



Kept

Author: *Amy Pennza*

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Description: Reunited with my men, I'm ready to take on the darkness that's spreading across the land. But the darkness is spreading in me too, and I'm not sure I'm strong enough to stop it. With the future itself on the line, I've got to harness my new powers and confront Midian and his demons head on. As kingdoms clash and magical barriers come down, I'm prepared to fight to save everything I hold dear. I'm ready for the ultimate battle.

The question is, am I ready for the ultimate sacrifice?

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Chapter One

GIVEN

“You... Evil...”

My brother’s last words echoed in my mind as I watched the sun rise over Lar Katerin.

The Deepnight twinkled overhead like a giant had drawn a curtain of perpetual twilight across the sky. Still, the sun shone through, bathing the vampire capital in muted but cheery light. Snow sparkled on rooftops, and curls of smoke drifted from thousands of chimneys. On any other day, I would have basked in the winter sun as I watched the city come alive.

But not this day. Today was for death, not life. Laurent was due to fetch me within the hour, and together we would cross the Rift and attend my brother Rolund’s funeral.

Against my will, my gaze was drawn to my hands curled around the balcony railing. As I had so many times over the past four days, I expected to see blood. When I closed my eyes, I saw Rolund’s blue eyes wide with shock and disbelief as he lifted his gaze from the sword I’d thrust into his belly.

Kinslayer. King killer. Already, the whispers raced across Ter Isir. Rumors swirled, linking me to Rolund’s death. No one could prove I killed him. After all, Sithistrans didn’t believe in farseeing.

At least, they weren't supposed to. But that hadn't stopped the whispers. Jordan of Twyl had mages embedded in the Towers of the Mir. According to their reports, the Brotherhood believed I was responsible for assassinating Rolund. A sentry swore he'd heard a woman's voice drifting from the king's tent the night my brother died. A southern knight claimed he'd seen the tent's flap move of its own accord. By the time Rolund's men checked on him, my brother lay cold on the ground with a gaping wound in his gut and no murder weapon in sight.

And now Sithistra had no king—and no heir.

Unless, of course, the Brotherhood chose me to succeed my brother. I was Baylen of Sithistra's daughter. Half human. Born a royal princess of the South. But no woman had ever ruled the southern kingdom. And even if the Brotherhood was willing to overlook my sex, they would never turn a blind eye to my vampire blood.

And now I knew I wasn't exactly a vampire, either. In the eyes of the Brotherhood, I was an abomination.

“You... Evil...”

I had no way of knowing what Rolund meant. If I had to guess, he referred to the prophecy. The savior of the realm will be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift. The mages believed my actions—and inactions—could steer the prophecy's outcome, leaving the cryptic words open to interpretation—and political maneuvering. But Rolund and the Brotherhood were convinced I had to perish in the Rift to break a curse my father brought down on Sithistra when he married my elven-born mother. Not content with letting magic run its course, Rolund had attempted to carry out the prophecy the night I appeared in his camp.

I'd defended myself, my hand filling with Avenor's sword when I needed it most. The sword's unexpected appearance was a comfort.

But Rolund's words still plagued me. Because I worried he was right—not about the prophecy, but about an entirely different kind of evil.

Midian's evil, which the demon king had force-fed me after I foolishly tried to kill him in Vai Seren. I hadn't heard his voice since Varick and I fled the Thicket, but I feared that could change at any moment. Like Rolund's, Midian's last words to me ran on a permanent loop in my mind. "Now I'm inside you, child. And this way, I won't ever have to leave."

The demon king was a liar. He might have lied about that, too. But I couldn't afford to assume I was free from his influence. There is power in blood.

I knew it to be true. But what if mine was tainted beyond repair? If Midian was truly inside me, he might be able to take control of me the same way he'd taken over Avenor. The demon king had fed me intrusive, twisted thoughts when Varick and I ran from Vai Seren. Midian had tempted me with the promise of unimaginable power. He'd tried to convince me to take Avenor's sword and seize all of Ter Isir for myself.

And the terrifying thing was, if Varick hadn't shaken me from my trance, I might have succumbed to Midian's sway.

What if it happened again? I looked at the city...and then down at the courtyard far below the balcony. If the demon king broke into my head again, would I be able to fight him off? And if I couldn't, would I have the presence of mind—and the courage—to do what needed to be done? Midian wanted out of Eldenvalla. If we were linked by blood, he might be able to enter my mind.

And then he'd have my body, too.

"Found you."

I turned as Laurent stepped onto the balcony. He was resplendent in head-to-toe black, the crown of Nor Doru nestled among the dark waves of his hair. Night-blooming roses chased around the crown's base, the blooms' centers studded with bloodstones. The severe colors suited my husband, who could be quite severe when he wanted to be. And when he wasn't severe, he was charming and sensual. There was no middle ground with Laurent.

He was overtly sensual now, pausing and raking his silver gaze down my body. "That's a beautiful gown. My compliments to the designer."

"I'll let him know you like it," I said, playing his game. He designed all my dresses, wrapping me in silk and velvet according to his whims. It was an unusual hobby for a king, but then my husband was no ordinary ruler.

He walked to the railing. "I thought we agreed you wouldn't stand out here. And you're supposed to keep one of your ladies with you."

"I know," I said evenly. After I stumbled into Rolund's camp, Laurent, Varick, and I had agreed I should never be alone—at least until I got control of my magic. Twice now, I had left my body while farseeing and ended up in the wrong destination. The first time, I'd been fortunate to land at Laurent's feet. But the second, I'd somehow pulled parts of my brother's camp into Laurent's bedchamber. Then I'd stumbled into the Sithistran camp and killed Rolund.

But I'd also been temporarily locked out of my body. So I was stuck with a babysitter in case it happened again.

Laurent's eyes were sharp as he took my hand from the railing and lifted it to his lips. "I didn't see any of your ladies in your room just now. Did you hide them somewhere, or are you hiding something from me?"

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My heart sped up. “I’m not—” I clamped my mouth shut. Was I hiding something? It was unwise to lie to him. Somehow, I’d ended up with two males who could scent falsehoods. I was getting more skilled at evasion, but I’d already hesitated too long for it to be effective. “I won’t come out here alone again,” I said finally.

Laurent’s expression was inscrutable as he brushed his lips over my knuckles. “You’re cold.”

“It’s winter.”

He kept my hand near his lips as he studied me. “You’re nervous about crossing the Rift.”

“Aren’t you?” A rider had delivered the invitation to Rolund’s funeral two days ago. Elissa, my brother’s First Queen, had penned the missive herself, claiming she wished to bury the hostility between our two kingdoms. To guarantee our safe passage across the Rift, the Sithistrans would lay their swords along the edge of the chasm. Nor Doruvian knights who returned from patrolling the Rift reported that the Green Guards had constructed Rolund’s funeral pyre well away from the edge. Laurent interpreted this as another assurance of peace. When the Nor Doruvian party crossed the Rift, we would stand between the Sithistrans and their weapons.

The catch was that our knights were also required to leave their weapons behind. I feared we were walking into a trap.

Laurent lowered my hand but kept it, his touch and penetrating gaze raising goosebumps on my skin. “I dislike standing on Sithistran soil. The sun is hot and the

people are boring. But I don't fear the South. Not with Varick leading my army."

My gut twisted. "It's Varick and your army I worry about. My actions put all of Nor Doru in peril."

Silver eyes gleamed. "Spoken like a queen. I chose well."

I shook my head. "You don't understand. It was a mistake to kill Rolund. The Brotherhood blames me."

"The Brotherhood isn't Sithistra. The South is now leaderless. Leaderless countries are unlikely to start wars." He shrugged. "The Brotherhood is powerful, but the brothers aren't kings. And religious men make poor soldiers."

"You're a religious man."

He smiled wide enough to show his fangs. "I'm not a man at all, princess. And I would have made a terrible soldier." Mischievousness shone in his eyes. "I am very bad at following rules." He tugged me toward the bedchamber. "Come. I brought you something."

My heartbeat picked up as I let him pull me inside. Before we wed, he called me "princess" because it was my title. Now, he used it when he wanted to be wicked. "We should go downstairs," I said. "The knights—"

"Will wait for us." He led me to the vanity table where my ladies styled my hair. A bundle of silk sat atop the polished surface. Laurent lifted it and pulled the silk away, revealing a crown. It was sized for a woman, although it was a far cry from the delicate circlet he'd placed on my head during our wedding rite.

"It was my mother's," he said, setting the silk aside and turning the crown in his

hands. It was lovely, but its beauty was dark and slightly unsettling. Black thorns twisted into elegant points. Small bloodstones winked among the tangles. There were no roses.

I touched one of the thorns. Pain shot through my finger, and a bead of blood appeared on my fingertip.

Faster than I could track, Laurent snagged my finger and sucked it into his mouth. Our eyes held as he sucked, drawing more blood from the wound before sealing it.

Too late, I remembered he had no business feeding from me. With a gasp, I pulled my finger from his mouth. “You can’t! It’s too dangerous.”

He ignored my protest and placed the crown on my head. “My mother had this made when my father chose her as his bride. The priestesses from the Wastes chanted rites as it was cast. My mother said if she was forced to wed a king, she would wear her own crown.” He turned me toward the mirror and stood behind me with his hands on my shoulders. “Her name was Sorina. She would have liked you.”

I gazed into the mirror and caught my breath. Slowly, the thorns twisted, the metal coming alive and rearranging itself. The bloodstones glittered and winked as the sensual dance unfolded. When the thorns rested at last, the crown’s points appeared sharper. Beautiful but undeniably sinister.

Laurent’s eyes met mine in the mirror, his silver irises glittering as brightly as the bloodstones in our crowns. He slid his hand from my shoulder to my throat. As he circled it, his rings caught the light. He put his lips next to my ear. “You are a vampire queen. My queen. And you’re not afraid of anything.”

In the mirror, my lips parted.

He squeezed my throat—just enough to make my heart trip in my chest. His breath coasted over my ear. “Turn around and grip the table. I have something else to show you.”

“Laurent...”

“Do as I say.”

He was in a mood. There was no arguing with him when he was like this—and I wasn’t sure I wanted to. Our tentative truce endured. We were polite to each other outside the bedroom. In the privacy of the bedchamber—and his bed—we put our differences aside. He’d lied to me. He’d tricked me into marrying him, and he’d planned to kill my child. He’d had his reasons. I didn’t agree with them, but I understood them. He’d been tangled up in the prophecy and desperate to save Nor Doru. On some level, I forgave him. But I couldn’t bring myself to trust him. Or love him.

But I wanted him. All the time. At inconvenient times. I wanted him when I didn’t want to. I dared any female—or male, for that matter—to resist my husband.

Heart thumping painfully, I turned around.

“Grip the table,” he reminded me softly.

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I obeyed, the glass bottles behind me trembling.

Laurent sank to his knees. The post in his ear flashed as he lifted my heavy skirts and held them bunched at my hip with one hand. With his other, he ripped my lacy drawers from my body.

“Laurent!” I clutched at the table.

He flung the ruined garment aside. “Varick ordered you not to wear these.”

“Today is different,” I gasped as Laurent pressed his mouth between my thighs. The bottles clinked, and I steadied myself with a hand on his shoulder. “We sh-shouldn’t do this.”

He spread my pussy open with his thumb and forefinger. “Why not? Widen your stance.” He didn’t wait for me to comply. Just spread me open and licked up my center.

“My brother is dead.” I bit my lip so I wouldn’t moan. This was so wrong. I curled my fingers into Laurent’s shoulder, fully intending to shove him away. But I ended up pulling him closer.

“And you’re alive,” he said, flicking his tongue over my clit. “Spread your legs so I can eat your cunt.”

With a moan that was equal parts shame and arousal, I complied. He growled his approval and buried his face in my sex, sucking at my clit and rubbing his tongue ring

all around the aching bud. Breasts heaving, I squeezed the edge of the table and watched his head move between my thighs. My gown was going to cause a scandal on the other side of the Rift. The style was classic Nor Doruvian, with a plunging neckline that revealed the sides of my breasts. The seamstress had inserted a black, sheer panel in deference to the occasion, but the fabric did little to hide my curves. Which was probably why Laurent had chosen it.

He worked my pussy hard, stroking his tongue over my clit. He went about his feast loudly, licking and sucking like he meant to devour me. The table rocked. His stubble scraped my thighs and my swollen, sodden folds. He circled my clit before licking down to my opening, where he speared me with his tongue, fucking it into me until I was shaking with need.

Absently, I waited for him to notice I'd complied with another of Varick's orders. But then he thrust his tongue deep and fluttered it, his tongue ring fluttering inside me too.

"I'm going to come," I said breathlessly.

"Not yet."

"Please."

He pulled back and pushed two fingers inside me. "I said not yet."

My head tipped backward as I hovered on the edge of a powerful orgasm. Sweat prickled under my arms and around my hairline. I could feel moisture pooling and then seeping from me as he fingered me. My heart raced, and I spread my legs wider, my hips thrusting to drive his fingers deeper.

"Look at me," he ordered.

Panting, I lowered my head.

He locked gazes with me, a king on his knees with his fingers buried in my pussy and his mouth smeared with my desire. He rubbed a firm thumb over my clit as he spoke in the deep, raspy voice he used when he prayed to the gods. “I think you’ve forgotten who you are. So allow me to remind you.” He worked another finger inside me. “And don’t you dare come until I say.”

My mouth hung open, breathy moans spilling from my lips.

He curled a finger inside me, hitting a spot only he seemed able to find. White-hot lust spiked, and I sobbed as I tried to hold back my release.

“You,” he said, “are Given of Nor Doru and Eldenvalla. Daughter of one king. Sister to another. Wife to a third. Queen of two kingdoms. Farseer. Wielder of Avenor’s sword. You have fire in your hand.” He thrust harder, finger-fucking me as his eyes held mine prisoner. “You have nothing to fear from the South...or anyone else. You’re strong and gorgeous, and you’re going to cross the Rift and show them exactly who you are.” He moved his thumb over my clit, rubbing my slippery flesh in quick circles as his voice dipped to a growl. “They will look upon you and tremble. No one fucks with the elven-born Queen of the North.”

The table creaked under my grip. I panted, bliss rushing toward me from all sides.

“Now come for me, my lady,” he said, and he fastened his mouth over my clit and sucked hard.

I flew to pieces, my body shattering as I screamed. Dimly, I was aware of several things at once. My nails digging into his shoulder. The table shuddering. My hips grinding into his face. I rode his tongue until I grew too sensitive, and then I pushed clumsily at his head.

He surged to his feet, grabbed my chin, and pulled me into a kiss every bit as passionate as the one he'd just given my sex. My cheeks heated as I tasted myself on his lips, and I whimpered into his mouth as he slid a hand around my hip and squeezed my ass.

After a few breathless moments, he released me and stepped back, letting my skirts drop to my feet. Eyes glittering, he sucked the last of me off his fingers. "I'm going to cross the Rift with the taste of your pussy in my mouth."

My face flamed. "Laurent..."

He smiled around his thumb. Then he moved in and turned me to face the mirror again.

I gasped at what I saw. A flush bloomed in my cheeks. My lips were red and bee-stung, my fangs peeking between them. My eyes glowed as if I'd just fed. I looked like the thorned crown on my head—pretty but sinister.

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“Exquisite,” Laurent said behind me. He reached up and straightened my crown, and his silver eyes seared mine in the mirror. “This is who you are. Sithistra tried to make you meek. The Brotherhood tried to kill you. Midian would exploit you.” He wrapped an arm around my waist and whispered directly into my ear. “And if you think the mages won’t do the same, you haven’t been paying attention.”

My breath caught. “And what about you?”

“Where am I standing right now?”

Behind me. I didn’t say it. Once upon a time, not too long ago, he’d been more than willing to exploit me.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

“No.”

His eyes gleamed with approval. “You’ve been laboring under the assumption that only good can defeat evil. I’m of a different mind, princess. If you’re going to go toe to toe with darkness, I think you’ve got to embrace the darkness within you.”

On top of my head, the crown shifted, the thorns slowly rearranging themselves. I held my breath as Laurent and I watched the sinuous dance in the mirror. When it stopped, Laurent met my eyes again. The mischief he displayed so often was gone, replaced with a dead seriousness that lifted the hair on my nape.

“You won’t win this battle with Midian by throwing yourself off that balcony,

Given.”

My heart sped up. I didn’t resist as he turned me to face him, and I held my breath as he nicked his thumb on his fang and pressed it between my lips. His blood sizzled on my tongue, the taste just as intoxicating as the first time.

His eyes glowed. “I was sixteen years old when I vowed to have Varick’s back. To my shame, I haven’t always lived up to that vow. I’m not perfect. But I like to think I’m capable of correcting my mistakes. I have his back now”—he pressed his thumb firmly against my tongue—“and I have yours. Levu.”

As it had during our wedding rite, his magic wrapped tightly around me and squeezed. It stole my breath before fading, the sensation—and his vow—settling under my skin. Wonder spread through me. For all his faults, Laurent took his role as a priest seriously. He wouldn’t make a blood vow unless he meant it.

He pulled his thumb away. “I don’t always agree with Jordan of Twyl, but I believe he’s right about one thing. Everything is connected. The Brotherhood is its own brand of darkness. The kind that hides behind light and lies about it. Elissa might have penned that invitation, but you can bet Crasor handed her the quill. He wanted to see if you would show up today, or if you’d huddle on your side of the Rift, meek and cowed like he expects.” Laurent’s silver gaze grew more penetrating. “Like everyone expects,” he added softly. “And always has.”

“Including you.” I made it a statement.

He took my hand again and lifted it to his lips. “As I said, I’m not afraid to correct my mistakes. I like to think it’s one of my very best traits.”

Against my will, a smile pulled at my lips. “So modest.”

“That’s not one of them.”

The smile broke through my defenses.

He bit my middle knuckle lightly, that alluring wickedness dancing in his eyes once more. “Come, my queen. Let’s go show our enemy something unexpected.”

Chapter Two

VARICK

Laurent was late, and it was doing nothing to improve my mood.

I slapped my gloves against my palm as I stood on the edge of the Serenity Tower’s snowy courtyard and watched my knights, Jordan of Twyl, and several priests from the Sanctum prepare to depart for the Rift.

“Let me do that,” Petru snapped, his bloodstained beard swinging as he shoved a squire away from a horse and began adjusting the saddle’s stirrups with gnarled hands.

The High Priest was a notoriously poor horseman. However, tradition demanded he accompany the crown on state visits. Which meant the entire party could look forward to listening to Petru bitch for the duration of the hour-long ride to the Rift.

Thwack. I slapped my gloves into my palm.

Jordan of Twyl stood a distance away, his hands extended over a brazier. He’d exchanged the gray robes of the Brotherhood for the leather armor worn by the mages of Wesyfedd.

Thwack.

Nearby, the castle blacksmith labored in the open doorway of his workshop, the rhythmic, jarring clank of his hammer spilling into the yard. The sound was tedious.

Thwack.

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My knight captains shot me wary looks as they directed squires and men-at-arms.

A sigh built in my chest. I owed both males an apology after spending the morning biting their heads off. It wasn't their fault Laurent was being stupid by accepting Queen Elissa's invitation.

There was a stir near the side door that led into the palace, and then the stupid male in question strode into the courtyard, his heavy black mantle swirling around his long legs.

He spotted me and smiled as he crossed the yard.

Thwack. The leather of my gloves stung my palm.

Laurent's smile grew, his fangs bright white and needle-sharp. The healing puncture wounds in my shoulder reminded me just how sharp those fangs were—and how difficult it was to change Laurent's mind when he'd settled on doing something.

Like crossing the fucking Rift without weapons.

All eyes turned toward us as he reached me. "General," he said, inclining his head and setting the bloodstones in his crown winking in the morning sunlight. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Lie," I said in his mind.

Silver eyes flashed with amusement—and challenge. "Your men are ready to

depart?”

“For these past two hours, Your Grace,” I said smoothly.

“And you’ve instructed them to leave their swords on our side of the Rift?”

“Just as you ordered, sir.”

A dark brow went up. “No weapons will cross the Bleak Pass this day?”

“That’s what I said.”

He pitched his voice low, his lips barely moving as he held my gaze. “Now who’s lying?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to.” I slapped my gloves against my palm. “Your Grace,” I added aloud.

His eyes flashed. “Walk with me, Lord Varick.” He turned and strode away. With a muffled curse, I followed, well aware that every pair of eyes in the courtyard followed too.

Laurent rounded the corner of the blacksmith’s workshop. He stopped in the shadow of the small building’s tiled roof and faced me. “You’re still angry.”

The blacksmith’s hammer struck sharp, metallic beats behind us.

I stepped into Laurent, forcing him to tip his head back to meet my gaze. My breastplate brushed the fur on his mantle. “This is a fool’s errand.”

“Oh, is it? I wouldn’t know. If only you weren’t so shy about sharing your opinions,

General.”

My growl rumbled between us. “If you don’t want my opinions, find someone else to lead your army.”

He dropped his gaze to my mouth. “I don’t want anyone else.”

