily kept abreast of the terrified beast, nipping at its front legs in an attempt to herd it. The kistral snorted and threw its head again, but slowed down slightly from a full sprint.

Unfortunately, my mount had veered too close to the fighting.

A rogue arrow flew, silent and true, and buried itself just behind the front left shoulder, where the kistral's heart would be. Behar barely leapt out of the way as she bellowed and fell to the ground, skidding along it with my leg pinned between its heavy body and the ground. Armor covering the tops of my thighs and calves took the brunt of it, but my hip screamed from the strain put on my leg beneath the heavy, still body laying on top of it. Immediately Behar took a defensive position with his hackles raised and teeth bared, standing between me and whoever was stupid enough to come within reach of an angry rinhound half their size. No one else was close enough to help pull me up.

“Gods damn it!” The gods were definitely turning their eyes my way, with how much I was damning in their names. I knew what I had to do. I had to become the monster I bargained for.

Behar knew it, too. Keeping his body angled to pounce at the first enemy, he slowly crept back until his back haunches were within reach. I could usually tap into beastwalker magic on my own, but contact with the bonded animal made it much

easier and faster to accomplish. With all the chaos of battle, even the best spellcaster would struggle to maintain focus enough to cast. Which made the fact Haron—or whoever was out there—was controlling a whole battlefield of undead and fighting on her own even more impressive. I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes, trusting Behar to guard me long enough to make the bestial transformation. Just placing my palm on his hunched back grounded me immediately, sharpening my mind to the acute focus of a predator stalking its prey. The world fell away, taking the disconcerting screams and wails of the dying away with it.

The change took over quickly. Muscles in my biceps, shoulders, and chest expanded, straining against the leather straps of my armor painfully before snapping under the pressure. The cotton gambeson and leather pants beneath it fell away even faster as it was shredded apart, and black fur sprouted from every inch of skin. Bones shifted and cracked, the sound ricocheting in my skull when an elongated snout grew out. Long fangs pushed my human teeth from their gums and littered the ground along with droplets of blood that followed them. If I had taken more time to let the transformation settle, it wouldn't have been as excruciating as it was now, hunching my back under the agony of twisting my body into this unnatural shape. The last of the spell stretched my hands and fingers, growing out black claws to replace the soft, useless nails.

My mind was still my own, but an instinctive howl ripped from my chest as I shifted entirely to my beastwalker form. Ears atop my own head swiveled to take in all the sounds, and I angrily shoved off the kistral's corpse to free myself. Behar joined in with his own howl, a duet of battle cries weaving through the clanging and pained screams. The weather here was miserable even on the eve of the Chill, but with the pumping heat my transformed body created a light cloud of steam now hovering around me. Toes tipped with wicked sharp claws flexed and spread on newly formed paws the size of dinner plates, digging into the hardened earth with every heavy step. It took a few moments to orient myself in this form—it felt unnatural walking on two legs in this form, but doable—and I lifted my nose to the wind to sniff for Gennel. It

was already difficult enough with my limited exposure to any discerning scent, but at this point my sense of smell was the most reliable. There was no way to tell what form he, or she, took otherwise. At least, not that I knew of. Obviously Haron had her own way of hunting down that skittering pest.

“Prince Irin!” Beolf called from behind. He grunted heavily and shoved the body of a tribesman off his sword with the strong kick of a boot from atop his mount. “We will cover you. Go!”

The twenty or so men around us—staying as close as they dared after witnessing my beastly transition—formed a loose half-circle that came between Behar, myself, and the fighting. I didn’t bother concerning myself with their pace as I lowered onto all fours. It had been a while since I had run full speed in this form—the moment of exhilaration made my insides feel as if they sloshed around when I shot off. Bodies that should have been blurs remained in crisp focus with my heightened sight. The shocked faces of the Hollows warriors interspersed with the empty expressions of the dead passed us by as we wove around the edge of the battlefield. It would be foolish to cut straight through, but too much of a waste of time to avoid the valley altogether in favor of climbing up and down the other two hills on the perimeter.

One warrior was brave enough to swing his crudely sharpened dagger at my head, a terrified cry on his lips. I snapped out to latch onto his arm and give a violent shake. It was a joke how easily his forearm separated from the elbow. My teeth crushed the bone as easily as chewing on a jelly-filled roll. I tossed the arm aside, blood spattering along my muzzle as I did, and kept running toward the other hill. The rabid look seemed to be a boon, scaring off the more rational fighters.

Even then, I wasn’t fast enough to avoid a small group of men who broke from the perimeter to try to intercept me, their clubs and axes raised over their heads as they screamed war cries and sprinted toward me. It would be admirable that they took on a beast walker twice their sizes, but I was far too angry to do more than swipe at their

bare chests with wickedly long claws. Two of them fell instantly, completely gutted, while another two barely dodged, receiving deep slashes across their chests and arms where they had tried to block the heavy blow. One more tried to circle behind and leap onto my back, only to receive a vicious bite from Behar on the leg that dropped him to a knee. I swung around with another powerful strike, catching the back of the man's neck and sending his head rolling in a fantastic spray of blood. Behar's mouth was bloody as he moved to stand closer to my side, crouched defensively while a continuous growl rumbled from his chest.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:13 am

The other two warriors, already weakened and bleeding, were being easily dispatched by a revenant swinging its javelin in a well-executed series of spins. How the dead could be this coordinated and skilled in their weapons was a testament to the level of control held over them. I had to shake my momentary fascination off and continue my path along the battle's edge. Behar was stuck to my left side between me and the chaos of the battlefield, panting heavily as he ran.