My dick tightened. Fighting with him made me want to fuck him, but we’d been too busy meeting with the Council for the latter. The furious kiss we’d shared last night didn’t count. We’d both walked away bleeding and unsatisfied, and we’d spent a tense night in bed with Given sleeping fitfully between us.

“I want you inside me,” he murmured now.

I looked left and right, then grabbed his mantle and shoved him against the wall of the blacksmith’s shop. “Damn you, Laurent, we have bigger problems than the South. Let the humans burn their king. We don’t need to see it.”

“Yes, we do.”

I wanted to shake sense into him. “This isn’t one of your games.”

“That is exactly what it is.” His silver irises were as clear as the winter sky above us. “Politics is a game, Varick.”

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“This isn’t politics,” I said, fear and frustration twisting through me. “It’s a trap.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Laurent—”

“We walk a tightrope today,” he said. “I need to know where Sithistra stands. I have to see it for myself, because I don’t trust Jordan of Twyl’s spies to tell me. The Brotherhood may still want Given dead. If that’s the case, I need to make them afraid to strike. On the other hand, it’s possible the Brotherhood has been neutered by Rolund’s death.” Laurent’s eyes gleamed. “We have to hope for that, Varick, because we may very well need the humans in the days ahead.”

I stared, absorbing his words. Slowly, I loosened my grip on his mantle. Laurent was a savvier political operative than I could ever dream of being. He’d been raised by a high priestess who survived by outmaneuvering an insane husband with unlimited power. “You would use the humans?”

“I might not have a choice.” His expression turned grim. “Eldenvalla was always the biggest of the three kingdoms, in both land and population. If even a fraction of the elves survived the quakes, they’re waiting for us behind the Thicket. The Deepnight disappears by the day. If Jordan is right—and I have no reason to think he’s wrong—the forest and the canopy are tied. If the Thicket falls, the demons will spill into all of Ter Isir.”

My gut clenched. My elven blood made me stronger than most. But Midian had still worn me down. The demon king had cracked my mind open like a melon and forced

me to relive the horrors of Lar Keiren—and he'd done it all on his own.

What could a demon army do to an ungifted populace?

“Why didn't you tell me this?” I asked Laurent.

His smile was soft as he reached up and stroked my beard. “Would you have listened? You hate humans.”

I grunted. “I hate this plan.”

“And you've just made my point.” He trailed his hand down to where my woolen gambeson peeked out from my breastplate. “I want you to wear your armor when you fuck me tonight. It reminds me of all those times you'd return from patrol and wake me with your tongue in my ass.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, most of the blood in my body pumping to my cock.

“Because you couldn't wait. You needed me so bad”—his breath hitched as I slammed him hard against the wall—“that you ate my ass and fucked me in full armor.”

I shoved him again and bent my head, hovering my mouth just above his. “Will you get on your hands and knees for me?”

“Fuck, yes,” he breathed, rolling his hips.

“You'll stick it out? Finger yourself and spread that slutty hole the way I like?”

“Whatever you want, baby.” He darted his tongue out, swiping my bottom lip. “Maybe I'll ride your face.”

“You’ll ride my dick,” I corrected. “You’re good at that.” And this was dangerous. The blacksmith’s hammer was a steady beat mere steps away. Laurent and I couldn’t do this out in the open. We never crossed that line. But the line blurred now, and it was hard to remember why it existed at all.

I slanted my mouth across his and stroked my tongue deep. Just as quickly, I pulled back. “You taste like Given.”

“Mmm. She needed convincing to cross the Rift, too.” He hooked a leg around my calf and thrust his hips into mine, grinding our dicks together.

“And you used all your tricks to persuade her, I take it?”

“I used my mouth.”

“Your filthy mouth,” I muttered, then seized his jaw and kissed him again. He tasted of cinnamon and Given’s pussy, and I wanted both. The three of us hadn’t discussed how things were going to work between us. I expected discomfort. Growing pains. Laurent and I had shared women before, but never for long. There was a difference between stolen nights and a lifetime. But we’d had no opportunity for weighty conversations—not with the prophecy and the prospect of war lurking around every corner.

In training, vampires from the warrior class learned to focus only on the present. Dwelling on the past or longing for the future was at best futile and at worst a distraction that could lead to an arrow through the chest. Soldiers who kept their minds in the moment had a better chance of surviving.

I didn’t know what the future looked like, but I was determined to ensure Laurent and Given saw it. If I lived to see it, too, that would be a nice bonus. All I could do in the moment was keep them safe.

And I could fuck them. Safety. Sex. I could give them those things. The deep thinkers of the world claimed there was more to life, but I wasn't so sure. It seemed to me that most people spent their time searching for one or the other.

Laurent groaned into my mouth. He slid his leg up the back of my thigh and yanked me harder against him. His hands were everywhere. Pulling at my cloak. Tugging on my hair. He dug his fingers into my nape as he sucked on my tongue.

I pressed him harder against the wall, giving him my full weight as I reached around and found his ass. I squeezed the firm muscle in both hands and rocked his hips into mine. I couldn't feel as much of him as I wanted to with my armor between us. And I wanted to feel all of him. I wanted him naked and under me, his long legs tangled with mine. I wanted him on top of me, his smooth dick and balls warm against my stomach. I wanted him flipped over and begging, his perfect ass lifting to meet me. Wanted to push his round cheeks apart and see his perfect, waxed hole opening and closing. Watch it gasp like a hot, needy mouth desperate to swallow me.

I wanted to sink into his heat. Get wrapped up in him. Kept by him. Welcomed into his body, which was always a soul-shattering homecoming. For as long as I could remember, Laurent had been home. Maybe, if I thought about it hard enough, I could remember a time when I didn't have him to come home to. But I didn't think too hard about it, because I didn't want to remember never having him.

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“I love you,” I said in his mind, my body repeating it without words.

He deepened our kiss, stroking his tongue ring over and around my tongue—reminding me of the promise he’d made and broken and then remade when he got on his knees in his tent and begged my forgiveness.

He had it. I’d given it. I’d give him anything.

Someone coughed.

I moved on instinct, landing in front of Laurent with my dagger drawn and my fangs bared.

Artur of Lar Guna stood steps away, a mix of shock and poorly concealed disgust on his face. He was a big male—nearly as tall as a warrior, although he was nothing of the sort. He’d purchased his spurs at a young age and then used his deep pockets to climb the ranks at court. Laurent didn’t particularly like him, but Lar Guna was rich. More importantly, he was loyal. The vampire was a devout male who had protected Sorina when Nicolae would have thrown her in the Rift. Laurent had never forgotten it, and Lar Guna had sat on the Council since Laurent ascended the throne.

Laurent moved around me. All nonchalance, he straightened his mantle as if Lar Guna hadn’t just witnessed us trying to swallow each other’s faces. “Did you need something, my lord?”

A stain bloomed across Lar Guna’s bewhiskered cheeks. His fangs showed between fleshy lips as he looked between us. “The queen is anxious to leave, Your Grace. She

was wondering where you were.” His gaze flicked to me again before settling somewhere in front of Laurent’s feet. “You and the general.”

“Well, you found us,” Laurent said lightly. “You can tell my wife the general and I will be along shortly.”

I sheathed my dagger. Lar Guna tracked the movement.

“Was there something else, Artur?” Laurent asked.

Lar Guna hesitated. Just as Laurent’s expression hardened, the vampire bowed. “Nothing at all, Your Grace. I’ll deliver your message to the queen.”

“You do that.”

As Lar Guna’s footsteps faded, I realized the blacksmith’s hammer no longer fell. Heat spread over my nape. It didn’t matter if Lar Guna blabbed. The whole courtyard probably already knew how Laurent and I had spent the last few minutes.

“It doesn’t matter,” Laurent said, clearly discerning my thoughts from my expression. Anger darkened his eyes. “Fuck him. His shock was an act. Everyone knows about us.”

“Yes, but we’ve been careful. We allowed them to pretend.” We fucked in the Rose Room, where no one could hear. Laurent paid his servants a fortune to look the other way when I slept in his bed. No one mentioned that I never used my bedchamber, or that my clothes frequently littered Laurent’s floor. In public, we were a king and his general, and the people of Nor Doru went along with the fiction that we were nothing more.

Laurent looked at me now, his lips slightly swollen from my kiss. “Maybe I’m tired

of pretending.”

I felt my brows pull together. “What do you mean? You want to live...openly?”

“Would you want to?”

The question caught me off guard. Such a thing had always been impossible, so I’d never given it any thought. But if the look in Laurent’s eyes was any consideration, he’d given it plenty. “People would talk.”

“They talk anyway.”

“Not as much as they’d talk if we did that.” I shook my head as reality snuffed out any tiny spark of hope that might have flared inside me. “No. It would never work. You saw Lar Guna’s face.”

Laurent narrowed his eyes. “Would it bother you to live openly?”

I opened my mouth. Shut it. My nape grew hotter, like I’d wandered into a patch of sunlight. “No... I don’t know. Why does it matter?”

“Because it shouldn’t matter at all,” he said swiftly, the vehemence in his tone nearly knocking me back a step. He saw my surprise and stepped close, his voice softening as he grasped the edges of my cloak. “I love you, and I’m not ashamed of it. When we were younger, hiding made things exciting. Like...” He frowned as he seemed to search for the right words. “I don’t know, maybe it felt like we were getting away with something. But I don’t know if that works for me now, Varick. You are not my dirty secret. I don’t want you sitting with your knights while I sit beside Given in the Great Hall.”

“Have you mentioned this to her?” Our conversation was yet another reminder that

there were three of us in his bed now. And he was a king. Whether he liked it or not, a lot of people took a great deal of interest in his marriage—and his marriage bed.

“No,” he said, “but I think I know how she’ll respond. Given spent her whole life being bullied into hiding who she really is.” A smile touched his mouth. “And our princess is learning to appreciate the unexpected.”

“She might not appreciate us kissing in public.”

He scoffed. “Only because she won’t be able to keep her fingers off her pussy.”

“You should probably discourage her from doing that in public.”

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Laurent's smile climbed all the way up to his eyes. "General Lord Varick of Lar Keiren, was that a jest you just made? Right here next to the blacksmith's workshop?"

I grunted. Then sobered. "The Rift awaits."

He stepped back, duty settling over him. He was still Laurent, but he was more now. King and priest, an aura of dark power huddling around him. The favored of the gods. Vessel of the sacred blood. His inability to control the Deepnight wore on him. The strain was evident in the lines around his eyes and his long silences during Council meetings.

"There's something else, Your Grace," I said quietly.

Laurent's gaze sharpened as he recognized the shift between us—a door closing quietly as we stepped into the loud, bright world once more.

"What is it?" he asked.

"My knights returned from patrol just before you entered the courtyard. More gaps in the canopy opened overnight."

His mouth tightened—a reaction too subtle for anyone to notice. But I wasn't anyone. I was his, and he was mine, and I knew he believed every missing piece of the Deepnight lay crumpled at his feet.

He nodded. "Your knights have thick cloaks, General?"

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Then we depart. And may the gods go with us.”

* * *

An hour later, sweat stung my eyes as I watched the first of my knights cross the Bleak Pass.

The patrol hadn't exaggerated. Not only had the Deepnight drifted several more feet into Sithistra, but the canopy along the edge of the Nor Doruvian side was also entirely burned away. The naked sun seared the ground, baking the dirt and filling the air with a damp, wavy haze.

In the distance, the Thicket soared into the sky. Clouds stirred at the tops of the trees. The barrier was farther away than it looked. It was still too fucking close for my liking.

I looked away, my gaze settling on Laurent. He sat atop his black horse at the mouth of the Pass, his gloved hands resting on his pommel as the sun beat down upon his cloaked head. Petru and the other priests clustered behind him, their lips moving as they chanted a protection rite. I caught words here and there, but I'd never mastered the ritual language of the Sanctum. It was wholly different from the common tongue of Ter Isir, the ancient words pronounced almost entirely with fangs bared and a hiss on the roof of the mouth.

Jordan of Twyl had dismounted and stood patting his horse's nose as he observed the priests.

Beside me, Given gripped her reins in tight fingers. She gnawed her lower lip, her gaze on the small, richly dressed figures assembled around the base of the funeral

pyre on the Sithistran side of the Rift.

On my other side, one of my knight captains, Radu, spoke under his breath. “The humans outdid themselves. They must have felled every tree in the South to build that thing.”

Given spoke without turning her head. “The Lord of the Mir demands it, Captain Radu. The pyre has to be tall enough for the smoke to reach the godsrealm.”

In that case, the humans had succeeded. Rolund’s pyre stabbed at the sky like a giant, wooden tooth. The base was stacked with straw and bundles of sticks. Green Guards stood at all four corners, their torches at the ready.

As Queen Elissa promised, the Guards and the rest of the Sithistran knights had thrust their swords into the ground along the edge of the Rift. They’d left their shields, too, the wood painted the green and gold colors of the South.

But I still didn’t like it. I didn’t like this meeting or the humans or the fucking sun. I didn’t like my knights crossing the Pass on foot, their horses stuck pulling up wilted grass in Nor Doru.

And I didn’t like the fear that twisted through me as I waited to hear Midian’s voice lifting from the Rift. It made me a coward. I was honest enough with myself to admit that. I didn’t lack for courage on the battlefield. But I was accustomed to enemies I could see. Give me an opponent who bled when you cut him, and I could fight without fear. Midian’s weapons came from within my mind. The demon king wielded my own demons against me.

Given’s horse shied and tossed its head. As she struggled with the animal, I reached over and took her reins. My own horse was a battle-hardened charger, and it stood steady as I brought the smaller horse under control.

“Thank you,” Given murmured, accepting the reins.

I put my gloved hand over hers and kept my gaze on the column of knights. “Are you all right?” I asked in her head.

In my peripheral vision, she gave a shallow nod.

“Have you heard him?” I didn’t clarify which “him” I referred to. It seemed wise to avoid speaking Midian’s name, even in her mind.

A subtle shake of her head.

“I haven’t stopped loving you.”

She looked at me sharply. Her horse, already spooked by the sun and the strange environment, shied again. Which was fine, since it gave me an excuse to keep my hand where it was as I looked at my queen.

Wide blue eyes stared back at me. Her full lips parted, and her cheeks went pink. I drank her in, admiring her otherworldly beauty. How had I ever convinced myself she wasn’t elven-born? I hadn’t, of course. I’d simply refused to acknowledge the truth. My honesty, it seemed, had its limits, after all.

“I love you,” I told her again. “Did you think I might have stopped?”

She bit her lip. Looked toward Laurent.

I followed her gaze and watched him watching the knights. His handsome, haughty face was inscrutable, his lean shoulders rigid. He was beautiful—and he was enough. In my heart, I knew I could have gone the rest of my life loving only Laurent, and I wouldn’t have felt a lack. But the interesting thing about love was its capacity to expand. To grow and become something different. When you least expected it, love squirmed between the tightest, most entangled vines. It pushed you. Forced you to make room in the narrowest regions of your heart.

I turned back to Given and found her blue eyes on me once more. Her pulse fluttered in her neck. Doubts stirred in her sapphire eyes—the same eyes that had kept me sane in Vai Seren. The ones that had wept for my past. Yes, things were different now. My heart had grown.

“I love you both.” Slowly, I moved my hand to her thigh and squeezed. “You both belong to me.”

The doubt in her eyes faded, replaced with desire.

“The king is ready to cross, my lord,” Radu said gruffly.

I pulled my hand from Given’s and quickly rearranged my features as I faced the Rift. The knights had crossed. Laurent waited on foot at the mouth of the Pass, his eyes on Given and me. Petru and Jordan flanked him.

“Come, my queen,” I told Given, urging my horse forward.

The sun blazed hotter at the Pass, waves of heat shimmering in the air. It was hard to believe that just a few dozen steps behind us, snow fell in Nor Doru.

Laurent and I had planned the order of our crossing in our last Council meeting, and we quickly dismounted and arranged ourselves in the proper order. Petru went first, his black robes sweeping the ground. The irony of watching him pass from the unrelenting sun into the twinkling twilight of the Deepnight wasn’t lost on me. It was as if the canopy had become unmoored and was now drifting into Sithistra like the icebergs that crowded the uppermost regions of the Wastes.

With Petru safely across, I stepped in front of Laurent and Given, and we advanced as a group. Every fiber of my being recoiled at the idea of my king and queen crossing the Bleak Pass together. Lar Guna and the other lords of the Council had argued bitterly about it, ultimately deciding it was better to minimize the number of crossings. Laurent and Given walking the Pass separately meant me shielding them one at a time—and giving the humans more opportunities to kill me with a well-aimed arrow.

My knights watched for archers now, their crimson cloaks stirring in the breeze as they formed a living shield on the human side of the Rift. My heart pounded with every step, my senses primed for an arrow's whistle or the whisper of Midian's voice as the black void of the Rift yawned on either side of me.

But neither came, and the cool, purple twilight of the Deepnight enveloped me as I stepped onto Sithistran soil.

Immediately, knights moved into position, arranging themselves shoulder to shoulder in a circle around Laurent and Given. I stayed in front, and I led the way as we walked to the pyre. After a moment, Jordan fell in at my side.

"General," he murmured in acknowledgment.

I kept my gaze on the humans, watching for signs of an ambush. "You couldn't find a clean robe to wear?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him smile, and then he said, "The Brotherhood excommunicated me. I thought they might object to me wearing their clothes."

"They're more likely to object to learning they harbored a mage."

"I doubt they're just learning that today, my lord."

We fell silent as we neared the pyre. Nobles in fine clothes stood before it, a row of Green Guards behind them. Each nobleman was flanked by two women—wives, I assumed. Every Sithistran wore a round, mirrored pendant.

As we reached the pyre, two women and two men stepped forward.

I'd never seen Rolund's queens, but they matched the descriptions my spies had

ferried from the South. Both women were swathed in black, with sheer, black veils trailing from elaborate headpieces. The taller one was Elissa, the First Queen. She was pretty enough with reddish hair and brown eyes, but her pinched expression diminished her beauty.

The woman at her side was shorter, younger, and lovelier. Rolund's Queen Consort, Lidia, had glossy black curls and bright green eyes that tilted up at the corners and reminded me of the cats that prowled the streets of Lar Katerin.

The males were easy to identify. With his gray robes and oversize mirror pendant, the white-haired male could only be Crasor, the Prelate of the Brotherhood. The male on Elissa's left was her father, Lord Rellan Blackmun of the Meadowlands. According to Laurent's spies, Rellan had more money than the royal coffers, and he'd used his wealth to buy his daughter a crown. His graying red hair was shaved close to his head. His golden breastplate was engraved with an apple tree.

My knights fanned out, their crimson cloaks streaming to their ankles. I stepped aside, and Laurent moved forward with Given's hand in his. He'd removed his gloves and thrown his hood back, and the bloodstones in his crown winked in the muted light. He guided Given between us, and he caught my eye as he lifted her knuckles to his lips before releasing her.

With the sudden clarity of a thunderclap, I realized what he'd done. He'd maneuvered us precisely where he wanted us—and he wanted Given between us. We stood in juxtaposition to the Sithistran men with their two wives, turning the South's polygamy on its head.

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“Everyone knows about us,” he’d said outside the blacksmith’s shop. He very well could have meant the three of us. Because those rumors had flown from the moment I returned from Evelina’s wedding in Lar Keiren. The rumors were full-throated rumblings now—more than loud enough to be heard across the Rift.

The Sithistrans knew Laurent took his queen and his general to bed. Laurent almost certainly didn’t care about his own reputation, but he’d always shielded me. And he was no debaser of women. Undoubtedly, he longed to shield Given from slurs and lewd suggestions. But he couldn’t. Whether we liked it or not, our lives were public—and even more so now that Laurent was wed. My sex and warrior lineage offered some protection against the muttered insults. As a female, Given was far more vulnerable. Laurent couldn’t stop the censure that was sure to come her way.

So my dark, beautiful prince had done the next best thing. He’d placed his mother’s crown on Given’s head, and he’d surrounded his wife with the finest warriors in Ter Isir. He’d crossed the Rift with his High Priest and the Archmage of Wesyfedd.

He’d brought his queen to face the enemy who tried to kill her. Here, his actions said. Fucking dare to try it again. Perhaps more than anyone, Laurent of Nor Doru knew that perception was nearly as important as raw power. And this display would echo all the way to Beldurn.

Crasor stepped forward, his dark eyes cold as he addressed Given. “The Lord favors you, Your Grace.” He didn’t bow as was customary when recognizing a Child of Prophecy.

My hand itched to draw the dagger I wasn’t supposed to have. Crasor had plotted to

kill Given. He'd sent his spy to Lar Katerin with a solstone blade. And now he dared to stand before my queen and speak of his false god's favor.

Slowly, Given reached up and lowered her hood. A ripple went through the humans as the crown of Sorina of Nor Doru writhed on her head. Given was a study in contrasts with her pale hair and black dress. She also couldn't have looked more different from the Sithistran women with their high-necked gowns. Given's bodice was little more than a sheer panel, the curves of her high, firm breasts drawing more than one male gaze.

She waited until the crown's thorns stopped moving before responding to Crasor. "The Lord favors us all, Prelate, although some might claim I've fallen out of his favor."

Crasor's mouth tightened. His eyes moved to me.

"Your god can keep his favor," I said. "I've never had a use for it."

A gasp went up among the human nobles. Several of the women clutched the mirrors on their chests. The Green Guards shifted their feet.

Elissa spoke over the tension, her gaze on Laurent. "We heard you were injured, Your Grace. My ladies prayed for your swift recovery."

At once, the crowd quieted, every pair of eyes going to Laurent.

He smiled. "Your intelligence was mistaken, Your Grace," he said silkily. "However, I do appreciate the prayers."

The look in Elissa's eyes was sharp enough to cut glass.

Lord Rellan cleared his throat. “We must also congratulate you on your marriage, King Laurent.”

“Thank you.” Laurent waited a beat, then said, “Forgive me, but my memory is notoriously unreliable when it comes to human houses. Remind me who you are again?”

Two spots of color appeared high on Rellan’s cheeks. “Lord Rellan Blackmun of the Meadowlands.”

“Ah, yes, of course!” Laurent gestured to Rellan’s breastplate. “The fruit farmers. Tell me, my lord, how is the harvest looking this year?”

Rellan turned redder. His hand went to his waist, as if he reached for a sword that wasn’t there.

“Father,” Elissa said quietly. The Green Guards stirred. My knights remained totally still. Watchful. The Nor Doruvian side of the standoff was a solid, motionless wall. Their stillness was a carryover from ancient times, when the Rift didn’t gouge the land and Nor Doruvians hunted humans freely. We no longer hunted, but the instinct to focus on our prey remained.

The thorns in Given’s crown moved, twisting and reshaping themselves in a sinuous dance. Crasor touched the mirror on his breast and spoke under his breath. “Lord preserve us.”

“Elissa,” Given said suddenly. Her voice softened as she held the First Queen’s gaze. “My sincere condolences on your losses. I know you loved my brother, and...”

Elissa lifted her chin.

Given's voice went even softer. "No mother should have to bury her child. I loved Cathrin, as I love you."

A slight breeze stirred, tugging at Crasor's robes and the knights' crimson and green cloaks.

When Elissa said nothing, Given turned to Lidia. "My condolences to you, too, Lidia."

Lidia nodded, her green eyes warming. "Thank you, Given. And condolences to you, of course." She drew a deep breath. "We've missed you at court. It's been dreadfully boring without you and—"

"Lidia," Elissa said sharply.

The Queen Consort snapped her mouth shut. Her black lashes swept her cheeks as she bowed her head, a little frown appearing between her dark brows.

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Elissa stared hard at Given. “I invited you here out of respect for my husband. That is all I have to say to you.” She turned to Crasor. “Prelate, please begin the service.”

Crasor faced the pyre. The lords and ladies of Sithistra did the same. The Green Guards stayed facing forward, their eyes locked on my knights. Distrust and tension were thick in the air as the Green Guards positioned at the corners of the pyre touched their torches to the bundles of wood.

As flames crackled, Crasor lifted his hands to the sky. “Oh, Lord of the Mir, we beseech you to receive the soul of your servant, Rolund of Sithistra. King of the Holy Kingdom of Sithistra. Devoted husband to Elissa and Lidia. Beloved son of Baylen and Amantha. Father to Cathrin and twelve others you saw fit to call home early.”

Beside me, Given looked toward Elissa. The First Queen stood ramrod straight, her black veil sweeping nearly to the ground.

My shoulder brushed Given. I slipped my hand into hers and spoke in her mind. “You showed her kindness. Her hatred is a choice, as well as a weakness. She can’t direct her disappointments toward their proper targets, so she has chosen to hurl them at you.”

Given looked at me, her eyes sad and accepting. She gave a slight nod and squeezed my hand.

The fire climbed, licking up the sides of the pyre. Smoke curled toward the sky. After several minutes, Lord Rellan turned around, his brown eyes finding Laurent. “I believe we’re finished here, Your Grace. I bid you a safe journey across the Rift.”

Unease raised the hair on my nape. My heart sped up, thirty years of soldiering supplying me with the certainty that something was wrong, wrong, wrong. The Green Guards were still. There were no weapons in sight.

And something was wrong.

We were in danger.

As alarms screamed through my head, Laurent spoke meaningless pleasantries to Rellan. Instinct urged me to intervene—to order my knights to rush our party to the Rift and get Laurent and Given as far away from the humans as possible. But barking orders would throw everything into chaos. My men had no weapons, and we were right on top of the fucking Green Guards.

Laurent turned Given toward the Rift. My knights reformed around them, and we advanced toward the chasm. Jordan and Petru walked side by side at the front. I brought up the rear, my unease blooming into cloying, sticky panic. When we were halfway to the Rift, I caught Radu's arm and spoke in a voice only he could hear.

“Look sharp. I have a bad feeling.”

He nodded, a thousand battles in his eyes as his expression hardened. The Rift loomed. Behind us, Crasor continued his prayers. The heat of the pyre caressed my back.

Maybe I was wrong. I was being paranoid. Biased by a lifetime of despising the South, I'd been against this meeting from the beginning. Of course I imagined a trap. But my unease continued, and by the time we reached the Rift, my heartbeat filled my ears, each thump a deep, shivering beat of a drum.

The Deepnight faded. A few steps later, the sun blazed unchecked. As one, my

knights pulled up their hoods. I left mine down, letting the heat sear my skin. We passed the long line of Sithistran swords thrust into the ground.

At the mouth of the Bleak Pass, Jordan stopped suddenly, forcing the knights behind him to halt. Jordan turned, a frown on his face. Flames from the pyre were reflected in his blue eyes.

The ground beside Petru burst open. A Sithistran soldier leapt from the dirt like a corpse escaping a grave. In a blur of movement, he seized Petru and slit the High Priest's throat.

Laurent lurched forward, his mouth opening on a bellow. Radu seized his arm and hauled him back.

Knights shouted.

Everything slowed down.

The Sithistran's blade flashed, severing Petru's beard. The grizzled, bloodstained hair fell to the ground. A breath later, the Sithistran flung Petru into the Rift. The High Priest flailed, his black robes billowing, and then plunged out of sight.

Laurent's anguished cry split the air.

Two of my knights sprang into action, falling upon the Sithistran and hurling him into the Rift after Petru.

Sound behind me.

I whirled, dagger in hand. Men poured from the base of the pyre, flaming bundles of wood flying as they flowed from the burning structure like a swarm of hornets. Bright

light flashed, seeming to come from a dozen different directions. For a second, confusion held me immobile. Then I realized the men held mirrors. Angled just right, they reflected the newly unveiled sun.

The Sithistrans charged us, light bouncing as they ran.

A beam hit me in the neck. Fiery agony streaked through me. My skin blistered, smoke and the smell of charred flesh swirling around my head. Steps away, a knight screamed as a beam caught him. He doubled over, his cloak swinging forward. A chunk of bloodied flesh fell from his face and turned to ash before it hit the ground.

“GO, GO, GO!” I bellowed, swinging back to my knights. “Get the king and queen across the Pass!”

Chaos. Light flashed everywhere. Thick beams bounced off the ground and seared my skin. I couldn’t look back at the pyre. One glance at the mirrors could blind me—maybe permanently. I stumbled to the screaming knight, threw him over my shoulder, and sprinted toward the Rift.

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I reached the mouth in half a dozen strides. My knights had done well. Given and Laurent were already across. Crimson cloaks swirled as knights swung onto their horses. With a grunt, I set the injured knight on his feet and gripped his shoulders. “Can you walk?” I demanded.

His face was blackened and steaming, part of his jawbone exposed where the sun had melted his skin. “Yes, General,” he gasped, blood bubbling from his wounds.

“Run.” I shoved him onto the Pass. A few more knights sprinted past me. I waited a beat, my gaze on the light-streaked ground. The thunder of the Sithistrans’ boots grew louder and shook the ground beneath my feet. When no other Nor Doruvian knights followed, I charged onto the Bleak Pass.

I’d never run from a fight. I ran now, anticipating the sting of an arrow in my back with every step. Radu held my charger steady on the far side of the Pass. The wooden bridge swayed with my footfalls. The Rift was a black, bottomless void on the edges of my vision. I reached the Nor Doruvian side, grabbed my horse’s mane, and vaulted into the saddle.

“Fall back!” I yelled, but it wasn’t necessary. This group of knights had trained under me for a decade, and they were already wheeling their horses around before the order left my lips. We raced to the safety of the Deepnight, and I called a halt and dared my first look back.

My breath caught. The Sithistran soldiers lined the southern side of the Rift. They held the mirrored shields at their sides, their chests heaving from the sprint from the pyre. They wore no armor, just heavy woolen jackets soaked with water. Their head

and faces were wrapped with wet cloths.

They had lain in wait under the pyre, likely roasting as Rolund's body began to burn above them. Despite their wet clothes, several men were badly burned.

"Make way for the king," a knight said quietly behind me, and then Laurent appeared on horseback beside me. Before I could bark at him to fall back, Given showed up on his other side.

"Laurent, this isn't safe," I said under my breath. We stood just behind the Deepnight, its twilight bleeding into brutal, bleached sunlight steps past our horses' noses. The humans' mirrors were unlikely to penetrate the canopy, but I couldn't be certain.

Laurent ignored me, his face a mask of cold fury as he stared at the Sithistrans.

The southern soldiers parted, and Elissa, Lord Rellan, and Crasor stepped into view.

Laurent bared his fangs at the trio. "This is an act of war," he shouted, his voice echoing off the walls of the Rift. "You are covered in dishonor."

Crasor pointed a long finger at Given. "Whore of the North! You declared war the moment you killed our king."

Given gasped. Around me, several of my knights hissed.

"Steady," I growled.

Elissa spoke, her voice carrying over the Rift. "We will not wage war over my husband's body. But make no mistake, Sithistra will have vengeance." She looked at Given. "You will pay for what you've done. Before this is finished, you will lose everything you hold dear. Just as I have." She turned and walked toward the flaming

pyre, her black veil fluttering behind her.

Silence reigned. Behind the Sithistrans, the flames of the pyre engulfed the entire structure, black smoke billowing into the sky.

Lord Rellan stepped forward. “Let it be known that Sithistra acted honorably this day. Unlike our neighbors to the north, we don’t attack under a flag of truce.”

Black tendrils rolled off Laurent and twisted into the air. “You murdered the High Priest of the Sanctum. A man of the gods.”

“False gods. We did well to rid the world of his evil.” Rellan signaled to a nearby soldier. The man drew an arrow and nocked it.

Laurent didn’t move. Sweat trickled down my spine. I tightened my thighs around my charger’s flanks, prepared to seize Laurent and remove him from danger.

“Return to your palace of sin and debauchery,” Rellan said. “We shall meet again on the field of battle.” Even from a distance, his sneer was visible as he glanced at me before refocusing on Laurent. “Assuming you’re man enough to wield a sword.”

The soldier loosed the arrow. It whistled through the air, arcing cleanly over the Rift and thunking into the ground a foot or so in front of Laurent’s horse.

A warning shot.

Rellan motioned to his men. Now, dozens nocked arrows.

“Your Grace,” I said, seconds from pulling Laurent off his horse and forcibly returning him to Lar Katerin. I didn’t fear the humans. But I was fucking terrified of those mirrors.

Once again, Laurent ignored me. Gaze on Rellan, he spoke in a quiet voice that lifted every hair on my body. “Before this is done, I am going to kill Rellan Blackmun of the Meadowlands.”

The arrows flew.

With a final hiss, Laurent spun his horse. He didn’t shout. He didn’t have to. My knights spurred their horses into a full gallop, closing ranks around their king and queen as we sped toward Lar Katerin.

I leaned over my horse and let the wind chase away the sweat from the sun and the Rift. And I tried not to think about how, for the first time in the recorded histories of Ter Isir, vampires had backed down from a fight.

Chapter Three

LAURENT

I felt Varick's presence behind me in the temple. I'd always been able to feel him, even when I couldn't see him.

But I could also sense he was hesitant to disturb me when I was at prayer.

"Stay," I said without opening my eyes. I'd lost track of how long I'd knelt in the palace's small temple. It wasn't my favorite place to pray. The nobles used it, and I disliked having others around when I spoke to the gods. For so many in Nor Doru, religion was more theater than faith. Courtiers delighted in the spectacle of blood rites. They expected the spectacle every time.

But the most powerful rites were boring and bloody. Painful and demanding. The gods spoke to so few. It was a privilege and a burden to bear their counsel. Not that they often gave it.

"Petru always said I was too impatient to listen," I murmured.

Soft footsteps, and then a temple robe settled around my shoulders, the weight of the fabric more familiar than my own skin. A second later, Varick knelt beside me, his body warm and solid. I heard him swallow, and then his gruff, beloved voice disturbed the stillness of the temple. "It's been ten hours, Laurent. The Council grows restless."

I opened my eyes and looked at him. He'd removed his armor and washed, and he was big and golden and the kind of heat that didn't burn. It only warmed. I wanted to crawl into his lap and pretend I wasn't on the precipice of losing everything. That I hadn't allowed my arrogance to lead us into an ambush.

"Petru is dead," I told him, as if saying it might make me believe it. Even after seeing his death unfold before me, I couldn't quite accept that it was real. It was like something I'd read in a story and pictured in my mind.

Varick put a hand on my shoulder. "What happened today isn't your fault."

I gave a soft, humorless laugh. "You know better than to tell me things you don't believe."

"I believe your intentions were good." He tugged the robe's open front more securely over my chest. "You made a sound argument before we left. I can see why you wanted to go."

"You believed crossing the Rift was stupid," I said, hearing the edge in my voice. "You told me repeatedly, and you were right. Now my High Priest is dead, the Deepnight continues to fail, there's a demon army ready to rip us to shreds, and the humans have fucking mirror shields. Did I miss anything?"

He pulled his hand back and folded his arms. Another male might have looked odd on his knees with his arms in that position, but he managed to look both sexy and irritated. And sexier because he was irritated. My dick stirred. Somehow, even if the midst of the shit situation I'd created, I still wanted to fuck more than anything.

Weak. The voice in my head was my father's. I could hear him now, sneering at me from his throne. "You thought you were smart, didn't you, boy? Putting on pretty crowns and seeking to humble the humans. You think they'll help you fight your

demons? To them, you are the demons.”

The worst part was, my father was right. Before he lost his grip on sanity, he had always been the most accurate assessor of my shortcomings. Petru had also excelled at it. “You should marry,” the High Priest had said at every opportunity. “Kings put their personal desires aside for the good of the realm, Laurent.” Petru had never said it outright, but he believed the Deepnight’s weakness was my weakness. Nor Doru lacked an heir because I’d lacked a wife. The prophecy had dovetailed nicely with the old male’s wishes for my future.

But he didn’t wish for anything anymore. Because he was dead.

Varick’s golden stare was steady. “You miscalculated. And now you’re hiding in here.”

“Is that what the Council is saying?”

“It’s hard to hear anything over the shouting.”

And I’d left him to handle it alone for ten hours. Weak.

Yes, Father. But I was good on my knees. My sire had seen to that. It was one of the last taunts I’d thrown at him before madness rendered him incapable of holding a coherent conversation. My father hadn’t particularly cared about my relationship with Varick, but Valen had—and Nicolae of Nor Doru had gone to great lengths to keep his “ghost” happy. Sneaking off with Varick had meant days in the Sanctum if I were caught.

My punishments had always looked the same. The priests carried it out because the alternative was a swan dive into the Rift. So they stripped me bare and left me with nothing but my thoughts and the sound of dripping blood to keep me company. Nude

on my knees on the obsidian floor, I chanted prayers until I lost my voice. When I nodded off, the priests roused me with buckets of icy water. When I pissed myself, they swung their buckets again. When hunger gnawed at my gut, I rocked on my knees and prayed harder. And when I grew too weak to sit up, a thrall crept to my side and offered a ribbon-covered wrist. Just enough blood to keep me conscious. Just enough to prolong the punishment. To twist the knife of pain and humiliation.

And I was twisted, because the pain only made me seek more pleasure. Eventually, the pain became pleasure. Like the vine on the night-blooming rose, I'd twisted myself around Varick, craving his big hands and his sharp thorns. Longing to be pinned down and pierced. My father had worked tirelessly to bend me to his will, and then he'd been surprised when I thrived in submission.

Weak.

Of course I was. That weakness had killed Petru. Like my father always claimed, I wasn't strong enough to bear the weight of the crown. I was twisted and I didn't care because it felt too good to ever stop. A trait unbecoming a king.

Another for the list, Father.

I couldn't look Varick in the eye, so I looked at the floor. "I am hiding," I said quietly. "I should have listened to you. I thought I was being clever." I rubbed a hand over my face and released a short, frustrated breath. "I could have gotten us all killed. Roasted by fucking mirrors. It's almost poetic."

Varick pulled my hand from my face. Then he stood, gripped me under my elbows, and lifted me to my feet. My muscles screamed, nerves waking and protesting. Knives stabbed deep in my calves and thighs, making me suck in a sharp breath and sag against him.

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He held me while my limbs woke and my strength returned. Memories flooded me—recollections of him doing this at other times in other places. “Don’t think about the pain, my prince,” he’d say. “If you don’t think about it, you stop feeling it eventually.”

But I’d wanted to feel it, because I’d wanted to feel him.

“Hurt me,” I’d whisper in his ear when we were alone. “Hurt me the way I like.” I’d twisted around him so tightly that I’d twisted him too.

Varick pulled back now, but he kept his hands on my shoulders and squeezed. His voice was deeper than it had been at sixteen, but his golden eyes were the same. “You don’t have to do this,” he said quietly. “Do you understand? You don’t have to punish yourself when you make a mistake.”

“I deserve it.”

He squeezed harder. Anger flitted through his eyes, which was strange because they were also sheened with tears. His mouth worked like he was having trouble forming the words he wanted to say. “You don’t.” Another squeeze. “You don’t deserve it.”

I waited for the blood to tell me he lied. Blood never lied. People did—all the time. But blood was constant and true. The blood stayed silent...but I was tired. And, as Petru had always said, I was too impatient to really listen.

Varick’s deep voice rumbled between us. “Listen to me, my prince. You couldn’t have known what the humans were plotting. Today is not your fault.”

My breath caught. Unable to help myself, I reached up and stroked his beard. The hair was so soft, which was surprising. Varick's soft spots always surprised me. "You haven't called me that in a long time."

He pulled me against him. Our lips met, and our kiss was...chaste. Slow and gentle, and yet somehow just as passionate as any he'd ever given me. He took his time, parting my lips with his tongue and then stroking softly. He always said he was bad at praying, but maybe his prayers just looked different than mine. Because it was like he was praying now, each rasp of his lips a litany, every brush of his fingers on my jaw a vow.

Eventually, he stopped kissing me and simply rested his forehead against mine. His breath teased my tingling lips. "Part of you will always be the prince I fell in love with. But you aren't that boy anymore, Laurent. You're not your father, either, and you're never going to become him."

"You can't know that," I whispered through a tight throat. The words were more painful than the ache in my knees. More agonizing than the solstone blade that had cut me to the bone. Because they were my biggest fear. The thought of losing my grasp on reality—of descending into madness and paranoia—terrified me more than I could say. Would I even know it had happened? That was the most terrifying part.

"I know you," Varick said. He lifted his head and looked at me for a long moment. "We promised to have each other's backs, and part of that is telling each other things we may not necessarily want to hear."

"I have a feeling you're about to."

His eyes stayed serious. "You are the king. And kings can't hide, even when they make mistakes. It's easier for you to come in here and become the boy you used to be, but hurting yourself isn't going to solve our problems. It won't fix the Deepnight

or help us figure out the prophecy.”

I bit my tongue so I wouldn't say what I was thinking, which was that I should hurt for what I'd wrought at the Rift. Petru probably would have preferred pain to death. At least pain meant you were alive. But Varick was right about hiding. I had to face the Council. Spending hours on my knees did nothing for the people of Nor Doru.

Varick sighed. “We're hardly living in ordinary times, Laurent. It's been five hundred years since anyone, king or otherwise, confronted the problems we're facing.” He gave me a small, soft smile. “Did you really think you were going to solve everything today?”

My chest tightened. “It would be nice if I hadn't made everything worse.”

“We don't know that you did.” He made a face like he just tasted something sour. “Jordan of Twyl will probably say it needed to happen. This is exactly the sort of thing that mysterious little fucker revels in.”

I permitted myself a quick huff of laughter. Then we stared at each other, letting our smiles fade into quiet worry. But it was worry neither of us bore alone. We were together. I'd broken us, but I'd managed to fix us. I could say that much for myself.

“How is Given?” I asked, guilt assailing me. Elissa had rebuffed her. Crasor had called her a whore. And I'd dumped her on Varick so I could wallow in self-pity in private. More weakness. I wasn't a good king, but I was an even worse husband.

“She's with the Council.”