Bodies of the chieftain's warriors who guarded him were already scattered along the side of the hill by the time we climbed to the top. Very briefly, I wondered where the chieftain they were supposed to be guarding was, half expecting him to spring at me from above. More revenants hovered around the base, and did an excellent job keeping anyone else from getting close. None of them moved to attack or even acknowledge us passing by on our way up, something else that seemed very... odd. Above the din of violent noises from the battlefield, two feminine voices screamed at each other between the metallic blows of swords.

"Gods, why won't you just fucking die?"

The other cackled, the voice husky and derisive. "I'm sure you would like that, demon spawn! Your bloodline scurries around like roaches who refuse to die!"

"Oh, that's rich coming from you!" The first one screeched again, and more strikes rang out. "You're the one who won't stay dead, Morrette!"

Morrette?

How two fighters still had the capacity to insult each other while fighting baffled me,

but the sight that welcomed me when I crested the hill shook my disbelief even harder. The chieftain in question was sprawled to my right, but not wholly there. His head, still bearing the pelt of some kind of beast — a trebegnon, the small human part of my brain helpfully provided — seemed to have rolled back down the hill from where the rest of his body fell, and a dismembered arm holding a club fell next to the rest of him. From where it had been cut at the forearm, it was almost like he'd raised it to block, and had it along with his head cut cleanly off. For someone to have that kind of strength... I shuddered at the thought of what I'd be up against, even in my own bestial form.

Another angry scream had my head snapping back to the active fighting a few paces away from the chieftain's corpse.

The blonde woman, who I expected to be Gennel, was wholly different aside from the height I knew her at as a man. She looked nothing like the Gennel Rhen I met, with a rounded face and full cheeks beneath wild, dark blue eyes. One hand was heavily wrapped in bandages, but the other gripped a short sword like she was very familiar with how to use it. A look of pure hatred pulled thin lips into a snarl as a stark contrast to the rest of her innocent-looking face. The ferocity with which she swung the sword with just one hand was impressive, but not nearly as graceful or efficient as the dual blades the other woman wielded.

Morrette... this was the Julran Princeps, in the flesh. If I hadn't confirmed her identity from the portraits copied into "The Tragic History of Julra" tome, I would have assumed Gennel was completely out of her mind with rage calling her that name. However, those drawings did nothing to convey the angular features she truly held, nor the expressiveness of her face as she bared her teeth in a feral interpretation of a smile. The burn of bloodlust even carried onto her scent, one that would burn in my nose long after this battle was over.

My hulking form finally caught Gennel's eye, and she laughed bitterly. "What, you

brought your hounds along too? The great Princept Morrette, still letting other people fight your battles!”

A pained shriek came from her lips on the tail end of the last insult as Morrette lunged forward and slashed across an unguarded thigh. It was clear she was playing with her food. “Better focus on me, Gennel,” Morrette taunted, circling her like a prowling trebegnon. Even the stained blue fabric fluttering from her arms and torso gave the appearance of the same black-blue fur. Her voice was a low, husky sound harshened by overuse. “I’d hate to kill you on a stupid mistake, like losing your focus. Again.”

"Gods forbid you fight fair!" Gennel snarked. "I wouldn't expect any less from the last member of a family of thieves. How dare you stand there and play like you're faultless!" Her voice grew louder and more shrill, spittle flying from her lips as her face morphed to a mask of unrelenting madness. Her feet kept the same circular dance, stepping with Morrette to stay out of reach. "Your family tookeverythingfrom mine! Theyknew Golath would starve itself to death, landlocked as it was and without its strongest practitioners! It was the greed ofyourancestors that caused the Frigid War! All of Julra was built on pillars of lies, spewed from the mouths of Hilj rulers, and the gods strike me down if I let you—"

"Are you almost done?"

The cool, indifferent question rocked Gennel back on her heels. Frankly, I was a bit surprised by the level response, considering all the accusations and insults being flung at her. It was like watching a child arguing with an adult, seeing Gennel all out of sorts as she stood off against Morrette.

She continued, unbothered. "I was joking about your villainous monologue before,girl,"she spat the word, clearly meant as an insult. "All I hear is the whining of a long-lost daughter of corrupted rulers who finally got their just punishment. What

the fuck do you know of what happened a hundred years ago, much less three hundred? You consider yourself a champion of the Werren name?" Morrette snorted harshly and tossed her head. "They were a murderous, backstabbing family of liars and manipulators who tried to trap strong families like the Hiljs with wretched curses and forbidden rituals! So spare me the 'woe is me, your family stole from mine' shit, when all you have to go on are some old fucking diaries from delusional, twisted people. You fight for nothing!"

A wordless scream ripped from Gennel, and she lunged to swing her sword with the only good arm. Even then it was a powerful blow. Morrette had blocked it with both of her swords, and her jaw clenched with the effort to push her off. She shifted her stance just enough to be able to throw a brutal kick at Gennel's knee and bring her to the ground. I thought she would end it there, raising both swords across her shoulder to deliver a strong blow across Gennel's throat, when icy spears suddenly shot from the snow all around where Morrette stood. Bright red blood scattered across the ground.

Morrette had just barely managed to dance out of the deadly spikes without being mortally impaled. It had all happened in a handful of breaths, before I could even get my body to move to her aid. I stepped forward, intent on helping Morrette or doing anything beyond being a dumbfounded witness, when her left arm snapped up to point her sword at me. Her eyes never left Gennel as the woman struggled to her feet, clearly winded. "You stay right there, Irin. I don't need you in the way."

How did Morrette know my name?

Gennel, however, seemed to be an opportunist. On her next sidestep, she spun on a heel and quickly lunged toward me, her sword flashing in the air on a powerful thrust aimed straight for my gut. The distance between us was too far of a stretch to make contact, but she took advantage of the momentum to drop in a sweeping kick that threw a spray of snow from the ground. Quickly dropping her sword, her hand flew

out with the palm facing me, and with a hiss of effort transferred the scattered snow to jagged icicles midair. Those hit their mark, embedding in my stomach and chest and causing a howl of pain to rip from my lungs. Fortunately Behar was too low to be hit, and he took advantage of the opening to latch onto her outstretched arm at the wrist and shake ferociously. A sickening crunch followed by her angry shriek hinted at some broken bones beneath his teeth before she kicked him brutally in the chest. His yelp as he skidded across the ground to land on his side made me see red.

It all happened in the span of a few heartbeats. From over Gennel's crouched body, my eyes locked with Morrette, and the pure rage that mirrored mine could set me on fire. It may have been equal parts seeing me and Behar injured that seemed to send her over the edge of reason. Black hair not plastered to the sides of her face with blood began to lift and flutter in an unnatural wind. With a smooth and practiced swing, she flung the gore from one blade and spun it to fall into the sheath on her back, and that free hand turned palm-up to collect swirling indigo magic.

Then Morrette began to walk with a slow, measured gait, and it was at that moment I realized we may all be fucked. It was like she hadn't just been stabbed with spears, like the pain didn't even register to her.

Gennel stumbled up, looking even worse for wear now with her one good arm now hanging loosely at the elbow by shredded muscle and skin. With an enraged snarl, I violently backhanded her, my large hand slamming into the side of her head and shoulder with enough force to send her flying and tumbling across the ground. Now that I knew she could weaponize the snow, I was much more cautious about keeping my distance. I moved myself between her and Behar's limp body. His side was still rising and falling with fast breaths, but the urge to go check on him shook my focus on the real threat.

Something shuffled from behind Gennel, barely cresting the hill before they pounced on her hunched form.

It was a group of warriors, the very ones who were likely protecting Gennel and the chieftain now among the group of dead attacking her. Their broken bodies covered her, weapons swinging and hitting whatever they could in the writhing pile, and I couldn't take my eyes from the chaotic scene. A warm hand pressed against my side close to one of the deeper ice shards, and I snapped my head down with a growl instinctively before realizing whose hand it was.

“Will you be able to heal this, Irin?” Even in that cold voice, there was obvious concern in Morrette's question and probing fingers. The ice pieces were already slowly melting and working their way from my body as it healed at an accelerated speed.

“I'll be fine,” I managed to speak around the mouth full of fangs. “What of her?” My head jerked to where Gennel continued to thrash and howl in rage, defenseless against the bodies of tribesmen who had just given their lives for her to pieces just as they had been by their brethren.

Morrette's eyes narrowed. “I'll take care of her. You head back to your men and recover.”

I wanted to ask if I'd see her after the battle died down, when a massive blast of magic slammed against us. My bulky form managed to stay upright, but I had to quickly wrap an arm around Morrette's waist to catch her from flying back onto her ass. We both turned to find Gennel battered and bloodied body, barely standing amidst a swirling cyclone of water, and several revenants impaled on massive ice spikes jutting from the ground. Anything that got even remotely close to her was viciously stabbed by shards of ice shooting from the wall of water she created around herself.

“This isn't...” Her voice was weak, barely able to carry over the cacophony of the battle below and the howling wind of the cyclone. Gennel tried again to speak louder.

“This isn’t over, Princept. I vow to avenge my family and revive Golath, and you will suffer greatly for your sins!”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:13 am

In the next breath, the cyclone tightened to a single stream like a water spout rising from the ground, and it snaked from between the clamoring bodies of the dead and wound its way through the chaos of the battlefield until it was out of sight. I lurched forward as if to follow, but Morrette held me back with a tight grip on my bicep.

“Don’t bother,” Morrette spat angrily. “She has likely already mimicked one of your soldiers. It will be impossible to find her in all this.” She waved toward the battlefield, the ground almost entirely covered in bodies. “And she knows she lost. All of her tribesmen are dead. Gennel will hide and lick her wounds for a while before striking again.”

I looked out from our vantage above the shallow valley and realized Morrette was right. No one alive held the weapons of the Hollows tribes or wore their furs. The revenants didn’t seem to be engaging with my men, and likewise, the soldiers I brought left them alone, probably more out of fear than comradery. The sheer amount of power it must have taken to raise and control an army like this... I couldn't even wrap my mind around it.

This was the army she needed in the Frigid War. She gave her people the victory they deserved.

Lost in the wonder of winning this unbelievable fight, I didn’t notice the absence of the purple glow that blanketed the area until Morrette stepped forward with a hand extended upward. The tome—I had completely forgotten it was still floating above us—drifted down gently to land in her palm that snapped it shut with a dull thud, and she tucked it under her arm. When the book closed, every resurrected body crumpled to the ground wherever they stood, filling the air with the loud, metallic clamoring of

armor and weapons clanging together as they fell. The noise was almost unbearable to my sensitive ears, and they tucked close to my head to block it out.