I winced. If she'd spent the past ten hours with my lords and Varick's captains, she was probably ready to mount my head on a pike. “Is she angry with me?”

“She’s the one who asked me to fetch you.”

“So yes.”

Varick stepped back and looked me over, taking in the open robe and my grubby skin beneath it. I’d come to the temple straight from the Rift, and I still bore the dirt and dried sweat of the road. “Come on. You need soap and blood-wine, and then you can face your wife and Lar Guna.”

I grimaced. “I think I’ll have better luck with Artur.”

Varick smiled. “A piece of advice from a male who learned the hard way, Your Grace. When she speaks, keep your eyes above her neck. And for the love of the gods, actually listen.”

* * *

A half-hour later, I strongly considered returning to the temple—and perhaps never leaving.

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The Council chamber smelled of stale sweat and soured blood-wine. Tonight, every seat at the stone table map of Ter Isir was occupied. Jordan of Twyl toyed with one of the iron night-blooming roses that marked a spot where the Deepnight had disappeared. Two of the highest-ranking priests of the Sanctum sat with blood-stained beards and dour expressions. The lords of the Council had removed their jackets, and several had rolled up their sleeves. Varick's captains looked like they'd rather be at the Rift, ambushes be damned.

Varick stood leaning against the wall with his thick arms folded over his chest. His eyes glittered with dislike as he listened to Artur of Lar Guna ramble about the events at the Rift.

Given was a cool, quiet wellspring of beauty in the room of tired, temperamental males. She sat at my right hand, her hair caught back from her face and a simple crimson gown hugging her curves. I wanted to ask how she was. If she'd eaten. Varick had undoubtedly seen to her needs. Not that she required a keeper. But she deserved chivalry. She deserved better than what she'd gotten from me.

“—and Petru's death is the least of our problems,” Lar Guna said angrily.

I jerked my head toward him. “Petru was a servant of the gods.” Across the table, one of the iron rose markers in front of Jordan shivered and tipped over. It rolled to the edge of the table. Jordan caught it before it fell.

Under his whiskers, Lar Guna's cheeks turned pink. He darted a look at the priests. “I meant no disrespect, Your Grace. We all mourn the High Priest's death.”

Undoubtedly, Lar Guna was sincere. The male had his faults, but he was a faithful follower of the Sanctum. My mother had trusted him completely. It was a shame he was such an uptight, unlikable cunt.

I stared at him until his cheeks turned red. “Perhaps we should all endeavor to mourn more convincingly.” I left him squirming in his chair and swept my gaze around the table. “I wish to speak to what I view as our most immediately pressing security concern. I began today believing Sithistra was neutralized as a threat because there is no claimant to the throne. My wife is Baylen of Sithistra’s legitimately born daughter. By all rights, the southern throne belongs to her.”

Lar Guna made a negative sound. “The South will never follow a female, let alone a vampire halfling.”

Briefly, I considered asking Lar Guna if he wished to join Petru in the Rift. I let silence hang heavy in the air before asking, “What gave it away, Artur? The mirrors or the arrows the humans shot at us?”

Across the table, Captain Radu coughed into his fist.

Lar Guna clamped his mouth shut, apparently deciding he’d said enough for the moment.

I turned my gaze back to the rest of the table. “After what happened today, I think we can all agree Lord Rellan Blackmun of the Meadowlands sees himself as the successor to the southern throne.” I looked at Given. “Do you agree with that assessment, my lady?”

Her blue eyes went wide before she recovered. She sat straighter in her chair. “I... Yes, I do, my lord.”

Despite the heaviness of the day, my heart lifted. I'd been wrong to take her across the Rift, but I'd been right to put my mother's crown on her head. Given was Avenor's heir as well as Baylen's. She had more royal blood than I did. It was time for my princess to learn to rule. "You offer us far better intelligence than any spy, my lady. What can you tell us about Lord Rellan?"

Her brow furrowed as she appeared to gather her thoughts. "Lord Rellan has always been ambitious. The Blackmuns were kings in their own right in ages past. Rellan is proud of that heritage. Some might say too proud. He maneuvered his heir, Edwin, into a powerful position at court, and he schemed to put Elissa on the throne from the time she was six months old." Given's shoulders lifted in a sigh. "She and Rolund weren't the best match, but my brother was swayed by Lord Rellan's money and power."

"What kind of power?" Lord Sergiu of Lar Bassa asked. He was a young, dark-haired male who'd only recently come into his title after his father's death. So far, he'd shown himself to be smart, as well as adept at navigating court politics.

"Men," Given said. "Lord Rellan has a fighting force almost as large as the crown's, and he has the money to equip them with the best horses and weapons." She gestured to Sithistra on the table. "The Meadowlands is a vast territory in the southeast where the Northern and Southern Seas meet. The weather is warm year-round, and the land is fertile. Most of Sithistra's food is grown there, which means Lord Rellan profits from every apple and loaf of bread sold in the South. But the Blackmuns also control a long stretch of coastline. Lord Rellan commands a large navy in addition to his land forces."

"He sounds like a king already," Captain Radu muttered.

Lar Guna scowled. "We can't protect the capital and the Rift with the number of men we have now." He pinned Radu with a dark look and jabbed a thick finger at the

table. “The troop reinforcements from the Wastes were supposed to arrive today. What’s keeping them?”

Radu narrowed his eyes. “Snow, my lord. Winter is upon us. As I’m sure you’re aware, cold weather makes for difficult travel, especially for fighting men weighed down by armor.”

Lar Guna’s scowl deepened. “Your men will get all the heat and sunlight they wish for at the Rift.”

I stiffened. Varick straightened from the wall. Slowly, he unfolded his arms. His eyes glittered, the gold brightening.

Lar Guna looked at me. The red in his cheeks darkened to the shade of his bottom lip. He licked it nervously but pressed on, a hint of challenge in his eyes. “Your Grace, I understand this is a delicate subject, but we’ve yet to hear a suitable explanation for the recent difficulties with the Deepnight.”

Varick’s voice lashed like a whip. “You forget yourself, Lar Guna. It’s not your place to demand an explanation from the king.”

Lar Guna swung toward him. “It is when lowpeople are turning to ash in the fields. Perhaps you don’t care about our citizens dying, General, but I do.”

“Shut your lying mouth or I’ll shut it for you.”

Lar Guna shoved his chair back and stood. “I am not the liar here, Lar Keiren!”

Immediately, both Radu and the other captain jumped to their feet.

Lar Guna was undeterred. He planted both palms on the table and leaned over, his

gaze sweeping the other lords. “We sit here and pretend our biggest problem is the South, and we all know it’s a lie.” He flung an arm toward the windows, where night had fallen hours ago. “The canopy isn’t just moving into Sithistra. It’s disappearing. The entire edge of the Rift was exposed today. And everyone insists on tiptoeing around this like we’re all fucking blind.”

“Artur...” Lar Bassa warned.

“I will not be silenced!” Lar Guna snapped, his voice rising and his eyes beginning to glow. He swung toward me and pointed the same finger he’d stabbed at the table. “You’re the only one who can control it, so why aren’t you doing it? You busy yourself with bedsport and neglect your duties. You are failing Nor Doru!”

In a blink, Varick was behind him, hauling him back with an arm around Lar Guna’s neck and the tip of a dagger against the smaller male’s temple. “I will kill you where you stand,” he hissed in Lar Guna’s ear.

Chairs crashed to the floor as the other lords stood quickly. Lar Guna gasped, his fangs punching down as his body realized it was in mortal danger. Lar Bassa drew a blade of his own and then looked unsure of what he meant to do with it.

Captain Radu had no such problem. His own dagger flashed in his fist as he bared his fangs and hissed at Lar Guna. “It’s treason to speak such insults against the king.”

“It’s the truth!” Lar Guna protested. He gagged and struggled. “We’ll all burn if this continues!”

“You first,” Radu growled. “My men should stake you out at the edge of the Rift.”

Lar Guna’s eyes were wild as they rolled to me. His voice climbed several octaves. “You are not your father, Laurent, to murder in cold blood!”

Varick tightened his grip until Lar Guna’s eyes bulged. “Damn you, I should cut out

your disrespectful tongue! That will stop you from speaking.”

“I wouldn’t, Lord Varick,” Jordan said quietly.

Everyone stilled.

All eyes turned to Jordan. The Archmage hadn’t moved in the chaos. He remained seated, his head bent as he toyed with the iron night-blooming rose he’d saved from toppling off the table. At last, he set the iron marker down and looked at Varick. “You never know when you might need Lord Lar Guna to speak for you.”

The silence held, everyone frozen like some dramatic painting. Jordan’s blue eyes met mine, the length of Ter Isir between us.

“Release him, General,” I said. As Varick obeyed, the other lords righted their chairs and resumed their seats. A hush fell over the chamber, broken only by Lar Guna struggling to catch his breath. Everyone waited for what came next. They waited on me.

I stood, my gaze going to the jagged groove that split the table in two, representing the Rift. The table was older than the chasm. According to palace lore, craftsmen had added it later, after the earthquakes that destroyed Eldenvalla had cracked open the land between Sithistra and Nor Doru.

“No king is perfect,” I said. Then I looked at Given. “Vampires are mortal the same as men. Isn’t that what they say in the South?”

“Yes, my lord.”

I smiled at her before returning my gaze to the males around the table. “I am not my father. That is correct. I don’t punish my subjects for speaking their minds. I respect

the opinions of everyone on this Council. That's why I believe it's important for all of you to know the truth about what we're facing."

No one spoke. No one moved. Again, they waited on me. I didn't wear the crown, but I felt its weight pressing down on my head.

"Palaces are the worst places to keep secrets. By now, you're probably all aware of the prophecy the mages of Wesyfedd carried from the Towers of the Mir the night Queen Given was born. But if you haven't, it says the savior of the realm will be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift."

Several gazes darted to Given. The scrutiny made anger spike in my veins. Made me feel helpless. I wanted to yell at them to stop looking at her. She wasn't an animal caged for their amusement. She hadn't asked for the prophecy, but it had trapped her nevertheless. Maybe I understood a little how that felt.

I cleared my throat. "We are fortunate to have the Archmage on our side."

Now, the gazes turned to Jordan, who wore a plain green jacket and had never looked younger or less intimidating. Not exactly the inspiring hero I needed to convince the Council I wasn't going to end up killing us all, but I was apparently stuck with him.

"The Archmage tells me that, like it or not, the prophecy touches every kingdom in Ter Isir. It touches Nor Doru, and our Deepnight." I pointed to the section of the table where the dead lands of Eldenvalla sprawled, the border marked by dozens of iron trees. "Our queen and General Lord Lar Keiren entered Vai Seren and met Midian, the king of the demons that dwell behind the Thicket. We don't know their numbers, but it doesn't matter. When the elves called up the demons from the Shade, they handed their empire to pure evil. The elves are all dead, their bodies possessed by spirits that can turn minds inside out and bring even the strongest warriors to their knees. And they don't need to lift a single sword to do it. That is what we're facing."

Around the table, males looked at one another. Brows furrowed, and a range of emotions played over faces. Fear. Disbelief. A few of the lords whose estates bordered Eldenvalla looked resigned. Doubtless, they were all too familiar with what lived behind the trees.

“The Thicket is failing,” I said bluntly. “It’s weakening the same as our Deepnight. The Archmage tells me that these things are connected. As the Thicket begins to fall, the Deepnight continues to disappear. If the Thicket breaks down completely, nothing will stop the demons from spilling into the rest of Ter Isir.”

Lar Bassa looked up from the table. “What do we do?” he asked hoarsely.

“I don’t know.” As frowns deepened and the weight of the crown pressed harder, I met Varick’s gaze. He stood near the wall again, his dagger sheathed and his golden eyes steady. He was right. I couldn’t run off and hide. Couldn’t lose myself in prayer and pain. That escape was temporary. It solved nothing.

I drew a deep breath and turned back to the table. “I don’t know,” I repeated, “but we need to acknowledge that we are at war. I’d hoped we wouldn’t have to battle the South. But the Brotherhood has a stranglehold on Sithistra, and the Towers don’t interpret the prophecy as we do. Worse, it seems they don’t understand the threat the collapse of the Thicket poses.”

“Nor Doru is not without gifts,” Jordan said. He stood and pushed his chair back. “Queen Given and Lord Varick are elven-born.” He looked at Given. “Rolund gave Nor Doru the South’s greatest treasure when he sent his sister over the Rift.”

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Given bowed her head, a blush staining her cheeks.

Jordan looked directly at Lar Guna, and his voice rolled with power that filled the chamber with the scent of leaves and the distant sound of rushing water. “Your queen is a direct descendant of Avenor of Eldenvalla. Your king has ten bly’ad on his tongue. They will do their duty by Nor Doru, Lord Lar Guna. Do not forget it.”

Lar Guna’s lips parted. “I won’t,” he rasped.

Jordan nodded. Then he looked at me.

Well. Perhaps more inspiring than I’d thought.

“It’s late,” I said. “Let’s seek our beds and meet again tomorrow when our minds are fresh.”

The room emptied quickly. Lar Guna beat a hasty exit, likely headed to his bedchamber to change his trousers and chant a few protection rites. Varick moved to the table and sat next to Given.

As I expected, Jordan stayed, his boyish facade firmly in place as the door closed behind the last of the lords.

I gave him a pointed look. “I take it you didn’t foresee the humans stuffing mirrors under Rolund’s funeral pyre?”

“Like you, Your Grace, I’m far from perfect. My sight isn’t always clear. But to

answer your question, I didn't know about the mirrors." He hesitated, something like annoyance crossing his face. "I was aware of Lord Rellan's presence at court, but I assumed he'd simply traveled to Beldurn for the funeral."

I sat heavily in my chair. "Well, he's in the thick of your prophecy now." I shoved a hand through my hair. "If he were smart, he'd get the fuck out of it," I muttered.

"As I've told you, it's not—"

"Your prophecy, I know." I propped my elbow on the arm of my chair and rested my chin on my hand. "It belongs to us all."

Jordan looked like he couldn't decide if I were serious or joking. "I'm sorry about Petru," he said, sounding sincere. "I know he was your mentor."

"A frequently disappointed one."

Jordan eyed me. "Is that what you think?"

I kept my chin on my hand. "Don't pretend to know the inner workings of the Sanctum, Brother Jordan. Your gods and mine are not the same."

"We don't have gods in Wesyfedd, Your Grace. I believe you know that."

I did, and he wasn't being completely honest. The Wesyfeddians worshipped the land, which was probably what had allowed them to raise the Thicket. They had a few names for the elemental deities, although they believed all magic sprang from the same central source.

"Will you appoint a new high priest?" he asked, those disarming blue eyes as penetrating as the day he'd arrived in my court and claimed he had something

important to tell me.

“I haven’t given it much thought. I have to say a rite for the old one first.” Also, I couldn’t imagine anyone but Petru in that role. I straightened. “It’s late.”

Jordan understood he’d been dismissed, and he stepped away from the table. “Perhaps you should give it some thought, Your Grace.” He nodded to Given and Varick. “Good evening, Your Grace. My lord.”

“Good evening, Jordan,” Given said softly.

I waited a few minutes after Jordan’s footsteps had faded before I slumped in my chair. “Just once, I wish that little shit would say something without being cryptic.” I rolled my head along the back of the chair and looked at Given. “Sorry I left you alone when we returned, princess.”

There was no anger in her blue eyes. “I had Varick.”

I smiled as I glanced at him. “There is no one else I’d have at your side.”

“He said you were praying.”

I swallowed, almost wishing she was angry. The lack of it raised a curious lump in my throat. “I was.”

She stretched her hand across the table, the simple wedding band I’d given her catching the candlelight. “I’m sorry about Petru, too.”

I leaned forward so I could take her fingers. I rubbed my thumb over her wedding ring and swallowed the lump. “Thank you, darling. He deserved better.” The old male had always been gruff when my father punished me, stooping and hauling me up by

the armpits when I passed out. “You waste your gifts. So much power in these veins, and you spend your time chasing the Lar Keiren boy.”

“He chases me, Petru,” I’d slur.

Petru would snort. “Keep praying, Laurent. Ask the gods to humble you. And when they do, ask them to help you stop enjoying it.”

Yes. The old male had known exactly who I was from the beginning.

“Who will take his place?” Given asked.

I answered her more honestly than I had Jordan. “I’m not sure. Petru was High Priest before I was born. My mother knew what she was doing when she raised him up from poverty. It’s unusual for someone so lowborn to hold the title, but Petru was powerful. No one else in the Sanctum comes close.”

“Except you,” she said.

“I can’t be both king and high priest.” It was exactly what my father had wanted, and he’d wanted it for all the wrong reasons. Not that there were any good reasons. “The Sanctum is separate from the crown. Combining them would create too much power. It’s dangerous.”

She tilted her head. “The only universal rule about power is that it’s best to have as much of it as possible. You told me that.”

I frowned. “There are exceptions to that rule, princess.”

“You said people who say that are stupid.”

I looked at Varick, who watched Given with a smile playing around his mouth. He felt my regard and looked at me. The smile stayed put.

“You’re enjoying this,” I said.

“Probably more than I should admit.”

I sighed. Then I pulled a ring off my little finger and slipped it onto Given’s ring finger just above her wedding band. “The night-blooming rose grows on a double vine.” I pointed at one vine. “The Sanctum”—I pointed at the other vine—“and the crown. They are tightly bound, but you still need space between them. Without that space, the rose withers and dies.”

She looked up from the tiny engraving. “At the Rift today…”

“Yes?”

“You didn’t use your power.”

I shook my head. “It’s not useful in battle. One on one, I can kill with a word. But I can’t fell an army. If there is a bly’ad for causing mass death, I don’t know of it. I don’t believe such a word exists.” I turned her hand over and stroked the veins in her wrist. “Blood is personal. I can bind you and bend you to my will. But just you, princess.” I looked at Varick. “Maybe the two of you if I’m well-rested.”

Given shivered.

“It’s very late,” Varick said, his eyes gleaming.

“It is,” I murmured.

His eyes lightened, and I knew I wouldn't be bending the general to my will. Not at all.

He lifted Given's other hand and kissed it. "Let's go to bed."

Chapter Four

GIVEN

It felt wrong to climb the steps to the Rose Room when the world was in shambles and I had no idea what tomorrow would bring.

But it also felt good.

I couldn't fix anything tonight. So why not enjoy myself in the moment? Gods, Laurent was rubbing off on me.

There was a simple wooden chair in the room now, as well as a small table that held goblets and a glass pitcher of blood-wine.

For some reason, the sight of the chair raised goosebumps on my skin.

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Laurent went to the bed and flung himself down on his back. He put his forearm over his eyes and heaved a sigh that lifted his chest.

“Ignore him,” Varick said, kissing my neck from behind as he unbuttoned my gown. “He needs a moment.”

“Fucking Lar Guna,” Laurent muttered.

Varick finished with the buttons and pushed my gown to the floor. “Let’s not talk about him.” He went to the chair and sat. He folded his arms and jerked his chin at me. “Take the rest off.”

Lust crackled through me. Doubt rushed forward in its wake. “Maybe we shouldn’t.”

Instantly, I had the undivided attention of two disgruntled-looking males.

“Why not?” Laurent demanded. He’d pulled his arm down, all signs of fatigue gone from his face. Now, he looked like a child who’d been given a toy and then had it snatched away.

“The last time we did this,” I said, “I pulled Sithistra into your bedchamber and murdered my brother.”

“You defended yourself,” Varick said. “It was far from murder.”

Maybe, but it still felt like murder. The result was the same. Rolund was dead. I didn’t necessarily mourn his loss, but I wished someone else had caused it. His killing

was a burden I had to bear. Another injustice he'd thrust upon me.

Laurent studied me. "You don't know if the sex caused it. You didn't farsee when we fucked in the Sanctum."

My face heated, the memory of Laurent thrusting inside me while Varick took his ass romping through my mind.

Laurent's smile was slow and wicked. "Oh, princess, if you don't want to fuck, you really shouldn't stand there in your chemise with your pretty cheeks going all pink. It reminds me how much I enjoy having that luscious pussy of yours wrapped around my dick."

Varick stood and came to me. Not for the first time, I marveled at how he towered over me. I was tall for a female, but he was still a giant in comparison. Which made it that much sweeter when he cupped a gentle hand under my chin. Distantly, I recalled him touching me in the same spot the first time we met at the Rift. He'd been angry that day, and he'd gripped me hard after I tried to slap him. Varick and I had come a long way since then. I knew in my heart nothing could make him touch me in anger ever again.

"We don't have to do it, halfling," he murmured. "But you won't be alone this time. You have both of us, and I'll call you back with my Voice if you leave us."

My resolve weakened. Not that it had been all that strong to begin with. "What if I pull another place into the palace?"

"Then we stop," Laurent said, strolling from the bed. He bent his head and kissed my cheek, filling my senses with cinnamon and the dark, spicy scent I recognized as the herbs the priests of the Sanctum mixed into the blood candles. "We can also just go to sleep." His silver eyes smiled. "Although, the first option promises to be far more

fun.”

They bracketed me, their body heat caressing my skin. I looked between them and heard myself whisper, “I don’t want to sleep.”

They exchanged a look, and I could have laughed at how obvious they were. If my elven gifts disappeared tomorrow, I would still have power—at least over these males. Somewhere along the way, I’d gone from being a pawn to a player in the game the three of us played. The rules were still shifting, but the ground under my feet felt a lot firmer than before.

Varick reached around me and grabbed Laurent’s chin—and he wasn’t gentle about it. “Go back to the bed.” As my body flashed cold and then hot, he released Laurent and fingered the strap of my chemise. “As for you…” His callused finger brushed my skin. “I’m going to sit down, and you’re going to take this off. Leave the stockings.” He flicked the strap off my shoulder and went to his chair.

I turned my head in time to see Laurent stretch sideways on the bed and prop himself on one elbow. His eyes flashed pewter in the candlelight. “I wouldn’t recommend keeping the general waiting,” he murmured.

My throat went dry, and my hands trembled as I pulled my knee-length chemise over my head. Per Varick’s order—and Laurent’s reminder—I wasn’t wearing drawers. That left me in just my stockings, which was somehow more decadent than full nudity. It was funny how two thin pieces of silk and some lengths of ribbon could make me feel more exposed. I suspected Varick knew that.

He sucked in a sudden breath, his golden gaze locked on the juncture of my thighs. It stayed there for a moment before he met my eyes and growled, “You’re bare.”

I nodded. My face heated, and I resisted the urge to cover my sex.

Varick looked at Laurent on the bed. “You knew about this?”

“Of course I did.”

I frowned at him. “You didn’t say anything.” I’d wondered about it when he got on his knees this morning, but then he’d done such wicked things with his tongue, and it hadn’t seemed important. Still... “I wasn’t sure you noticed,” I added, hearing irritation in my voice.

His lips curved. “I noticed, princess. I just knew it wasn’t for me.”

Varick crooked a finger at me. “Come here.”

Face burning, I went to him. He spread his legs wider, snagged me by the hips, and pulled me between his knees. He stared hard at my sex, his eyes lightened to pale gold as he took in my denuded mound and smooth lips. His hands looked obscenely large as he smoothed them up to my waist, which he spanned easily. Tiny white scars marred his knuckles. Every soldier had them—sword marks from training or defending himself in battle. Varick didn’t need a weapon to crush me. His hands were plenty capable of doing the job. He would have killed Lar Guna if Laurent ordered it. He obeyed Laurent without question.

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Except in this. In the Rose Room—and in bed—Varick gave the orders. “I make the rules,” he’d told me when we were alone together in the hut after Vai Seren. Now I knew just how much he’d meant it. Varick didn’t give even a little bit during sex. He controlled everything. Demanded total obedience, all the way down to requiring Laurent to keep himself waxed smooth between his legs so Laurent never forgot who gave the orders. Varick had asked if I might like to do the same.

“And you’ll raise your skirts and show me your bald little pussy, because I fucking ordered you to.”

I shivered. Heat pooled between my thighs.

He drew a fingertip down my sex, stroking lightly over the seam where my lips met. “When did you do this?”

My face flamed hotter. “A couple of days ago.” He touched me again, and I whimpered. If I’d learned one thing growing up in a castle, it was that servants knew everything. No subject was too intimate. The maidservant I’d pulled aside had smiled and murmured, “Leave it to me, Your Grace.” Hours later, a richly dressed madam from the most upscale brothel on Gate Street had swept into my chamber with a satchel full of very interesting tools and creams. An hour later, I’d experienced the novel and intensely pleasurable sensation of bare skin in my intimate areas. My sense of touch was heightened—and concentrated between my legs. The brush of my chemise against my mound had been erotic torture.

Varick’s finger was even more so as it continued its languid descent. “And you didn’t think to tell me.”

My breath hitched. Was he...angry?

Pale eyes snapped to mine. "That was naughty, halfling."

My nipples tightened. More heat built between my legs, my wetness leaking from between my lips. "You were busy," I breathed.

His fingers tightened on my hip. With his other hand, he spread my lips with his thumb and forefinger. I knew without looking that moisture gleamed there. He left me that way, open and achingly vulnerable, my clit throbbing under his gaze. Then, almost casually, he leaned forward and licked up my center.

My knees loosened. I clutched his shoulder so I wouldn't fall. "Varick..."

He eased back, his lips wet from the brief kiss. A frown formed between his blond brows, and he shook his head. "I'm never too busy to know what's happening with my pussy." His fingers still held me spread open, and he let his gaze linger for a second before lifting his head. His fangs flashed as he spoke in a growl. "And it's mine, isn't it, halfling?"

My heart pounded. A sense of surreality descended over me. Laurent was a strong presence at my back. My husband was just behind us. Watching. To most of the world, this was so very wrong. Even in Sithistra, husbands didn't bed their wives at the same time. And yet here I was nude before my husband's general with my husband listening to every word in tacit approval. The three of us had done this before. It shouldn't have affected me this way. But it did. Having Varick stake such a blatant claim with Laurent in the room made everything feel more forbidden.

Heart racing, I looked at Laurent over my shoulder.

Varick pinched my clit hard, making me yelp and jerk my head back around.

“I asked you a question,” he said.

“Wh-What?” I licked my lips, desire and more than a little fear muddling my thoughts. “What question?”

His hand on my hip moved to my ass. He squeezed and pulled me into him, and he released my clit and turned his wrist so the heel of his hand pressed firmly against my mound. He gripped my ass harder, pulling me onto my toes as he thrust his middle finger inside me. “Whose pussy is this?”

“Yours,” I gasped, rocking helplessly. His finger filled me. My inner muscles contracted, squeezing around the intrusion. I was so hot and slippery between my legs, I could feel my pussy wetting his fingers. “Yours, General.” The second his title left my lips, my face burned with the wrongness of it. I needed to come. I was so close. I dug my fingers into his shoulder and thrust my pussy against his hand, struggling to get his finger where I wanted it.

Before I registered him moving, he’d gripped my waist and settled me over his lap with my legs spread and my knees on either side of his hips. I grabbed his shoulders to steady myself, and I was wholly unprepared for the sharp smack that landed directly over my pussy.

I cried out. Instinctively, I tried to slam my thighs shut, but I got nowhere with his hips holding my legs open. Before I could get my bearings, he smacked me again—a stinging, open-handed blow that struck my clit.

“Varick!” Even as the rebuke left my lips, I rolled my hips. Everything between my legs burned...but it also ached. I wasn’t sure if I wanted him to stop or keep going.

He gripped my thigh with one big hand. He kept his other hand between my legs, his palm ready to strike at any second. “Who makes the rules?” he demanded.

“Y-You,” I gasped. I tensed, anticipating a swat.

It didn’t come. Instead, he dropped his voice low. “First rule, and the most important one. You tell me to stop, I stop.” Warning entered his eyes. “But if I stop, I don’t start again, understand?”

I tensed, confusion and protest twirling through me. “Like...ever?”

He took my chin in a light grip, and his voice softened. “Just for the night, halfling.”

“Oh.”

His fingers tightened. “Don’t say it unless you mean it.”

My stomach fluttered. “All right,” I whispered.

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He ran his hand down my throat...and then kept going until he cupped my breast. He dragged his thumb back and forth over my taut nipple, his sword-callused skin sending sparks shooting through my chest. He was gentle. Careful. Back and forth, he stroked my puckered flesh, teasing me with the lightest contact. Soon, the ache in my pussy spread to my nipple. Every maddening stroke echoed in my clit.

The swat cracked in my ears before I felt it between my legs. He struck harder this time, catching me over my swollen clit. I gave a strangled cry and lifted up, my body trying to escape him before I even realized what I was doing. That earned me another swat, followed by a firm hand on my hip pulling me back down.

He rubbed two fingers over my clit, stroking in firm circles. "Second rule. You don't touch my pussy without my permission. That includes keeping it bare. You ask first."

I couldn't believe I was in trouble for this! But it was hard to concentrate on my anger when his fingers were soothing the spot he'd just punished. I clutched at his shoulders and thrust my hips because I couldn't stop myself. "How many rules are there?"

"As many as he wants," Laurent said in my ear. He must have knelt behind me, because his bare chest met my back, and his hands came around my body. He captured both breasts and squeezed.

Heat blistered through me. Laurent tugged me backward, and I let him, bowing my spine and resting my head on his shoulder as I writhed in Varick's lap, doing my best to ride his fingers. Laurent buried his face in my neck and sucked at my skin.

“Don’t bite,” I gasped even as my eyes slid shut. “You can’t feed from me.”

My husband spoke against my damp neck. “Our princess still thinks she gives the orders around here, General.” He licked my skin as he caressed my breasts, his long fingers skimming the undersides before sweeping up to my tingling nipples. He pinched both peaks hard. “Perhaps she needs a lesson in paying attention.”

The smack landed before he finished speaking. My eyes flew open as I jumped and tried in vain to close my legs again. Arched as I was, my pussy was at the perfect angle for Varick to punish.

And he did, delivering hard, rapid-fire swats that ripped pained squeals from my throat and made my eyes water. He didn’t stop at one this time. He kept going, his heavy palm striking my vulnerable clit over and over. His eyes gleamed palest yellow as he watched me gasp and jerk. The burn between my legs intensified, sliding between pain and pleasure and back again. I squirmed between him and Laurent, gasping and whimpering and flinching with every vicious crack against my denuded mound and swollen clit. Every time I thought Varick would stop, he simply continued. And then continued some more.

All the while, Laurent tormented me from behind, stroking my breasts and plucking at my nipples. He dragged his fang over my pulse as if daring me to speak up again.

But I was beyond speech. My mouth opened on a moan and stayed that way, my breath coming in hoarse cries that followed every brutal slap. To my mortification, the sound of the swats grew thicker, amplified by my wetness. And Varick was hitting me so hard! Desperate, I thrust a hand over my pussy.

“No,” Laurent scolded, quickly seizing my wrist and pulling it away.

Smack, smack, smack. Varick’s eyes glowed as he watched me writhe and cry out.

My eyes streamed. It was too much. I couldn't take anymore. The word stop hovered in my mind like a bright, shiny beacon. If I reached for it, I knew Varick would keep his word. But he'd also keep my release from me. That would be my punishment. The general didn't give during sex. Not even a little bit.

My cries grew louder. My hips lifted, my body straining. Seeking. I thrust up and up, and then I sought the burn. I wanted the pain, which had suddenly become nothing but pleasure. It rushed through me, fire spreading everywhere.

And I combusted. Ecstasy flooded me, bowing my spine harder as I screamed and flew apart. I thrashed, vaguely aware of Varick's swats turning into sweet circles around my clit. He stroked me until I stopped bucking, and then he pulled me up, threaded a hand through my hair, and kissed me.

Gasping and boneless, I let him in, as helpless to stop this onslaught as I'd been to stop the first. And, once again, I didn't want to. I clung to him, my arms around his neck and my legs spread around him as he plundered my mouth. My hips rolled as aftershocks shuddered through me, making me whimper against his lips. His beard brushed my face, and his damp palm spread over my back.

Something brushed my lower back. Laurent. I'd forgotten about my husband.

Varick ended the kiss. "Stop fucking around and get on the bed."

In the split-second it took me to realize he wasn't speaking to me, Laurent's soft laughter caressed my hip. I looked over my shoulder as he stood and backed up, his silver eyes dancing with heat and mischief. He'd removed his jacket and shirt, and his pants were loose and riding low on his hips. His rippling abs formed a V-shape that never failed to make my mouth water. He walked backward until his legs hit the bed. Then he let himself fall, landing in a graceful heap that made his pants sink lower.

Varick rose, picking me up like I weighed nothing and depositing me in the chair he'd just vacated. He hooked a finger under my chin and forced my gaze to his. "Legs wide, halfling. You sit and watch for a minute. And if I catch your fingers anywhere near your clit, I'll put you over my knee and spank your ass the same way I just spanked your pussy."

I suppressed a whimper as my cheeks flamed. My buttocks clenched as if anticipating what that might feel like. The chair under me was hard. His hand would be a lot harder.

Shivering, I spread my legs.

"Wider."

The whimper escaped as I obeyed, gripping the edges of the chair's seat and spreading my legs as wide as they would go without hurting. My stomach quivered. Below it, my mound was a bright, angry pink from Varick's hand.

"Good girl," he said, and went to the stand with the pitcher and goblets. He poured himself blood-wine and drank, his eyes on me above the goblet's rim. The sight of his thick throat working as he swallowed was surprisingly alluring, and I knew I'd never be able to watch him eat or drink again without thinking of this moment. From now on, my mind would forever link the simple act of him swallowing blood-wine with him spanking my pussy and then making me sit nude and splayed open for his pleasure.

"He's bare because I keep him that way," he'd said of Laurent. "It reminds him that he belongs to me."

I had a growing certainty that no one Varick claimed as his own ever forgot it.

Laurent lay on his back on the bed, one hand behind his head and the other rubbing lazy circles on his stomach. He turned his head as Varick set down the goblet, and he watched with rapt eyes as Varick prowled to the bed.

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My heart sped up as Varick planted a knee between Laurent's thighs and climbed over him. Varick angled his hips to one side of Laurent's, giving me an unimpeded view of Varick's hand dragging Laurent's pants down. Laurent lifted his hips, a needy moan escaping him as his cock sprang free.

I bit my lip so I wouldn't moan, too. I expected Varick to remove Laurent's pants completely, but he left them at Laurent's thighs. Then he reached between Laurent's legs and grabbed his balls.

Laurent sucked in a breath, his stomach going concave. He whipped his hand from behind his head and gripped the sheet instead.

Varick's fingers turned white.

"Fuck!" Laurent muttered, his jaw going tense as he stared up at Varick. He shifted his hips, and it was obvious he wanted to spread his legs but couldn't with his pants around his thighs. His shaft bobbed, the thick length flushed a deep red.

Varick ignored it, keeping his fingers brutally tight around Laurent's sack. His expression was fierce as he lowered his head and spoke quietly in Laurent's ear.

I leaned forward, straining to hear, but I caught only snippets—things like "good boy" and "when I tell you." Oddly enough, the fact that I couldn't hear everything made the heat simmering inside me flare higher. Varick's whisper was low and intense, and it clearly had an effect on Laurent, who nodded and moaned and shifted his hips again. He bucked a bit against Varick's grip, which looked more painful by the second.

Varick lifted his head and looked down at his hand between Laurent's legs. Slowly, he pulled Laurent's sack down, stretching the delicate skin. My heart pounded, and I couldn't decide if I wanted to look away or continue watching as Varick kept going, stretching Laurent's balls lewdly.

"Oh...fuck," Laurent moaned, dragging the last word out to a broken whimper. He lifted his head, only to slam it back down once he got a look between his legs. His fingers clawed at the sheet, and his smooth chest rose and fell rapidly. "I can't," he gasped.

"Yes, you can," Varick murmured, still tugging. "Breathe with it instead of complaining."

Laurent whimpered again, one fang piercing his bottom lip. Varick dipped his head and licked the dot of blood that appeared. He kept his mouth hovering just above Laurent's as he squeezed and stretched Laurent's sack.

"Get your dick out of my way," he said quietly.

Laurent closed his eyes on a long blink. Then he reached a shaking hand down and pulled his cock up. He held it against his stomach, and he appeared to hold his breath, too.

Varick released his sack, only to slap it hard. The sharp crack was so loud and unexpected, I jumped and just barely managed to swallow my scream.

Laurent wasn't as successful. His cry bounced around the room as he arched off the bed. His breath shuddered out, then he glared up at Varick and growled deep in his chest. "You are such a fucking dick."

"You want to say that again?" Varick asked, seizing Laurent's sack once more.

Laurent clamped his mouth shut, but his glare remained.

Varick's hand flew. This time, Laurent howled, drawing his knees up until Varick shoved them back down.

Laurent glared and hissed, his fangs flashing. "You—"

Varick closed Laurent's mouth with a kiss. He moved his hand to Laurent's dick and stroked. Now, his grip looked firm but gentle, his fist sliding up and down Laurent's shaft lovingly.

Laurent melted beneath him, the hand he'd clenched in the sheets coming up to cup Varick's jaw. Laurent moaned and sifted his fingers through Varick's beard, his hips rolling in a slow, sensual grind as he pumped his straining dick into Varick's hand. When Varick broke the kiss to trail his lips down Laurent's throat, Laurent arched his neck and gave a throaty moan that curled my toes.

"Fuck, baby," he rasped. "Just like that. Don't stop. Fuck, don't stop." He slid his hand into Varick's hair as Varick's fist continued stroking. They moved together, the tension between them giving way to satisfied grunts and masculine moans.

They were mesmerizing to watch. Their bodies were so different from mine, all that carved muscle on display. Predators. That was what they were. Far more so than I could ever be with human blood running through my veins. Varick was speed and brute strength. Laurent was leaner and sleeker, but just as dangerous. Combined, they were deadly. And beautiful.

Watching Varick handle Laurent's dick brought my desire roaring back to life. My sex heated, moisture quickly pooling and trickling from my spread pussy. I shifted on the chair, gasping softly when the movement nudged my damp opening against the wood. I was sore from Varick's spanking. The ache mingled with my growing desire,

creating another confusing mixture of pleasure and pain. I rocked my hips on the chair, trying to decide if I liked it.

Laurent moaned as Varick nuzzled his throat. Varick swiped his hand over Laurent's cockhead, gathering the moisture that seeped from Laurent's slit and slicking it down Laurent's thick, veined shaft.

Laurent dragged Varick's head back up and resumed their kiss. It quickly turned aggressive, their jaws working against each other. They battled, nipping and sucking at each other's mouths, their tongues and fangs flashing. For a moment, it seemed like Laurent might have the upper hand—then Varick gave Laurent's dick a vicious tug that jerked Laurent's hips off the bed.

Laurent moaned and settled down, opening his mouth wide as he surrendered to Varick's kiss. Seeing him give in had me squeezing the sides of the chair. He was always so self-assured with me. In our interactions, he seized control. But he was completely at Varick's mercy now, all his stinging quips and mischievous smiles muzzled by Varick's dominance. And maybe my husband was right about me. Maybe there was more darkness within me than I cared to admit. Because witnessing his submission didn't just heat me up. It set me on fire.

Varick lifted his head and looked at me. His eyes gleamed as he extended his hand. "Don't just sit there, halfling. Come over here and help me fuck him."

Chapter Five

VARICK

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:04 am

Given was a vision as she rose and walked to the bed.

If she ever found out what the sight of her bald little pussy did to me, I'd be in big trouble. Probably, she was going to find out. One glance at Laurent confirmed he already knew. The smirk in his silver eyes made me want to bind his hands and start on his sack all over again.

But I could do better than that. I had Given to help me.

I took her hand and helped her sit astride Laurent facing me. Immediately, he seized her hips and tugged her backward until her ass covered his face.

Her blue eyes went wide. "Laurent!"

"Quiet, princess," he said lazily, his beringed fingers around her waist. "The general was an absolute beast to your pussy. I'm going to kiss it better." A second later, she gasped, and I knew he'd put his very talented tongue to work.

"Oh...my...Laurent," she moaned. She splayed one hand on his taut stomach and leaned forward, her head drooping as she straddled his face. He growled and dug his fingers into her waist. The soft, wet sounds of his feasting drifted down to me as I yanked his pants off and tossed them aside.

"Don't make her come," I warned, and he grunted his assent as I left the bed and stripped. I fetched oil from under the pillows, then stood next to the bed at Laurent's shoulder and drew Given's mouth to mine. I kissed her lips as Laurent kissed her pussy, my dick swelling at the satisfaction of having both of them in my bed. I wasn't

sure what expectations the three of us had for each other, but maybe we didn't have to figure it out all at once. Maybe we could figure it out as we went. There was something exciting about that—the idea of discovering another person's edges and limits. And when you could blur those edges and push those limits.

Given returned my kiss, and she gave a breathy little protest when I broke away. Her glittering blue eyes tracked me as I settled between Laurent's thighs and stroked my dick. A flush had spread down her chest as Laurent ate her pussy. Her rosy nipples were two tight, tempting berries I wanted to suckle. And that plump, bare pussy...

"Damn," I grunted, watching Laurent's stubbled jaw work as he thrust his tongue into her. I'd have to think of other reasons to paddle her mound. Any excuse to drink in her cries as her clit pouted at me from between those soft, silky lips.

I dragged my gaze up and found hers locked on my hand working my dick. I let it sail up and slap my stomach, and she bit her lip hard. When I took Laurent's shaft in hand, she moaned loudly.

"Halfling," I murmured, and lust-drunk blue eyes lifted to mine. "You want to help me prep his hole?"

Laurent groaned.

Given looked at my hand pumping Laurent's shaft. "Yes."

"Come here, then."

Laurent gave her a light slap on the ass as she squirmed off his face. I grabbed him around the thighs and yanked him into me. The movement yanked her too, and I smiled as she gasped and grabbed his knee.

“Hold his ankle,” I told her, lifting his leg up, then smiled at his muttered “fuck” that drifted down from the pillows.