I hoped the dead of Julra could finally know peace after death. But I had a horrible feeling Gennel would not slink away to nonexistence. Knowing she was out there, already lurking among my troops, made my stomach twist unpleasantly. Maybe Dayer could find a way to run her out before we marched back to Gilamorst. She had seemed extremely weak when she fled. I doubted Gennel would be an immediate issue, with injuries like that.

That kind of thirst for revenge didn't die with one battle.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Irin

This is my last entry to "The Tragic History of Julra," I fear. I willingly dedicated my entire life to the illustrious

kingdom since starting this tome at the age of 32, and in turn, it has tilted my perspective to a new and enlightened

view of this beautiful world. I have no regrets, only hope that Princept Morrette and their family found peace. Sinna, I

dedicate this book to you, my love. Thank you for sharing your mind, your culture, and your life with me. I look

forward to meeting you in Wira's embrace.

- "The Tragic History of Julra," by High Scholar Yuret Wend, Year 100 of Ber's First

Reign

Morrette and I stood in silence, just taking in the remnants of the battlefield below us. Unable to maintain this beastly form any longer, I let go of the tight reins I held it in to allow my body to shift back to its smaller human form. The relief that came with it was like taking off a heavy set of armor. As fur shed and muscle shrank down, I felt so much lighter and flexible. Morrette didn't seem disturbed by the transformation, with just a cursory glance my way before turning her head toward the towering wall of the Clifftombs.

Beolf hobbled up the side of the hill to my side on foot. Nursing a gash on his elbow, he ripped the greave off to staunch it with a bandage. By the time he made it over, I had reclaimed enough of my humanity to speak unhindered by fangs or a muzzle.

“I think it's safe to say the Hollows population is well and truly decimated now.” Beolf's eyes jumped between us, silently measuring up Morrette's still form and the sword still clutched in her other hand.

“I want confirmation of Gennel's whereabouts. Have the trackers fan out and try to sense any concealment spells in the area.” I turned my attention momentarily to where Behar was pulling himself back up onto his paws. My steps were still a bit unsteady, getting used to walking on shorter legs again, but when I made it to his side I ran my hands over his chest and sides to check for any severe injuries. He was a bit tender from the kick—his pained whines as I pressed against that spot told me as much—but otherwise he was free of broken bones or cuts. “Good boy,” I praised the rinhound. “Thank you for your help, Behar.”

He seemed content with a copious amount of ear scratches for his service. Even when Behar appeared exhausted, his tongue lolled out happily at the attention. The reaction brought a toothy smile across my own maw despite myself.

“If she were truly dead, there would be nothing to sense,” Beolf continued. “How would we know she didn’t just run away again?”

My fangs ground together in agitation. “You’re right on that,” I finally admitted begrudgingly. “We could eradicate her identity as Gennel Rhen in Gilamorst, at least. If she does resurface, she would have to make a new persona and rebuild her influence.”

“Fucking rodent,” Beolf muttered.

I scoffed, but it was a nervous sound. “I suppose the party is over.”

“Yeah, and you better hurry to catch the host.” Beolf jerked his head toward Morrette’s retreating form down the hill's slope. “From what Dayer has been going on about the last four days, getting into the Clifftombs is impossible without her.”

We were close enough to the castle that her trek wasn't far, skirting around the edge of the cluttered valley toward the drawbridge, now being lowered across its moat. The fluttering of dark fabric whipped from her lifted arm, as if she were the one controlling it. Of all the things I'd seen since riding up to this mess, that felt like the least wild thing to happen this day.

"Gods damn it!" Twisting my neck and shrugging my shoulders as if to relieve some tension, I tried to push the rest of the beast down and snap the rest of my human form back into place. If done slow enough, the process was mostly painless. But I had an urgency that pressed me to revert back before I attempted to confront Morrette about... everything.

“Stay with Behar. Make sure he doesn’t run.”

I didn’t wait to hear his response before loping down the hill to catch up to Morrette,

who had already stepped onto the drawbridge. It was an exhausting effort, but by the time I made it within range of yelling I was entirely myself, tattered clothes draping from my smaller frame and leaving me exposed to the chill. Steam wafted from whatever bare skin hit the wintry Julran air with the excessive heat my body let loose from the change.

“Morrette! Wait, I need to talk to you!”

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Why I expected her to slow down was a slip in judgement.

The massive Tome of Wira was still tucked casually under her arm, but as I drew closer, it felt like I was being crushed from all sides. The sheer oppressive aura that filled the air around her was almost enough to deter me, if I hadn't already been so desperate to talk to Morrette. Even so, I had to clench my teeth to keep them from chattering out of fear. This had to be what it felt like to be in the presence of a god, being so brutally reminded of a mortal's inferiority. Maybe Wira herself lived in that tome.

Finally—after what seemed like an hour of running—my bare feet hit the planks of the long drawbridge. The slapping of skin against the frigid wood was enough to make her slow to a stop and glance over her shoulder.

“You look a little underdressed for the weather, little princeling.”

The pet name made me stop short, the ragged breaths seizing in my lungs. Only one person I knew called me that.

"Haron?" Her name fell from my lips in a whisper. "I can't... this isn't... You can't be Haron, right? You're the Princept Hilj, aren't you? But you're..."

A small smile pulled her full lips up, but it wasn't a happy expression. "You're right on both accounts. I was Haron Val Toric. But beyond that, I am Morrette Hilj. I know it's..." She huffed a weary sigh, turning her gaze to the still water beneath the bridge we stood on. "It's probably unbelievable to you. I'm sure you figured out my little trick when you found my old body, otherwise you wouldn't have suspected I made it

here. You would have thought I was dead, no?"

My head bobbed, but my mind was whirring so fast I could hardly find the words to spit out. It was truly a miracle, seeing Morrette in the flesh. Now it made complete sense why she always called me princeling, or seemed overly reckless with how she lived as Haron. However she was able to accomplish it, she was practically immortal. To her, I was a child. And I felt even more childlike, running after her with these pants that were tattered and a shirt barely clinging onto my shoulders in shredded strips. As if I didn't feel wildly unprepared to face off against someone who had lived over a hundred years, I couldn't rely on a royal presence either.

Morrette waited for me to collect my thoughts, her weight leaned into a hip with the tome propped on it. The swords she'd just slaughtered a quarter of the Hollows with peeked out from over her shoulders in their sheaths. Up close, she was an exquisite play of light and dark, of masculine and feminine, in how she held herself tall and unwavering. Blood stained her skin in varying shades, flaking off in some places where it had dried. The dark blue trousers and vest hid the majority of gore not covering her skin, hugging every defined muscle along her chest and stomach. Another layer of lustrous silk—silver and bound tightly across her chest—peeked out from the vee of the stiff vest. And the very distinct Julran collar made popular during Morrette's lifetime wrapped around her shoulders and extended up to the bottom of a sharp, pale jaw, making her long neck appear even more so.

True, she looked exactly as she had in the portrait recreations, but at the same time was nothing like the stoic noble that stared back at the artists. The only difference between the prince standing before me and the one from my history tome was the length of her hair. It had grown from its short style after decades under whatever spell preserved that body, still long even after she'd roughly chopped it off at the hip. And those eyes—bluer than the water crashing against the cliffs—pierced straight through me as if I had been impaled by an icicle again.

Now it made sense why her eyes were two different colors as Haron. It had to be a side effect of whatever advanced necromancy she used to reanimate those people with her own soul. I could not imagine living so long outside my own body. Living borrowed lives to hide and plot, to resurrect a whole kingdom so long after its people left it in ruins. And yet it saddened me, that a part of Haron I thought beautiful was the consequence of reanimating a corpse.

“You look...” My tongue fumbled with the words I wanted to say, either from exhaustion or disbelief, I couldn’t say for sure. “You’re... my gods. Your body looks like... it’s like you haven’t aged a day.”

One black eyebrow lifted on her forehead. “That’s what you chased me down to say? Excuse me if I don’t take that as a compliment.”

Shit, shit, shit! I was fucking this all up!

“No!” I lurched forward a half-step, afraid she would turn her back and leave me here. “No, I’m just... shocked. And I’m relieved you’re alright. Watching you throw yourself into the fight like that—” Another shudder racked my body. I wrapped my arms around myself in an attempt to disguise it as a chill, instead of fear of what could have been. “Ber’s balls, Har...Morrette. I thought I was going to watch you die out there.”

This unsettled feeling roiled my stomach to the point I thought I would puke at her feet. I would be hard-pressed to fall much lower than I already was, practically sniveling and chasing after her like this. Even worse, boots thudding across the drawbridge at my back meant there was now an audience for my shameless bumbling.

“We’ve been running halfway across the kingdom looking for you, woman!” Beolf’s gruff voice carried through the biting wind. He must have been close enough to

eavesdrop on my discovery of Haron being Morrette. “The least you could do is show a little bit of gratitude. We came all this way to find you. Prince Irin was worried sick that Gennel—”

“Spare me, Sir Rocks-For-Brains,” Morrette answered dryly. If I wasn’t trying to keep what little composure I had left, I would laugh at her nickname for him. It wasn’t nearly as charming as ‘little princeling.’ “I was not a frail, defenseless damsel that needed saving, and I have lived too many lifetimes as men and women to be put in one of your gender-bound boxes. If you cannot call me they or their, use my fucking title. I know it is too difficult a concept for someone of Respar to comprehend, but I am neither a man nor a woman by your standards.”

Beolf visibly gawked, clearly startled by the concept. He could do little more than sputter an apology under Morrette's narrowed glare. “Er, a-apologies, Prince Hilj. I meant no disrespect.”

I grimaced from second hand awkwardness just standing next to him. Morrette certainly had a way of cutting a man down at ten paces, something that carried over from her—their, I corrected in my head—time as Haron Val Toric.

“Also, you expect me to thank you for coming to help me? You’re lucky I don’t take five pounds off your shoulders at the neck for showing up here!” Morrette continued. “What kind of strategist are you, just barreling up onto a battlefield like that?”

“Well, I was hoping for the bare bones of a thanks, if you must ask,” Beolf grumbled. “Glad to see you still have all those jagged edges to scrape against.”

“Apologies for disappointing you yet again. I’m sure I will lose sleep over it.” Morrette rolled their eyes and turned to walk the rest of the way to the open gate to the Clifftombs’ inner courtyard.

I could feel my opportunity slipping away with every fall of their boot against the wood. “Wait, Princept! I need to... I want to form an alliance with you! By marriage!”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I realized they were the wrong ones to say. Morrette froze mid-stride, shoulders tall and stiff, and only the long hair brushing their waist gave any indication they were not a statue carved from pale stone. But there was something stirring beneath the smooth surface, a monster lurking just beneath the calm waters, and I was the little duckling paddling my way across, about to be eaten.