She took his ankle, then watched, her expression spellbound, as I drizzled oil on his dick.

“Stroke him, sweetheart,” I said, guiding her free hand to his shaft. “Get him nice and hard while I open him up.”

“Can’t get any fucking harder,” he said behind her.

I dribbled oil on his crinkled pucker. “You say that like you don’t think I’ll take you up on the challenge.” I rubbed two fingers around his hole and watched the muscle contract.

“Oh gods,” Given whispered, her hand faltering on his dick.

I took her hand and lay her shiny fingertips over his slick asshole. “Firm circles.”

Her cheeks turned the same deep pink as her nipples as she followed my instructions, smearing oil around Laurent’s quivering hole while he groaned at her back.

“Good girl,” I murmured. “Now give him one finger. Slow. Give him a chance to open. You’ll feel it.” I took over stroking his dick as she bit her lip hard and pushed a finger inside him.

It was my turn to bite my lip. Because watching his perfect, pink asshole swallow her finger rushed me right to the edge. Laurent wasn’t doing much better as he jerked his hips and moaned loudly from the top of the bed. His slit leaked, precome mixing with oil. I bent and sucked his tip into my mouth, my head brushing Given’s breasts as I swiped my tongue around Laurent’s cockhead.

“Varick!” he yelled, shuddering violently and leaking into my mouth. “I’m going to come.”

I pulled off his dick. “Not yet.” But, fuck, it needed to be soon. My balls ached, my own dick dripping. I worked a finger into his hole alongside Given’s, and their moans mingled as his silky heat squeezed hard. “There’s my slut,” I growled. “Show our princess how much you want it.”

Laurent groaned and obeyed, squeezing his inner muscles rhythmically. I watched Given watch the fluttering contractions, and then I leaned in and took her mouth in a quick, hard kiss. When we broke apart, I pulled my finger from Laurent’s hole and smacked him hard on the ass. “Get ready.”

He understood, and he lowered his legs as I lifted Given and flipped her around so she faced him. “He’s been a good boy,” I said, resettling her astride him. “I think he deserves a reward.”

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Laurent grasped Given's hips and gave me an irritated look. "Oh, is one of you finally going to fuck me?"

I kissed Given's shoulder. "What do you say, halfling? Do you want to ride him?"

"Yes," she breathed, already rocking. "Please."

I urged her up with a pat on her ass, then grabbed his dick and guided it to her opening. She was so wet, she took him easily, sliding down with a low, sultry moan that went straight to my cock. She began moving right away, her slim hips rolling as she worked her pussy onto his dick.

"Oh, princess," Laurent said in a strained voice. He reached up and fondled her tits before squeezing her waist again. She rode him faster, and he shot me a tense look. "Hurry baby. I'm not going to last."

That made two of us. Moving quickly, I slicked oil over my shaft again, then pushed his legs up and brought my dick to his opening. I teased him for a few seconds, pumping my cockhead inside and making sure he was ready.

His fingers bit into Given's hips. "Slow down for a second, darling." She stilled, and I pushed forward. As I sank home, Laurent's dark lashes fluttered, and his toes curled in the air.

"Fuck," I said through clenched teeth. He was tight, and I didn't want to hurt him. Not like this. There were good and bad ways to hurt, and he and I both knew the difference. I clenched everything—my muscles, my ass, my will as I struggled to

hold still when all I wanted to do was pound into the hot, slick paradise clamped around my dick. I rested my forehead against Given's shoulder and squeezed my eyes shut.

She was the first to move. And, somehow, that was perfect. She led us, her sweetly curved body taking us gently forward. And in that moment, I knew she'd understood me earlier when I spoke in her head after Laurent sought the temple instead of the Council chamber.

"He's going to be a while, my queen."

She'd looked at me across the table, her blue eyes troubled and full of questions.

The answers were complicated, and I'd held her stare as the lords argued around us. "I understand if you're angry with him. Just know that no one could ever punish Laurent more than he punishes himself." Born to parents who hated each other and sought to use him for their own purposes, he'd never been loved for who he was—only for what he could do. And he could never do enough. He tried. He'd spent his whole life trying, nearly killing himself to gain bly'ad and take down his father. He'd studied in the Sanctum. He'd spent his childhood bent over dusty books or trembling on his knees. Sorina had taken him to the cloister in the Wastes, where he'd scrubbed chamber pots between prayers.

He'd done everything he was supposed to do, and it wasn't enough. It was never going to be enough. Because Laurent wasn't the god his father had tried to create. He wasn't the pure, perfect vessel Sorina and Petru had tried to mold. The gods had given him so much power. He'd spent all of his thirty-four years trying to deserve it.

And it was never, never enough.

No one was ever going to convince him. Nobody could make him give up trying. The

only way to make him stop for a little bit was to force him. Hurt him. Bend him until he stopped fighting for a spell. And this—not power—was the thing Laurent truly craved. Underneath his irreverence and witticisms and seeming disregard for the rules, Laurent longed to lose control.

Given rolled her hips and gave him what he wanted. She led and he and I followed, the three of us falling into a seamless flow of sighs and soft touches and thrusting hips. Time stopped, and the cares of the kingdom and the prophecy faded away. Right now, there was only this, and only this mattered. Laurent's ass gripped me, every thrust so hot and perfect I almost wanted to stop so I didn't have to feel it end. I leaned forward, pushing his knees to his shoulders and folding Given between us.

He kissed her and skimmed his hands up her sides, dipping his fingers into the tiny hollows of her rib cage. And when their kiss ended, she turned her head and gave it to me. I tasted her. Tasted Laurent on her tongue. Tasted the three of us blended together. Where would we go after this? I didn't fucking care. We'd go together. That was fine with me.

Something drifted past my shoulder, and I turned my head and saw small, white blossoms. They rained down around the bed, falling gently and disappearing before they touched the ground.

"You're not going anywhere," I told Given, kissing her shoulder. "We've got you."

Laurent threw his head back, his mouth open and his eyes two burning, silver slits. Dark lashes dusted his cheeks as he gasped in time with my thrusts. I fucked him harder, sweat dripping from my forehead onto Given's back. I drove into him, my stomach slapping her ass and grinding her onto his dick over and over. Her magic filled the room, her blossoms dusting our skin before winking away.

Laurent gripped my forearm, a choked cry spilling from his lips. A second later, he

shuddered, his fangs stabbing down as he came hard. Given cried out and shook between us.

And then I was swept away too, my orgasm bowing my spine as I yelled and spurted deep inside Laurent's ass. I emptied into him, but it was really both of them, this time between us different in a way I knew I'd never be able to put into words.

We ended up in a heap in the center of the ruined bed, pillows strewn and damp sheets twisted beneath us.

"I'm never going to be able to fall asleep like this," Laurent muttered, his bent arm over his eyes again.

He was asleep in under a minute.

Given and I faced each other on the pillows. I touched her cheek, and understanding passed between us. We'd solved nothing. The prophecy and Midian waited for us. The Rift loomed, the day's failure revealing Sithistra as a bigger threat than we'd thought. The Deepnight and the Thicket continued to crumble. We hadn't fixed any of it. We hadn't even fixed Laurent. But we'd tightened some of the threads that connected the three of us. And that was enough for now.

It was enough.

Chapter Six

GIVEN

At some point in the night, Varick got fed up with Laurent's tossing and turning on the rumpled sheets and moved all three of us downstairs to Laurent's bedchamber. Varick stole my heart a little more by cleaning Laurent up and tucking him into bed.

Then he ruined it by insisting on accompanying me to the privy—and standing right there with his back turned while I did my business. I lay awake wondering how I was going to survive never truly being alone. The irony of my situation was so perfect that I smiled ruefully at the canopy above Laurent's bed. I'd spent my childhood wishing for companionship. Helen had loved me, but she'd been a servant. And, now I knew, another person assigned to watch me.

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Watchers. In another twist of irony, the mages' ancient name was literal now. I couldn't be alone because I couldn't control my power. I wasn't certain what I could or couldn't do with it—or if I should try using it at all. I had no reason to escape to the Middling now. Even if I had a reason to farsee, I was too frightened to attempt it for fear of landing in Vai Seren. My one solace was that Midian couldn't reach me in my dreams. According to Varick, the demons needed a conscious mind to weave illusions. And now I knew I'd never dreamed of Midian at all. I'd dreamed of Avenor and the tragedy that was his failure and my birthright.

But I could farsee in my dreams. I'd done it before, when I stayed in Aberwas and traveled briefly to Vai Seren as I slept. The memory of seeing Varick wrapped in vines was permanently etched in my mind. Midian had looked so pleased when I arrived.

The sky outside Laurent's bedchamber windows was a deep purple. Dawn was another hour or so off. Servants were probably already stirring, lighting kitchen fires and clearing snow from the courtyards around the towers. Castles were a beehive of activity in the morning. They were busy all the time, really.

I jerked awake—which was my first sign that I'd fallen asleep. The second was that thick shafts of bright yellow sunlight slanted through the bedchamber.

And a thick layer of dust covered the floor, turning the carpets gray. Panic set my heart skipping beats. Trembling, I looked at Laurent and Varick sleeping beside me. My panic ebbed slightly. They were real. They were solid. I hadn't gone anywhere. But as I looked up again, piles of broken furniture appeared in the room. In the corner, an upholstered sofa slowly materialized. It was the kind of elegant piece a

highborn lady might keep in her chamber.

It was the same sofa I woke on when the elves dragged me to the castle in Vai Seren.

“You’ve been missed, Given,” Midian said in my mind.

My trembling increased. I wasn’t safe. Laurent and Varick weren’t safe.

“Well, that’s your fault.”

How?

In my head, the demon king made an impatient sound. “You’re not very bright, are you? Running from a destiny so much larger than you could ever be.” He chuckled. “Fate has such a delicious sense of humor.”

I blinked rapidly, trying to decide if the dust and furniture were real or illusion. Maybe this wasn’t like the night I visited Rolund’s camp. Maybe I wasn’t pulling Vai Seren into the room. Midian was a liar. He could be putting visions in my head. Making me see things. None of this was real.

Valen of Lar Keiren stepped around one of the posts at the foot of the bed. His handsome, brutal face twisted with disgust as he took in Varick sleeping with his arm around Laurent. Hard, golden eyes lifted to mine. “Do I look real to you, little doll?”

A harsh sob escaped me.

Varick and Laurent shot upright. At the same moment, Valen and the furniture winked out of sight.

“Given?” Varick grasped my shoulder and shook me a little. “What is it? What did

you see?" His golden eyes were hard. Just like his father's.

I recoiled, fear scrabbling down my spine. "Don't touch me!"

Surprise flashed across his face.

Laurent stared at a shaft of sunlight slanting across the foot of the bed. "It's too bright in here. Something is—"

A muffled scream drifted through the windows.

The three of us tensed. "You both heard that?" I asked the men.

"Yes," Laurent said grimly. He flung the covers back and left the bed.

Another scream.

The scent of smoke hit my nose. Something in the palace was on fire.

Varick was a blur as he leapt from the bed. Before he could do anything else, pounding footsteps rang out, and three palace guards burst into the chamber. The one in front was badly burned, his skin red and bloodied. Sickening bubbles covered his cheek.

"Your Grace!" he gasped, his shoulders heaving. "The sky has opened up. The Deepnight above the city is gone."

Varick paled. "Gone?"

The guard turned to him and spoke between harsh, panting breaths. "There are also reports of fighting in the streets, General. A merchant stumbled through the palace

gate saying he saw soldiers with mirrors.”

Laurent and Varick were moving before the guard finished his sentence. Laurent blurred as he left the room. A second later, I heard him bellowing for servants.

Varick swung toward me with a forbidding expression. “You do not leave this room. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I rasped. “But—”

“No buts,” he said sharply. “That’s an order, my queen. I won’t compromise on your safety.” He strode to the guards and put a hand on the wounded male’s shoulder. “Summon a thrall and feed until you heal. Then I want all three of you watching this chamber’s outer door.” His tone went hard as steel. “If anyone but me, the king, or one of my knight captains walks through it, you kill them on the spot. Is that clear?”

“Yes, General,” the males said in unison.

“The queen doesn’t leave this room. Guard her with your lives.”

“Yes, my lord,” the bloodied male said. “We’ll protect her.”

Varick left. Another distant scream drifted from outside. Heart pounding, I looked at the windows. They were too high up on the wall for me to see what was happening on the streets. But Laurent had a balcony. Like mine, it overlooked the city.

I slipped from the bed, and the guards averted their eyes as I crossed the room in my nightdress. They murmured among themselves as I quickly dressed in a gown I could button without help. As I was shoving my feet into slippers, someone pounded on the door in the main chamber. The guards drew their swords and went to answer it. A second later, I heard Captain Radu’s voice.

My gaze fell on Avenor’s sword leaning against the armoire that held my gowns. I’d been reluctant to touch it since Rolund’s death. For a second, I considered reaching for it. Then Radu’s voice sounded again, and I spun and rushed to the main chamber.

Radu stood with the guards and two wary-looking thralls—one male and one female. The thralls looked at me and quickly dropped their eyes.

“Your Grace,” Radu said, bowing slightly. “The general sent me. He gave orders for you to remain in this chamber.”

“Thank you—”

“And away from the windows.”

Irritation spiked. “What’s happening outside? Are we under attack?”

Radu glanced at the thralls, his expression growing shuttered. “I couldn’t say. I came straight from the barracks in the Serenity Tower.”

I understood that he wouldn’t speak in front of the thralls. They kept their eyes on the floor, the dark-red ribbons around their necks and wrists impossible to overlook. The glossy, liquid bands clung to their skin, the strips more like a living entity than fabric. Laurent had placed them during the blood rite he’d performed my first night in the palace, which felt like a lifetime ago. Like most thralls, the pair was young. The man had the broad shoulders and tan skin of someone who’d grown up on a farm. Although both thralls were dressed well, they were undoubtedly from poor southern families. Sithistran nobles and merchants didn’t sell their children into blood servitude.

Radu grabbed the male thrall by his shirt collar and shoved him toward the wounded guard. “Use this one first,” Radu told the guard. “If you need more, you can have the girl.”

The guard seized the man’s hair, yanked his head to the side, and bit through the red band that circled the thrall’s neck. The thrall flinched and squeezed his eyes shut.

Beside Radu, the young woman lowered her head. She held her arms in front of her, one hand folded over the other. The red ribbons gleamed around her wrists.

That could have been my fate.

My throat went dry as I stared at her. Rolund had sent me over the Rift to serve as a thrall. Laurent could have bound my wrists and throat and fed from me for a year. And for the rest of my life, everyone would have known I'd been a slave. In Sithistra, it didn't matter that the servitude was voluntary. The year of service carried a lifetime of stigma, even though the compensation was enough to lift an entire family out of poverty. Once a thrall, always a thrall. Only the poorest humans offered themselves. Was the service truly willing if the servant's choices were submission or starvation?

A soft moan drew my gaze back to the young man. The guard's face was buried in his neck. The thrall was pale under his tan, his brow furrowed as he moaned again. One hand dangled at his side. The other came up to grip the guard's forearm. Between the thrall's legs, a noticeable bulge pressed against the front of his trousers. Memories of feeding from Elissa—and feeling the unwelcome stir of arousal—flooded my mind. She'd asked me to sample her blood to check on her pregnancy. When I'd hesitated, she'd commanded me.

“Are you well, my queen?” Radu asked.

I jerked my gaze from the thrall. Radu stared at me, his warrior's body dwarfing the female thrall next to him.

I cleared my throat. “Yes, Captain. Thank you.”

The male thrall moaned more loudly. His mouth hung open, his ragged breaths lifting his chest. The ribbons were supposed to stop vampires from taking too much blood. Just as I began to worry something was wrong, the guard wrenched away with a gasp,

his fangs distended and dripping blood. The thrall swayed. One of the other guards caught his arm and led him to a chair.

“Get him some water,” Radu ordered. He looked at the first guard, whose skin was now pink and healing. “You need more?”

The guard shook his head as he took out a cloth and wiped blood from his chin. “No, sir. I’m good.”

Radu turned to the young woman. “Go sit with the other one.”

As she obeyed, eyes downcast, discomfort squirmed through my gut. I hadn’t paid much attention to the blood thralls during my time in the palace. Before Vai Seren, I either drank blood-wine or fed from Laurent. Like servants, the thralls blended into the background.

Or maybe I simply hadn’t noticed the things I didn’t want to notice.

“What is your name?” I asked the woman.

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She froze in the act of pulling out a chair. Her gaze darted from me to Radu.

“Answer the queen,” he said gruffly.

“M-Mira,” she said. Her cheeks turned a brilliant pink. “Your Grace,” she added hastily.

It was a common name for girls in the South. Parents named their daughters after the Lord of the Mir. The male version was Miro.

“It’s lovely,” I told her. I looked at the young man. “And yours?”

“Henrik,” he mumbled.

“Do you—” I cut myself off before I could ask if they missed their families. Of course they did. I licked my lips and tried again. “Have you received letters from home?”

The thralls exchanged a look. Mira spoke in a tone that was almost apologetic. “Your Grace, neither of us can read or write.”

Embarrassment flooded me. Or maybe it was shame.

I looked between the thralls. “If you wish it, I could write letters for you.”

Radu stayed silent, but I could feel his disapproval.

Mira's eyes lit up. "You would do that?"

A scream split the air. High-pitched and full of terror, it sounded like it came directly from the courtyard. Before it cut off, several more rang out—along with the clang of steel on steel. I rushed toward Laurent's balcony, only to stumble to a halt when Radu stepped into my path.

"No windows, Your Grace."

I tried to step around him.

He moved quickly, his crimson cloak swinging out as he blocked me. "The general—"

"Lord Varick said no windows, Captain. He said nothing about the balcony." I drew a deep breath. "Step aside, sir. Please."

"I have my orders, Your Grace. It's thirty lashes if I disobey the general."

"I'll speak to him."

"Respectfully, ma'am, that won't do any good. And even without the lashes, I wouldn't disobey Lord Varick."

"That's admirable, Captain, but I need you to get out of my way."

"I can't do that, Your Grace."

I fainted left. He anticipated it, his big body blocking my path before I saw him move. Outside, men's shouts joined the screams. The sound of shattering glass drifted through the windows.

“Step aside, Captain Radu,” I growled, cursing myself for leaving Avenor’s sword behind. I waited for the grip to fill my hand, but nothing happened.

Radu’s gaze flicked to something over my shoulder. The guards. Just as a hand clamped around my arm, I slipped from my body.

I heard it hit the floor behind me as I landed in front of the balcony doors. Sunlight blazed, the glare so bright I had to fumble for the latch before I caught it and stumbled outside. For a moment, I was blinded, and I threw up a hand as my ears filled with screams and the sounds of battle on the streets below.

I blinked rapidly, willing my vision to clear. When I lowered my arm, a cry ripped from my throat.

The Deepnight above Lar Katerin looked like an angry god had dropped a boulder directly over the city, creating a perfect hole in the canopy. Now, the twilight formed a hazy circle on the horizon, leaving all of Lar Katerin exposed. Harsh morning sunlight baked the streets, where Sithistran knights with mirrors fought bloodied and burnt Nor Doruvians. Everywhere I looked, men sparred in hand-to-hand combat. Swords flashed. Light from the Sithistrans’ mirrors bounced everywhere, striking off buildings and vampires. A Nor Doruvian knight caught a beam in the face and fell to the ground, his skin smoking. Another knight grabbed his cloak and dragged him backward into the shadows of a building.

Motion drew my eye to a narrow street near the palace gate. A pair of Sithistran soldiers pulled a screaming female from a merchant’s shop. She fought them, clinging to the doorway before they forced her into the street. Her scream turned to wails as her skin caught fire. One of the soldiers kicked her to the ground, where she writhed as the flames consumed her. A second later, she turned to ash.

“No,” I whispered, my knees loosening. Shock and disbelief warred within me. The

Sithistrans were here. Humans marched through the streets of Lar Katerin, slaughtering lowpeople and killing warrior knights. They were aided by the sun, which the lowpeople couldn't endure. I stared at the ash pile that had been the female, my mouth watering uncontrollably as vomit surged up my throat.

“Given!”

I whirled as Varick appeared beside me, a heavy cloak over his head. His skin smoked as he grabbed my arm and hauled me back from the railing. One side of his face was burned, his beard black and patchy. He was covered in sweat and dirt. His hand on my arm was shockingly red, like he’d thrust it into a pot of boiling water.

“You’re hurt!” I cried.

He pulled me inside and slammed the balcony doors shut. When he whipped around, his expression made me take a step back. “Damn you, female, I should heat your disobedient, reckless backside.”

I ignored him and reached for his hood. “Let me see—”

“I’m fine,” he growled, taking my arm again. He turned me and gave me a light shove. “Get back in your body. You can’t stay in the palace.”

All at once, I became aware of Radu, the guards, and the thralls standing around my body, which lay crumpled on the carpet. They all looked like they’d seen a ghost. They’d also just heard Varick threaten to spank me.