“Wouldn’t the resurrection of your kingdom be worth the alliance?” I hated the desperation that strained my voice, but I kept going anyway. “If we are bound by marital law, Respar’s resources would be yours to help rebuild Julra. And, we would be a united front against whatever could come out of the Hollows.” My arms spread wide as if trying to embrace Morrette from a distance, even as their back faced me. “Please... just take a moment, not tainted by the indignation of how other men treated you. This is me, Irin, asking you to rule our countries by my side.”

Morrette’s eyes narrowed into vicious slits over a cold shoulder. It was so tempting to let my eyes drift lower to take in all of their fiery, raging glory. Gods, they would be an amazing queen and partner. Maybe even the mother to our children. Everything I wanted was right here, just within reach.

Slowly, almost menacingly, Morrette turned on a heel to face me down again. The drawbridge may as well be the battlefield we just left behind, for how they seemed to face off against me now. Legs set shoulder-width apart, fist balled tight at their side while the other gripped the tome even harder, and a fire burning so brightly in their eyes they practically glowed. I braced myself for a through tongue-lashing, or maybe even the sharp edge of one of those swords. That show pissed off they looked.

Finally, some other emotion beyond aggression broke through Morrette's expression. They scoffed in equal parts disgust and disbelief. "I'm sure my value as good breeding stock is more appealing to you than that of a ruler on equal footing. You forget I have been alive longer than your infant country, child. I have seen everything Respar has to offer, and I would rather watch it burn to the ground than serve as any kind of figurehead."

"That is not true," I spat and jabbed my finger at them. "I may have had my preconceived notions from being raised as the ruler of it, but I threw those aside pretty quickly once I saw your side of the disparities. Since then, I did not think you were lesser than just because of your gender, either as Haron or Prince Morrette! I admire you for your contributions to the necromancer profession, and your wisdom, and your ability to hold your own in a battle even though you're reckless to a fault. The fact you cannot see that makes you just as blind by your own indignation as those narrow-minded men you compare me to! How is that fair? Am I not allowed to grow and change as a person?"

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Morrette's mouth opened as if to argue, but I kept on. "Wouldn't you rather stay and help me shape Respar? You said it yourself, we are an infant country. Julra had been a power unto its own for centuries before we ever built Respar, and I acknowledge our flaws. Change cannot happen in a day, or a year, or maybe even my lifetime. But..." The emotion clogging my throat was almost too painful to swallow. I hated the tears burning my eyes as Morrette watched me so intently, their face blank and accepting all at once. "You have shown me so much more than I could ever imagine learning as a ruler on my own. You have taught me that strength has nothing to do with gender, race or status, and everything to do with conviction and dedication to a goal. You showed me that being complacent is not the same as being neutral. And I don't want that for our countries. I want to rebuild what you lost in Julra. I want to rebuild what this land lost from Julra.

"And gods damn it all, but I fucking love you in whatever form or body you take! Because nothing on the outside matters! You have carried that same soul for decades, and it has never dulled, or wavered, or given an inch of its morals for an easier life. That is what I love, and you cannot invalidate my feelings about it!"

By the end of my rant, my chest was heaving, my lungs struggling to get enough air even as I gulped it down. My hands clenched so tightly at my sides they shook with the force and the nails cut painfully into my palms. I had to clench my jaw to keep from spewing any more of my pride out, although there was hardly any left to spill. This had to be the worst fucking love confession I've ever given. To be fair, this was the only love confession I've ever given. Tears burned my eyes, and I bit the inside of my cheek until blood flooded it in an effort to keep them from falling.

The silence that followed my passionate monologue was deafening. Crushing. I was

about two seconds from turning tail and running. The urge to find a place to dig a hole and hide in to nurse my wounded pride was almost greater than my sense of self-worth when Morrette finally spoke.

“Irin.”

Their voice was soft, but no less demanding than before. They waited for me to finally lift my head. Apparently this wasn't a conversation I got to look at the drawbridge for.

“You are not in love with me,” Morrette began. My mouth dropped right open in a counterargument, but they raised their hand palm-out to ward it off. “You love the idea of me. You love the potential I represent as a royal and skilled practitioner. The person you knew me as, Haron? She is dead. That person is gone. She never even existed, really.”

My head shook before they even finished talking. “That's not true. I know my heart, Morrette. Yes, you look and sound differently. But the same soul that I knew as Haron is still in there,” I jabbed my finger in their direction, “and that is what I love! The fact you kept that spirit alive for so long and never gave up or lost sight of your goal, that is what defines you. Your loyalty to those you care about goes beyond the body you inhabit, Morrette, and I respect the hell out of you for that.

“I understand if you want nothing to do with me, I really do. I failed you when I should have listened and at least investigated more about Gennel when you raised your suspicions. I let my misconceptions color your capabilities as a spellcaster. And I allowed my fear of what could happen blind my ability to make the right choice, to trust your judgement. But...” Morrette may as well wrapped a hand around my throat for how tight it felt now. “I'm willing to spend the rest of my life making it up to you. I just... I can't let you go. I won't let you go.”

My eyes refused to leave Morrette's now. Even when my pride was thrown at their feet to stomp on. Even if I stared rejection right in the face. Morrette didn't think I knew their character, but I did. I knew the bravery and loyalty, the strength and passion that lay in that soul. Man or woman, whoever or whatever Morrette was, I wanted in my life for as long as I could have them. Braced as I was for them to shoot me down, I almost fell on my ass regardless when a glorious smile suddenly stretched Morrette's lips. It was like Wira herself smiled at me—with that long black hair whipping in the salty sea breeze—beautiful and terrifying and rewarding all wrapped together. Their blue eyes softened at the edges, and I think I saw a gentler side of Morrette Hilj. A side that not many others have seen, or are alive to talk about it.