Varick’s warning growl rumbled directly behind me. “Given—”

“I’m going!” I stared at my body and willed myself into it. A breath later, I stared at Varick’s boots advancing toward me across the carpet. He bent and helped me rise, and then seven feet of angry warrior loomed over me.

He pulled me away from Radu and the others, and his golden eyes were stark as he took my face in his hands. “Listen to me and don’t argue. The city is falling. We can’t fight the Sithistrans under the naked sun. If the Green Guards storm the palace, they’ll take you prisoner.” His voice went low. “They’ll take you to the Rift, Given.”

My bowels turned watery. “I know.”

“We must evacuate. Radu will take you through the tunnels that lead outside the city. From there, you’ll go to Lar Budina. It’s a sizable village about a half hour ride away. From the look of the horizon, the Deepnight appears to be holding there.”

“What about you?”

“Laurent is down in the streets. I have to fetch him.”

My breath caught. “In the streets? The Sithistrans will kill him.”

“Not on my watch.” Varick’s eyes gleamed with an intensity that made shivers course down my spine. “I want you to swear you’ll do as Radu says. You’ll obey every order without question. Swear it to me now, halfling.”

The endearment made my throat burn. “I swear,” I rasped.

“I love you,” he said in my mind, his golden eyes bright in his reddened, dirt-streaked face. “You and I have survived worse than this. We’ll survive today.”

“Yes.” For a moment, we stared at each other. Then I flung myself into his arms and kissed him, not caring if Radu and the others were watching. After a brief moment of hesitation, he squeezed me against him and returned the kiss. I tasted his sweat and my tears.

A few breathless seconds later, he set me away from him. “I trust Captain Radu with my life. And yours.” He looked at Radu, who stood watching us with the guards and the thralls behind him. “Don’t stop until she’s safe in Lar Budina.”

“You have my word and my vow, General.”

Varick nodded and turned to me.

“I have to get Avenor’s sword,” I said. “It’s in the bedchamber.”

“Fetch it quickly. Then go with Radu.” For one tense, shivering moment, he looked like he might kiss me again. But then he pulled his hood more closely around his face. “I have to go.”

“Find Laurent,” I said. “He can’t fall into southern hands, Varick.”

“He won’t. Now go. The king and I will meet you in Lar Budina.”

Chapter Seven

LAURENT

The sun killed everything it touched. And it touched everything.

“We have to fall back, Your Grace!” a knight hollered behind me. His plea was accompanied by hands clutching at my cloak.

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I shook them off and strode forward, sweat streaming down my face as I struggled to keep my eyes open. It was hard. Every blink brought a thousand tiny needles of pain. The smell of my singed, cooking flesh filled my nostrils. In several places, my clothes stuck to my skin, the fabric melted into the muscle and bone underneath.

These discomforts were nothing. I could endure them. My people could not. The ordinary vampires of Nor Doru couldn't survive without the Deepnight. The Sithistrans knew it, and they were going door to door, dragging merchants and townsfolk from the safety of the buildings into the streets. The humans must have been lying in wait, watching the city for any sign of weakness. Well, they'd fucking found it.

Hands clutched at me again. "We can't save the city, Your Grace!"

"I know," I growled without slowing or turning around. The city was lost. But I could still save my people. If I could lead them to the tunnels under the palace, I could get them to safety. Some might survive with blankets thrown over their heads. But we'd have to be quick moving to the city's gates. The Sithistrans were everywhere with their mirrors.

And I was powerless against the sun. The bly'ad for "kill" hovered on my tongue, but speaking it would only kill one southerner at a time. I'd never felt the limits of my power so keenly. Had never felt so fucking helpless as humans marched through the streets and slaughtered my people with the sun.

Ahead, a tavern's wooden sign hung over the street. I rushed to the door and shouldered it open. As I stepped over the threshold, a board swung at my head. I

ducked, and the knights crowding the doorway behind me rushed forward, seizing a male in a stained apron and slamming him against the wall. He grunted painfully. Across the darkened taproom, shocked cries lifted from behind overturned tables.

“I’m sorry!” the male gasped, his eyes wide with shock as the knights pinned him. He fell into an anxious babble. “I’m s-so sorry, Your Grace! I d-didn’t expect to see you. I’ve got my two little girls here, a-and my wife. We tried to make a run for it earlier, but the sun was too bright, and the humans had mirrors—”

“Shut up,” one of the knights hissed. “Keep your voice down.”

“Sorry,” the male, who was obviously the tavern keeper, whimpered.

“Release him,” I ordered. As my knights complied, I looked across the taproom. “It’s all right. You can come out.”

Heads peeked above the tables. A dark-haired female and two young children gaped at me before turning their frightened gazes to my knights.

“My men will take you to safety,” I said, swinging back to the tavern keeper. “Do you have cloaks?”

He nodded vigorously. “Yes, Your Grace. Heavy ones. My wife has family in Wesyfedd, and we visit sometimes.”

“Good. Go get them, and then do everything you’re told.”

“Yes, Your Grace. Everything.”

I looked at the highest-ranking knight—a lieutenant from the Wastes. “Take two men and get these people to safety, Sir Stefan. Stick to the shadows. Even with the cloaks,

they won't be able to tolerate the sun for long."

"Yes, Your Grace." He pointed to two of the knights. "You and you. You're coming with me."

I motioned to the others and headed for the door.

"Wait!" the tavern keeper called out. When I swung back, his face was still frightened. But now there was bewilderment too—the dazed expression of someone who's witnessed something they can't quite make themselves believe. "Can't you put the Deepnight back?" he whispered.

"You think you're smart, boy," my father's ghost said in my mind. "But you're weak. You'll never be able to do the truly hard things."

The tavern keeper swallowed thickly. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Go with the knights." I looked at his wife and daughters, who were now huddled together in the center of the tavern. I pulled my glove off, nicked my thumb, and traced a glyph in the air. "The gods go with you."

The female bowed her head and murmured her thanks in the ancient language of the Sanctum.

A knight opened the door, and I stumbled into the street, blinded not by the sun this time but by my own failure. It hung around my neck, its weight far heavier than the crown. Under my cloak, my scalp and shoulders blistered. Smoke rose from my arms as I moved up the street, the sound of clashing steel and men's shouts drifting from the next street over. Vaguely, I was aware of the knights flanking me.

I should tell them to leave me and flee the city. I was leading them to their deaths.

But the words died on my tongue. I needed these men. I had to save as many Lar Katerins as possible, and I needed the knights to guard the townspeople while they ran for the tunnels.

An anguished wail interrupted my thoughts. A female crouched in the street, her skin smoking as she clawed at something on the cobblestones.

I broke into a run. “Get up!” I yelled, panic gripping me. “Get out of the sun!” I reached her, my hands going to the ties of my cloak. As I prepared to rip it off and throw it over her, I noticed the shoes.

A pair of child’s boots lay in the street. There was clothing, too, and a pile of ash underneath.

“My Alex,” the female cried. Her hands shook, her fingers splayed wide like she wanted to grab everything on the ground. “He was right here.”

I fumbled with my cloak’s ties. “You have to get out of the sun.”

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She turned and looked up at me, and her skin was melting down her face. Her head smoked.

“Your Grace!” someone said next to me.

“He was right here,” the female said, her chin sloughing off and revealing jawbone. It dipped as her mouth opened on a wail. “Where did he go?”

Someone shouted in my face. Hands pulled at me. I threw them off and reached for the female.

She burst into flames.

The hands yanked me backward, pulling me off my feet. NO. The protest welled up and choked me, but I couldn’t spit it out. Like a bly’ad I hadn’t earned, it stuck to my tongue. As the hands clawed me backward, desperation clawed at me, too. I couldn’t leave. I had to save the female and her child.

Light slashed across my vision. A beam bounced, striking my face and raising fire in its wake. Blistering agony sliced from my forehead to my neck. The hands left me, and I flailed as I struggled to keep my balance.

“It’s him!” a rough male voice bellowed. “It’s the priest!”

Gasping, I looked up and saw half a dozen Sithistran knights gathered at the end of the street. Each one held a mirror shield in one hand and a bloodied broadsword in the other. For a second, we stared at each other. Then the knight in the lead charged

me. He swung his mirror forward. Light flashed.

Pain.

Pain like the solstone. Pain like the Rite of Destru. Pain like standing before the gods and having my flesh peeled from my bones.

The smell of cooked meat singed my nostrils. Smoke filled my lungs. I realized I'd squeezed my eyes shut.

Weak. I was going to stand in the street and die under the sun.

I opened my eyes. The Sithistran bore down on me. Varick burst from a side street, his fangs bared in a battle cry that sent chills racing down my spine. His sword arced down, the blade flashing brighter than the mirror. Blood sprayed, and the Sithistran's head spun into the air.

Knights charged behind Varick, their crimson cloaks flying. Within seconds, the Sithistrans were dead.

Varick ran to me and grabbed my arm. "Laurent."

I watched his knights smashing the Sithistrans' mirrors onto cobblestones soaked with blood. Rivulets ran toward the twin heaps of ash that marked the spot where the female had mourned over her son.

"Don't let that blood touch them," I rasped.

"What?" Varick asked, sounding puzzled.

"Don't—" I pushed him aside, urgency beating at me as I rushed to the ashes in the

street. I ripped my cloak off and flung it over the clothes and the vaguely vampire-shaped ashes a breeze was scattering down the street. I fell to my knees and nicked my thumb on my fang. The Rite of Death spilled from between my lips as I rocked on my knees and touched my thumb to one tiny boot. My vision blurred. I rocked harder. When the wind swept more ashes over the cobblestones, I crawled forward and cupped my hand around them.

Varick knelt beside me. “Laurent, we have to go.”

I continued praying, the words emerging with no effort. I’d said them so many times before. The cobblestones probably should have hurt my knees, but they didn’t. I was good on my knees.

“Laurent,” Varick said, and now his voice was strained. Nervous. “Laurent, we’ve lost the city. Sentries on the Serenity Tower spotted more Sithistrans advancing toward the gates. If you love Nor Doru, you will get up right now and come with me. I am begging you to get up. Don’t make me watch my men die.”

The last cut through the haze that had enveloped me. I looked up. Knights stood around me, each one from the warrior class and each one badly burned. Smoke rose from their shoulders and curled into the sky, reminding me of Rolund of Sithistra’s funeral pyre. If I didn’t move, I would kill every single one of these males. Just as I’d killed Petru.

“All right,” I croaked.

Varick had me on my feet before I drew my next breath. Moving fast, he removed his cloak and wrapped it around me. It stuck to my neck.

I wheeled around, searching the sky for the palace’s towers. “Given—”

“In Lar Budina,” he said, stopping my spinning with a firm hand on my bicep. He pulled the cloak’s hood over my head. “Come on.” He didn’t wait. Just grabbed my arm and pulled me into a run. His knights followed. The knights who’d accompanied me from the tavern followed, too. I’d forgotten about them. I’d forgotten my own men in the street.

Weak. The word pounded louder than the knights’ boots. It echoed over and over, running with me as I raced toward the tunnels and left my fallen city behind.

Chapter Eight

GIVEN

“He won’t stop,” I said without turning from the window where I stood rolling bandages.

Outside, Laurent walked up and down rows of wounded knights and lowpeople spread on an elegant lawn.

Well, what used to be an elegant lawn. Now, it was a scene of carnage. The mayor of Lar Budina had graciously vacated his manor house so Laurent could set up a temporary headquarters while the Council decided Nor Doru’s next move. For the past several hours, refugees from Lar Katerin had streamed into the village. All but one of the lords of the Council had escaped the city. Everyone was badly burned.

Under Captain Radu’s direction, the handful of knights who’d avoided serious injuries had cleared the snow from the grass and set up makeshift cots for the wounded. Townspeople had brought blankets and other supplies. Braziers burned brightly, warding off the cold.

Laurent seemed determined to heal every lowperson, knight, and noble. There were thousands. A priest in black robes trailed him, a gold knife from the Sanctum in his hand. Every few minutes, Laurent knelt on the frozen ground and pressed his bloodied thumb between the lips of someone who had fled the city. His face was gaunt, his shoulders stooped. As I watched, he stood and swayed on his feet. The priest steadied him. After a second, Laurent shrugged the male’s hand off and moved to the next person.

“He’s going to kill himself,” I said. Evening was falling, the Deepnight’s purple twilight giving way to true night. As far as I knew, Laurent hadn’t fed or eaten. He still wore the same clothes he’d thrown on after springing from bed this morning.

Behind me, Varick grunted.

I turned at last. Varick sat in a chair before the fire, his eyes on the flames. The mayor’s bedchamber was large and richly furnished. Varick had bathed and fed from a thrall. His wounds were healed, although he’d had to shave his beard. His golden hair waved back from his forehead, and he wore leather trousers and an embroidered jacket a merchant from town had brought to the manor house. If I didn’t know the Deepnight had opened above the city today, I might think he was a well-to-do country lord relaxing after dinner.

I couldn’t keep the anger from my voice. “You’re not going to stop him?” I knew enough about the bly’ad now to know the power words exacted a heavy toll. Speaking the language of the gods drained Laurent. Speaking them over and over could kill him.

Varick stayed silent. The fire popped.

“Varick,” I said sharply.

He looked at me, his expression hard. Almost aloof. He’d been the Varick of old since he arrived in Lar Budina, barely saying two words to me after seeing to his knights and wolfing down enough food to make the maidservants gasp. When he did speak, it was in grunts and monosyllables.

“What,” he demanded now.

I tossed the bandage I’d rolled into a basket at my feet. “You’re being an ass.”

He turned back to the fire. Grunted. Again.

“If you don’t go get Laurent, I’ll go myself.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I’m the queen.” I glanced at the corner where I’d stashed Avenor’s sword.

“And I’m twice your size.” As I sucked in an angry breath, his jaw tightened. “Leave it, Given,” he said more softly. “Not much longer now.”

Not much longer until what? Laurent dropped dead? I frowned at Varick, silently cursing my poor judgment when it came to choosing men. A table adjacent to his chair held a large vase bursting with flowers. It was a big vase. Probably sturdy enough to knock some sense into a male from the warrior class.

Frustration building, I turned back to the window. No one else could hope to approach Laurent. No one but Varick would dare. Lar Guna and some of the other lords had discussed it but ultimately decided to leave the king alone. Besides, they reasoned, he was healing the knights.

Anger nipped at me. Anyone could see Laurent was ailing. But the lords were willing to use Laurent if it meant replenishing Nor Doru’s defenses. I looked at Varick’s reflection in the window. He still watched the flames, his expression hard in profile. He commanded Laurent’s army. He had an interest in seeing his knights restored to good health. But it was difficult for me to believe he could sit idle while Laurent hurt himself this way.

No, it was impossible for me to believe. Varick loved Laurent, and Varick of Lar Keiren was fierce about those he loved. So why was he just sitting there?

“Have the servants prepare a bath,” he said suddenly. “I want it within the next five minutes.”

I stared at him in the window, my frown pulling tighter. “The servants need longer than five minutes to heat water.”

“Tell them not to bother. It’s better if it’s cold.”

I opened my mouth to ask why when movement outside drew my gaze. On the lawn, Laurent staggered on his feet and collapsed.

Varick was up and moving before Laurent hit the ground. “Get me that bath!” he barked over his shoulder. He used his general’s voice—the one that made me jump and obey without stopping to think. I shouted for servants. The manor house was large, and it had the staff to support it. A small army of servants produced a tub and quickly filled it.

Outside, Varick strode to where Laurent lay in the grass surrounded by a growing crowd. Varick shooed them away, scooped Laurent into his arms, and swung back to the manor.

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“That’s enough,” I told the servants, rushing them from the tub to the door. “I don’t think you want to be here when Lord Varick returns.” I wasn’t sure I wanted to, either.

Moments later, Varick’s boots clomped in the hall outside the chamber. He shouldered his way into the room with an unconscious Laurent in his arms, pausing only to kick the door shut with his heel. Then he marched straight to the tub and dumped Laurent into it. Laurent roused at once, sputtering and grabbing at the sides.

He gasped loudly. “What the fu—”

Varick shoved him underwater with a big hand on Laurent’s head.

I clapped a palm over my mouth to hold in my yelp.

Laurent’s legs kicked above the water, sloshing it everywhere. He lost his grip on the tub, and his upper body plunged deeper. Varick held him under with an unforgiving grip on Laurent’s hair.

“He can’t breathe!” I protested.

“Good,” Varick growled. He pulled Laurent from the water. As Laurent choked and sucked in air, Varick went to one knee beside the tub. He kept a tight grip on Laurent’s hair.

“Behave yourself or go back under,” Varick said in his general’s voice. “Which will it be?”

Laurent's chest heaved as water coursed down his face. His fangs were fully distended, his face a mask of rage. "Fuck you! How dare—"

Varick shoved him back down. "Wrong choice," he muttered as Laurent kicked and struggled violently. He was no match for Varick's strength, however, and he only succeeded in making a bigger mess on the mayor's carpet.

After an agonizing minute, Varick pulled Laurent from the water by his hair. Varick released him, leaving Laurent to gag and dry heave as Varick quickly drew his elven-steel dagger and set it on the ground.

Laurent lunged at him, fangs bared and eyes wild. His bite grazed Varick's hand.

Varick blurred, and then he had Laurent by the hair again. The muscles in his shoulders flexed like he was struggling to contain Laurent. "Same question, Your Grace. Are you going to be a good boy?"

"I will confiscate your estates! Seize every piece of property—"

Laurent's threats cut off as Varick shoved him under the water. The tub was more than half-empty now, most of the water soaking into the carpet. I watched helplessly, unsure if I should intervene.

Abruptly, Varick's voice flowed into my head. "Let me handle him, halfling." He turned his head and met my gaze briefly.

I nodded.

He held Laurent under for far longer this time. When he finally dragged Laurent up, Laurent leaned over the side of the tub and vomited water. Varick's dagger flashed. Faster than I could track, he sliced his wrist and thrust it in front of Laurent's mouth.

Laurent's eyes fired bright silver. He hissed and lunged for Varick's arm.

Varick gripped Laurent's hair and yanked his head back. "Slow. Understand?"

"Yes," Laurent gasped. He writhed in Varick's grip. "Please."

"Slow. Say it."

"Slow." Laurent shuddered, and his eyes dimmed a little. "I'll...go slow."

"Who am I?"

Laurent stared at the blood and water streaming down Varick's wrist.

"Laurent," Varick said sharply, shaking him a little.

With a low, broken sound, Laurent looked at him.

"Who am I?" Varick murmured.

Laurent's brow furrowed. "Varick," he rasped. "You're..." He drew a deep breath, and his eyes filled with longing. "I love"—he sucked in another breath—"always loved..."

“And you don’t want to hurt me.”

Laurent’s face crumpled. A wounded, heart-wrenching sob escaped him. “Never,” he said, his voice cracking.

I pressed my hand harder over my mouth. From the moment I’d met him, Laurent had disarmed me. He had an answer for everything, usually delivered with cutting sarcasm or a sensuality I found difficult to resist. I’d met him as he was now, fourteen years my senior and capable of outmaneuvering me in just about every situation. But seeing him like this, I glimpsed a side of him perhaps no one but Varick had seen.

This was Laurent with all his walls down. Raw and vulnerable. Someone wounded a long time ago and terrified to give his heart away. My mind traveled back to one of our earliest conversations—the night he’d shown me the door his mother had bricked up to stop his father from entering her chamber. “All love is a tragedy,” he’d said. “We’ve all got bricked-up doors inside us, Princess. Loving someone means tearing all that down and leaving ourselves open. Make yourself that vulnerable and you give the ones you love the power to hurt you. And they always do.”

It had sounded cynical at the time—the words of a man too worldly to ever allow himself to love. But now I realized that wasn’t true. Laurent was afraid to love. He expected to be hurt. In fact, he counted on it. But he did it anyway. When Laurent fell, he fell hard. And as with everything else he did, he believed he deserved to hurt. It was possible I would have never known this. I’d met him after he’d bricked up the boy Varick knew. But maybe I should have known it. I’d just watched Laurent killing himself to heal Nor Doru’s wounded. He loved his country. Had fallen hard for it. He loved it so much he’d willingly hurt himself for its sake.

He'd follow a prophecy he didn't want to believe in.

My gaze strayed to the window. Until today, I hadn't truly appreciated the terror of the sun. Nothing could erase what I'd seen from Laurent's balcony. As long as I lived, the memory of Sithistran soldiers dragging that female into the street to burn would endure in my memory.

Heart in my throat, I looked at the tub.

Varick loosened his grip on Laurent's hair. "I love you, too," Varick rumbled. "You are loved. Do you understand?"

Laurent squeezed his eyes shut.

"Look at me," Varick said in his general's voice.

Laurent blinked his eyes open. Water dripped from his hair and ran down his face. His fangs were still fully distended, but his eyes appeared calmer.

"I love you. And you're going to feed slowly. Isn't that right?"

"Yes," Laurent rasped. "I promise."

Varick released him. He waited a moment, then pressed his wrist to Laurent's lips.