Then, they were moving toward me, their steps slow and measured as if trying to not spook a wild animal. A slim, long-fingered hand reached out and cupped the side of my face with a gentleness I didn't expect. I knew my cheeks were rough with stubble, unable to shave on my mad dash to Julra, but they didn't seem to mind as their palm pressed against my jaw.

"Irin," Morrette began, and already I could hear the rejection in their voice. It was going to be brutally painful this close to them. My eyes shut to brace for the next blow to my heart. "I hear you, and your feelings are valid. But..." That pause threatened to crush my chest with the weight of it. "I hope that we can work together to bring my people home and resurrect Julra. Maybe from there, we can assess together if our feelings are the same. Despite how I appear to you now, I have ninety years of life over yours. Who knows, you may get tired of me and my old ways."

There it was. That glimmer of sharp humor I thought died with Haron. I snapped my eyes open, looking up just in time to see Morrette's eyes crinkle at the corners with mirth. Their hand still rested against my cheek, gently brushing the wind-bitten skin with the pad of their thumb.

But they continued. "I have my goals, as you said before. I have only taken the first

step to revive my country. But I feel... I feel like I will be sidetracked if I allow myself to be whisked away to be a queen in Respar. All I can offer you is the friendship of one ruler to another, with the hope that one day those feelings will grow to match yours. You do not deserve the burden of waiting for me to catch up, so I wish you would find someone who—”

“Oh, fuck right off with that!” I stepped back out of Morrette’s grasp. If anyone from my buttoned-up council were here to witness me talking like this to another royal, they would likely faint from shock. “I’m not letting you think you can get off the hook by pushing me into a relationship with someone else! If I’m going to turn around and walk off this drawbridge today, it’s with the promise I’m coming back here someday with a gods-damn ring and wedding parade!

“If that’s not something you can live with, you tell me right now you hate my fucking guts and never wish to see me again. And you better fucking mean it, because I can tell if you lie.”

Our eyes locked, mine prickling with the threat of tears I refused to shed. Morrette seemed to take my measure, waiting to see if I would fold under the weight of my promise. The joke was on them. I wasn't going to let this go even if my life depended on it. They could hold a sword to my throat and I would still give the same answer. So, I was considerably shocked when a laugh burst from them, so much so I startled a bit and almost slipped from Morrette's hand still on my cheek. It was the same hearty laugh they had as Haron, coming from deep in their chest. They threw their head back with the force of it, the untethered sound completely melting me from the inside out, my courage now a puddle at my feet.

“That is an impressive proposal, little princeling.” Morrette pulled their hand back to wipe tears from their eyes with the back of a finger. Little chuckles still shook their chest as they met my stubborn stare with one of fondness. “I look forward to the day you kick down my doors with your ring and wedding party. Until then, Julra will be

your ally, should you ever need our support.” Their head turned to the east, the light hitting their collar just right to flash bright silver in the waning light. “I fear this is only the beginning of what Golath’s remaining royalty has in store for us.”

Their eyes were set on the icy horizon, but mine would not waver from their striking profile. I vow I would do whatever Morrette Hilj asks of me. I only hoped they would ask.

Epilogue

Morrette- 141st year of Ber's Reign, beginning of the Thaw

I waited patiently at the drawbridge entrance that had not been raised since Irin returned to Gilamorst over three months ago. Maybe part of me wished for him to climb over the hills again, with the wedding parade he’d threatened to bring and an engagement ring clutched in his fist. We’d continued to send letters since our parting... he sketched a new design for the ring at the bottom of every single one. He even sent over some clothes in the likeness of what Julran fashion used to be, based on his research. It was a thoughtful gift, one that almost brought tears to my eyes when I pulled a form-fitting tunic from its wrapping paper. It looked just like the one I wore in the portrait that hung in the Necromancy Guild, in the Hilj house colors of deep blue and silver. Our scrying sessions were less sparse than the letters, perhaps once a moon phase, and they had quickly become the most anticipated days in my otherwise busy life.

It was a slow process on his side, reconstructing an entire country’s belief of women being lesser than men. From what Irin told me of his efforts, more of the spellcaster guilds' membership included women in their rosters now, and because of the growing workforce more families were being lifted from poverty and able to support children that would have been sent to the orphanage otherwise. Likewise, more children were also being reclaimed or adopted from said orphanage, now that wealth was more

equally distributed between social classes. He had also created a scholarship, named after Trisne Pid, to send young women on the cusp of adulthood for internships in the City of Scholars, to study in the Covenant Library with researchers they are paired with in their fields of interest. It had a twofold purpose, to get women of marriageable age out of Gilamorst to experience more of the world than what was previously offered, and provide them employable experience should they decide to leave the City of Scholars after their appointed year of interning. Truly, it was a revolutionary idea for Respar, one that I was immensely proud of Irin for spearheading.

Fortunately, the search for Julran refugees willing to move back to their motherland was moving much faster than the updating of Resparian social expectations. I was anticipating the first group—two hundred and three at last count during our lastscrying—to arrive within the next couple of days. It had been a slow process rebuilding the surrounding homes, with just me and the undead I raised to enlist some help, but I refused to have the people I was welcoming to Julra have to rebuild it all themselves. In my mind, it was like inviting guests to my home and expecting them to clean their own room and cook their own meals.

Irin calls me stubborn. I asked if he expected any less, to which he just laughed at me.

My hope was to have anyone who claimed Julran lineage, whether they were pure or of mixed blood, to feel comfortable enough to stay in Julra and breathe new life into this frigid land. From the pamphlets I drafted and sent to be mass-produced in Respar, I gave no rose-colored description of possible hardships. Still, the fact that so many still wanted to join me after my warning warmed my heart.

Now, I stood at the entrance to the Clifftombs and waited for a different guest. One that was no less special, but touching in a different way.

She was right on time, the morning sun barely free from the horizon, when her kistral came into view over a rolling hill. Silver-and-black hair, previously bound in

a braid tossed over her shoulder, was very disheveled from the rowdy sea breeze playing with it. She didn't even seem to acknowledge her wild appearance, her whole face lighting up at seeing me waiting for her at the Clifftombs entrance. The woman barely even let the kistral stop before jumping off its back. She looked to be at least in her sixties, but acted as spry as a young adult as she openly gawked at me.

"My gods, it's really you!" She stumbled forward, catching my outstretched hand as more of a brace than a gesture of introduction. A large, bulky leather satchel was slung across her back and threw her off-balance even more. "You look almost exactly as the artists portrayed you in Father's research. I can't even... Father would have..." Her voice choked off on a tight chuckle, and she hastily wiped her eyes. "How amazing to meet you in person like this!"

A warm smile lit my face. My head bowed as far as the Julran collar would allow, wrapped as it was around my neck and shoulders. The cool press of metal was a comfort to me now, something I didn't realize I missed until I returned to my original body. "It is a pleasure to meet you as well. Scholar Janna Henash, correct?"

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“Wend-Henash, yes,” she answered breathlessly. “I choose to honor Father’s memory by keeping his surname with my married name for research publications.”

“That is a noble way to commemorate him. Yuret was a brilliant and compassionate scholar, and his research of Julra was a delight to read.”

Janna’s mouth gaped open and shut like a fish gasping for air. “Wha... what? Did you meet him? How? Father died almost forty years ago! Unless...” Her expression turned sly. “You are full of secrets, aren’t you?”

At that, I laugh heartily. “I’m sure he is rolling in his grave to know I had, in fact, met him while he was alive.”

“I’m shocked you were able to manage that without his knowing. He was fortunate—or maybe unfortunate—enough to be a truthsayer. He was very sensitive to lies and deception. I think that’s what made him perfect for interviewing refugees from Julra for his book.”

My lips twisted to a more mischievous smirk. “I was aware. Yuret was a bit of a... test of my own skill, so to speak. But please, join me inside. It is too cold to stay out here.”

Janna nodded and hustled to fall in step beside me, her much shorter stature making it a bit of a challenge to match my long-legged stride as she pulled her mount along. “To think, I’m walking with the Prince of Morrette Hilj! I feel like I’ve known you my whole life, watching Father write ‘The Tragic History of Julra’ about you and your people. Thank you so much for this opportunity to speak with you at length for the

second edition.”

“I am grateful to be included in your research.” I tilted my head to the side to take in her wide-eyed stare. “May I ask why you did not want to make a second volume, instead of just a second edition of your father’s book?”

Janna smiled back, but her hazel eyes were watery again. Coupled with the inky blue-black hair—now streaked with white with her age—and mid-toned skin covered in freckles, the marks of a Julran ancestor were obvious. I saw those parts of Sinna in Janna, in the way she wrinkled her nose when she laughed and the deep dimples when she smiled. Parts that her brother Olin would have shared, were he still alive. It warmed my heart to see that the Val Toric line carried on with her.

“That book is my father’s legacy,” Janna explained. “I would rather add onto it, then overshadow it with my own account of the history of Julra. His work has paved so many avenues for the City of Scholars and the country of Respar beyond his wildest dreams, both in historical research and spell-casting examination. I just... couldn’t bear to take away from that.”

“I understand what you mean.” I lifted my gaze to the ruins of the palace I was steadily rebuilding. Against the relentless beating of ocean waves and the wind, it looked formidable and resolute even as it sat in shambles. “I hope we can build a new future together, Scholar. Until then, I am happy to answer anything you’d like to know about me and my country.”

Janna’s joy was palpable, her eyes shining as she looked up at me like I was some kind of god. “This is so exciting! Definitely the most anticipated release the City has ever seen! King Irin has already requested his own copy of the second edition! He has been so much more supportive of the Covenant Library and its research since taking the throne. We’ve had such a huge influx of new researchers hoping to intern with us! And his personal funding has helped with some much-needed repairs and expansions to the Library!”

“I’m happy to hear that,” I answered. “Perhaps you can help me deter him from marriage with my more gruesome war stories. Or help him spend so much money he can't afford a wedding.”

My tone was dry, but it had Janna cackling so hard she bent in half. I joined in, and the happy sounds bounced pleasantly off the stone wall of the Clifftombs. It had been a long time since anything beyond the sounds of battle or rolling waves of the sea hitting the cliffs filled the chilly air.

Janna was wiping tears from her eyes by the time we managed to compose ourselves. We stepped off the long drawbridge and through the open gate into courtyard, now cleared out with trimmed wiranblood bushes lining a grey cobblestone path to the castle's entrance. “With how fervently he devoured every document we had on Julra and your personal history, I doubt he will be that easy to scare off.”

“Yes, that is one of his more admirable qualities,” I agreed. “So, tell me more about your father, Janna. I want to know all about the man who spent his life studying mine.”