Laurent groaned. His tongue darted out, tasting Varick. Then he seized Varick's arm and bit down savagely, making Varick grunt and steady himself on his knee. Laurent sucked greedily, his cheeks hollowing with the effort.

"What did I say?" Varick ground out.

“Go ooh,” Laurent said around Varick’s arm.

“So slow down.”

Laurent glared but obeyed, his pulls growing less frantic. After a minute, the burns on his face healed, the skin becoming smooth and whole. His irises lost their wild sheen. His face went from gaunt to healthy.

Varick’s shoulders relaxed. He reached his free hand up and pushed Laurent’s wet hair off his forehead. “Good boy.”

Laurent’s eyes drifted shut, his dark lashes dusting his cheeks. Still sucking, he moaned.

I hugged my waist and tried to ignore the heat building between my legs. I’d just had something of a revelation about my husband. Lar Katerin had fallen today. The lawn outside was full of wounded Nor Doruvians. I had no business feeling desire. But desire and feeding went hand in hand, and it seemed not even disaster could dampen the lust that so often accompanied blood. A dangerous ache. Far more dangerous than I ever realized. But I walked in danger all the time now. What was a little more?

The air crackled with tension that continued to build as the men held each other’s gazes.

Eventually, Laurent pulled his fangs from Varick’s wrist and sagged against the side of the tub. “Fuck,” he whispered. Under the water, he reached between his legs.

I didn’t even see Varick move. In a blink, he gripped Laurent’s throat. “Don’t even think about it,” Varick rasped. He shoved Laurent backward, making water slosh over the rim of the tub and slop onto the floor.

Laurent coughed and gave him a dark look. “What the fuck is your problem?”

Varick surged to his feet. He turned and paced away, only to swing back with a growl. “What’s your problem?”

“Maybe you can tell me since you already seem to know.”

Varick vibrated with anger as he flung a hand toward the window. “How long were you going to stay out there?”

“As long as it takes.”

“You can’t heal everyone on that lawn. You’re lucky you collapsed instead of succumbing to bloodlust. You could have ripped someone’s throat out. You could have ripped my throat out.”

“Not with you fucking drowning me!”

“Exactly.”

I looked at Varick. “Is that why you dunked him?”

He nodded, his shoulders heaving as he stared Laurent down. “It distracted him. Pissed him off enough that he cared more about threatening me than attacking me.”

Laurent huffed. He sat back in the tub and scrubbed water off his face. Despite the feeding, he looked exhausted. “It doesn’t always work.”

“It worked this time,” Varick growled. He stared at Laurent, his jaw clenched so hard I prepared to hear teeth cracking.

Laurent sighed and looked at him. “I know what you’re going to say.”

“No, you don’t, and I’ve earned the right to tell you when you’re being stupid, so shut up and listen.”

Laurent lowered his gaze.

“In battle,” Varick said, “You make the best choice you can under the circumstances. If the choice is between living and dying, it’s not even a difficult one. You could have died in the street today, Laurent.” Varick pointed to the window. “You could have died out there.” He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was lower. “At the Rift, I retreated for the first time in my life. I didn’t like it, but I fucking did it because the alternative was to watch you, Given, and the rest of my men die by sunlight.” Another pause, and he drew a shuddering breath. “Don’t do that to me again.”

I’d seen Varick of Lar Keiren at his most vulnerable. I shouldn’t have been surprised at how much it affected me. But now I knew that his heart was as big as his body. Every time he showed it to me, I fell in love with him a little more.

Laurent’s eyes shimmered. He blinked away tears. “I won’t,” he croaked.

Varick swallowed hard. Nodded. He licked his own wrist, sealing the dagger wound and Laurent’s bite marks. He probably didn’t intend for it to be sensual, but it was. His pink tongue lashed out, and I swore I felt it between my legs.

Abruptly, all the tension in the room shifted. Like someone tossing fresh logs on a fire, it roared and shot higher, filling the air.

“Fuck,” Laurent muttered, his fingers turning white on the edge of the tub. “Varick—”

“No,” Varick said firmly. He faced away and clenched his fists at his sides. He drew a deep breath and spoke in a strained voice. “Both of you, just...don’t move.”

Water sloshed. Laurent slumped in the tub and rested the back of his head on the metal. He kept one hand locked on the rim and closed his eyes. “Not even this freezing water is helping.”

I looked between them, noting Varick's straining erection and Laurent's death grip on the side of the tub. "You two need to fuck each other."

Varick grunted.

I propped a hand on my hip. "If you grunt at me one more time tonight, I'm going to get my sword."

Laurent laughed weakly. "Our princess isn't yet fluent in Varick of Lar Keiren." He opened his eyes and rolled his head toward me. "What the general is trying to say is that he thinks it's a bad idea."

"Because it is a bad idea," Varick rasped, irritation in his voice. He looked at me with glowing eyes. "What did you see this morning before the attack?"

My desire ebbed. "Vai Seren. It was the same as the night I killed Rolund. Parts of Eldenvalla appeared in the bedchamber, and..." I trailed off, my heart pumping harder as I recalled Midian's taunts. Heard him claim it was my fault Laurent and Varick weren't safe.

"And?" Varick prompted.

"I heard Midian and...I saw your father."

Varick's jaw tightened all over again. "Did he touch you?"

"No," I said quickly. "And I only saw him for a few seconds." I drew a deep breath. "Midian said he missed me. Then he insulted my intelligence and said I'm running from my destiny."

Varick came to me and pulled me into his arms. He rested his chin on the top of my

head as he'd done in the hut after we fled Vai Seren. "The demon king is a liar, halfling. You know that."

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“Yes, but he’s in my head. Or, at the very least, he managed to make a connection with me.” Misery settled over me. During the flight from Lar Katerin and the long day seeing to the wounded, I hadn’t thought about Midian. But now that I was reasonably safe in Lar Budina, I had no choice but to acknowledge I’d acquired a new problem. It was the very last thing I needed.

Varick’s heart thumped under my ear. He and Laurent stayed silent. But what was there to say? We could speculate all we wanted, but there was no way to know when or if Midian would speak in my head again. All we could do was wait for the next time.

I breathed in Varick’s scent. Even in borrowed clothes, he still smelled of leather and forest. “Do you think the three of us having sex is making my magic unstable?”

“I don’t know, but I’m afraid to risk it now.” He sighed, and his breath stirred my hair. “I spent tonight trying to make you too angry with me to want to fuck me.”

I slapped a hand on his hard chest and pushed away. “That’s what you were doing?”

In the tub, Laurent chuckled.

Varick glowered at him before turning back to me. He had the good grace to look sheepish. “Laurent was too far gone to feed from anyone else. I knew I’d be hard as obsidian once he took my vein.” Varick brushed his thumb over my bottom lip. “And if you’re in the room, halfling, it’s pretty much a foregone conclusion the three of us are going to fuck.”

“I could have gone somewhere else.”

“Absolutely not.” Varick’s eyes went deadly serious. “From now on, you don’t leave my sight. Right now, my gift of Voice is the only thing we have to guide you back into your body.” His eyes darkened. “I’m not happy with you for farseeing today.”

“What?” Laurent asked sharply.

My cheeks heated. “I only went to the balcony.” I stepped away from Varick. “Why did you have to tell him?”

Varick raised a sandy brow.

“I would have found out eventually,” Laurent said testily. He extended a hand. “Come over here, my lady.”

“What are you going to do?”

He gave me a very Laurent-like look. “Right now, I’m going to continue sitting in this glacier water until my dick goes down or my balls freeze off.” When I went to him and took his hand, he dropped his arrogant expression and offered me a sad smile. “You’re safe from me at the moment, princess. I only wanted to know how you’re feeling after today.”

I sank to my knees beside the tub. Cold water quickly soaked my gown, but I didn’t care. “It’s not your fault about the Deepnight. Everything is connected, remember?”

“I remember. But I didn’t make you a queen for you to rule over a fallen city.”

On impulse, I lifted his hand to my cheek. Then I turned my head and pressed a kiss to his knuckles the way he often did to mine.

His sad smile turned tender. “So much more than I expected,” he said softly. He looked up as Varick approached the tub. Varick knelt beside me and took my other hand. The three of us sat that way, our clothes soaked and a hundred unspoken worries flowing between us.

Laurent let his head thunk against the back of the tub. His gaze wandered the room...and then settled on the chairs positioned before the fireplace. He sat up.

“What is it?” I asked, following his gaze. He stared at the vase on the table next to the chair Varick had sat in. The vase held night-blooming roses, but the vase itself was decorated with tiny white blossoms. They appeared to drift through the air over a clearing filled with tall grasses. My mouth went dry.

Everything is connected.

Laurent looked at Varick. “Is Jordan of Twyl in Lar Budina?”

“He’s staying in one of the guestrooms down the hall.”

A determined look entered Laurent’s eyes. “General, tell our friend the Archmage I wish to speak with him.”

Chapter Nine

VARICK

Jordan of Twyl wasn’t in his bedchamber. When I went looking for him, the secretive little shit was already in the manor’s small library. Waiting.

I’d turned on my heel and fetched Laurent and Given, and now the three of us watched Jordan stare at a painting of night-blooming roses that hung between two

bookcases. He hadn't changed position since I found him. Hands clasped behind his back, he studied the painting like it was a priceless work of art.

It wasn't. I'd spent half my life in soldiers' barracks. But I'd spent the other half in palaces, and I knew the difference between wealth and money. Wealth was quiet. Understated. Money shouted, getting in your face and making sure you knew it was there.

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The mayor had money, and his manor house reflected it. The library was no different. The books on the shelves were all the same: crisp brown leather and gold lettering on spines that had never been cracked. The cushions on the settle near the window were round and plump—a sure sign no one ever sat there. It was a quiet room that yelled its importance and made me long for a bedroll in an army camp. Anything but floral-patterned carpets and busts of ancient vampire heroes on golden pedestals.

Jordan continued admiring the painting.

Laurent gave me a look, then went to the door. He pricked his thumb and ran it from the door to the edge of the frame, leaving a smear of bright-red blood. “Heseth.” The blood ward streaked around the room, sealing us inside. He was pale as he turned back, the purple smudges under his eyes revealing just how far he’d pushed himself on the lawn.

I hadn’t lied to Given when I told her I wanted her to be angry with me. But that wasn’t the only reason I’d kept to myself as the day wore on. I’d been too furious with Laurent to confront him—and I’d known he wouldn’t stop until he literally couldn’t go any longer. I couldn’t cross him in public. We both understood how critical it was to keep those lines between us bold and sharply drawn.

So I’d stewed in private, and I’d worried I might take my frustration with him out on Given. The gods knew I’d done it before. I’d just been too stupid to realize it. Hopefully, I was a bit less stupid now.

Although, considering she’d been ready to gut me with her sword, I still had much to learn before I knew how to please a female.

“The mayor of Lar Burdina is an artist,” Jordan said. “He did most of the paintings in this house.”

Punching Jordan wouldn't solve anything, I reminded myself. It would feel good, but it wouldn't solve anything.

Laurent folded his arms. “Tell us everything you know about Given's power.”

Jordan spoke without turning around. “You've locked me in, Your Grace. Am I your prisoner?”

Laurent's eyes flashed. “Well, I certainly feel like yours. We all do, since you dribble out information when it suits you. I can't afford to play your games anymore, Archmage. My capital is baking in the sun, the South is probably marching toward us as we speak, and Midian is whispering in my wife's mind. You claim to serve Ter Isir. You swore to help Given. Help her now by telling her what you know about her gifts.”

I waited for Jordan to say something unhelpful and infuriating. Instead, he went to one of the bookcases and pulled a book from the shelf. But not a book that had been there a second before. I blinked hard, certain I'd just watched him place his finger on an ordinary brown leather tome with gold lettering on the spine. But the book he held when he turned back was nothing like the others on the shelves. The scent of spring leaves filled my lungs. I clenched my jaw and watched Jordan return to the center of the room.

The book in his hands was large and old, with a cover that was doing a miserable job of holding the pages inside together. Ribbons of various colors dangled from the bottom, reminding me of the day he and I had met in the library at the Midnight Palace, when he'd helped me pin my sister's betrothal contract to the table before swearing an oath to serve me.

And then he'd told me Given of Sithistra was elven-born, her mother's House perhaps not so insignificant after all.

But he hadn't told me everything. He'd withheld information. Concealed his true identity. And I didn't trust him even a little bit.

Jordan looked at Given. "Your nurse, Helen, taught you the histories of Ter Isir."

"Yes." From the look in Given's eyes, she was fed up with Jordan's bullshit, too. "She never told me she was a mage. But she told me the stories, even the ones my next-mother forbade her to share."

Jordan looked at the book he held. "Most of the peoples of Ter Isir record their histories. We write them down, passing stories from one generation to the next." A rueful smile touched his lips. "It's an imperfect system. The ones who wield the quill only tell us the history they want us to know. But the elves didn't write anything down." Jordan looked up. "They relied on the memory keepers among them to remember the past exactly as it happened."

Given went completely still. "Queen Vara."

Jordan nodded. "Avenor's queen had the gift of Memory. I believe she left a record of the Fall of Eldenvalla in a place where only you could find it."

"The sword," Given said. She hesitated, a line appearing between her brows. "Avenor sent Vara through the escape tunnel as Vai Seren fell. She didn't have the sword with her."

Jordan touched one of the book's more bedraggled-looking ribbons. "Those who read closely enough know the sword of the Kings of Eldenvalla didn't always stay in its scabbard. You didn't have it with you when you farsaw to Rolund's camp. The sword

appeared when you needed it.”

Pain flitted through Given’s eyes, and it was like a fist around my heart. Rolund’s death was justified—and necessary—but I knew it weighed on her. Kinslayer was a vile insult in every kingdom in Ter Isir. People didn’t much care if the kin in question had been a murderous cunt warped by religious fanaticism.

“So that’s Given’s magic?” Laurent asked. “This power of Memory?”

Jordan shook his head. “I don’t know that Queen Given has that particular gift.” He looked at her. “You’re a farseer. There’s no question of that. But almost every elf in Eldenvalla could leave their body.” Jordan’s eyes took on a faraway look that lifted the hair on my nape. “In his wisdom, I think Avenor gifted you something far more powerful than farseeing or Memory. As Vai Seren fell, he abdicated his throne. He passed the gift of Making to his queen so she could bestow it upon his heir.”

The scent of leaves grew thicker. Energy filled the room, the sort of pressure that precedes a storm. It made me want to run and seek shelter. Hide from Nature, which could neither be fought nor contained. But this wasn’t Nature. It was magic. Power in its rawest form, it was neither good nor evil. Devastating in its ambivalence, it acted without malice or morals. Like a storm, it could flood a village or end a drought.

Jordan returned to the bookshelf. He moved two leatherbound books apart and slid the beaten-up, mismatched book between them. I stared, willing myself not to blink. And I didn’t. I kept my eyes open the whole time. Nevertheless, I missed his sleight of hand. The weathered book disappeared, blending into the stacks as if it had never been there at all.

Jordan turned and looked at Given once more. “There is power in blood. The Kings of Nor Doru have a mystical connection with the Deepnight. They control the canopy and protect the kingdom from the sun. The Kings of Eldenvalla had a similar gift, but

it went much deeper than that. They had a mystical connection with the land and everything in it. They called it the Making. A simple name for an awesome gift.”

The energy in the room swelled, growing thicker and wilder. It became a presence—something invisible and intelligent breathing down my neck. It licked against my skin, tasting me and taking my measure. Every intake of breath was soaked with the scent of forest and the promise of rain.

“The elven kings possessed the power of creation,” Jordan said. “The Making is primitive magic as old as Ter Isir itself. Through it, the Kings of Eldenvalla filled their land with lush forests and fragrant grasses. Endless blue skies and sunlight that didn’t burn. The magic was everywhere and it was everything. It lived in the beating heart of the king, who was connected to all of it.” Jordan lifted his hand and turned it over.

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A tiny white blossom rested in his palm. The same flower he'd shown me on the beach at Lar Keiren.

My heart thumped painfully. My mind grew muddled, my memories bending and overlapping. "You..." I heard myself croak. "I've seen that before." But my recollection of the flower was strange. Like sand sifting through my fingers, the more I tried to remember it, the faster it slipped away.

Jordan's voice was quiet. "I showed it to you before you were ready, Lord Varick. But I promised King Laurent I would protect you in the Wastes."

"I don't need protection," I growled, my eyes glued to the flower.

"Not from others, no," he said. "But perhaps from yourself." Jordan closed his hand around the flower, and when I looked up his blue eyes were soft. Apologetic. "You're willing to see Queen Given's flowers now, but you didn't want to see them in Lar Keiren." His smile was as soft as his eyes. "Don't think too hard about it."

My chest tightened with anger. "I don't like people fucking with my head."

"I assure you, I didn't. Denial is almost as powerful as magic, Lord Varick. And just as dangerous."

He was just a boy, I reminded myself. Half my age. But who the fuck really knew? He looked innocent and inexperienced and he was neither of those things. I didn't like it. And once upon a time, he'd pretended to be my friend.

I didn't like that, either.

Given spoke, breaking the tension. "When I saw Avenor and Vara, she begged him to use his gift. She asked him to 'speak it into being' but he refused. He said he gave the last of it to her."

Jordan nodded. "She spoke of the Making. Avenor knew Midian would have stolen it if Midian possessed him. In Midian's hands, the Making would have destroyed all of Ter Isir. The demons can't create anything. Their plane is the opposite of ours. Devoid of warmth and life. And they lust for what they can't have. That was the elves' great error—desiring power when they already had so much. Avenor's last act as king was to give his gift to his wife. I'm sure he thought the child Vara carried would inherit it. But the Making waited for the right person." Jordan held her gaze, his blue eyes steady. "The gift is yours twofold, Your Grace. You inherited it. And it was given."

No one moved in the hush that followed. Even the energy that filled the room seemed to hold its breath.

At last, Given shook her head. "I wish I could accept what you're saying, Jordan, but..." She drew a slow breath, then released it on a sigh. "You speak of creation, but I've never created anything."

"Never?" he asked lightly. "Not even when you venture between the planes?"

"He means the Middling," I said gruffly. As much as I didn't want to agree with him, he was right about that. I looked at her. "You changed the sky when you took me there. When we—" I shut my mouth before I could describe all the things she'd done when we fucked in the clearing. I believed her when she claimed she'd been willing, but I could never forgive myself. That was a shame I had to carry. But I'd carried heavier things. As long as she forgave me, that burden would keep.

“It makes sense,” Jordan said. He looked from me to Given. “Helen’s reports said you had nightmares. That you dreamed of a tall, elven man in a grassy clearing. You’ve slipped in and out of the Middling since you were a child. I’m not surprised you changed it while your mind was between waking and sleeping. You’ve been practicing the Making your whole life, creating a space where you feel safe.”

“But I wasn’t dreaming when Varick and I hid there from Midian.”

Jordan was undeterred. “You must have surrendered your will enough to let go and embrace your gift.”

Her eyes widened. “Yes,” she rasped. “I...” A blush stained her cheeks. She darted a look at me. “We...”

“Had sex,” I said tightly. “Midian forced the issue.”

She frowned. “Varick—”

“You abdicated your will,” Laurent supplied. As all eyes turned to him, he nodded matter-of-factly. “The closest I get to the gods is through the Rite of Destru. It’s a total surrender. I leave everything behind. My crown, my clothes, even the tiniest specks of dirt under my fingernails. And I drain myself. I have to die to reach the godsrealm. The only thing that comes close is an orgasm. In those few seconds, you’re happy to die. You give up all control. For one brief moment, you touch the gods.” He shrugged. “I don’t see why this Making would be any different. If, as Jordan says, it’s primitive magic, this makes sense to me. There’s nothing more primitive than sex.”

Jordan looked at Given. “Perhaps there’s a reason you’re the wife of the High Priest.”

“I’m not the High Priest,” Laurent snapped.

Jordan's gaze was mild. "Of course, Your Grace. My mistake."

Given was quiet as she seemed to absorb everything. After a moment, she lifted troubled eyes to Jordan. "If I have this incredible gift, why am I having so much trouble when I farsee? When I was in Aberwas, I traveled to Laurent by accident. And we all know what happened when I visited Rolund. I blend places together, seeing things that shouldn't be there. And then before I can stop it, I'm there."

Jordan smiled. "Magic, like prophecy, won't stop for anyone. If you dam it up, it will simply flow in another direction, and not always in a way you expect."

Given's lips parted. "Did Igrith steal that from you, or did you steal it from her?"

Jordan laughed, a rich sound I wasn't sure I'd heard before. "Only a fool steals from Igrith." His smile faded. "I'm a seer, Your Grace, not a farseer. But I know that suppressing gifts can backfire. The more you tell yourself you can't farsee, the more disastrous the results are likely to be. The Sight functions in a similar way. Plenty of seers have attempted to stifle their visions. That path leads to madness."

She made a disgruntled sound. "So you're stuck with your gift whether you like it or not? And I'm stuck with mine?"

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“That’s Fate for you.” His lips twitched. “And before you ask, Rhys definitely stole that one from me. They didn’t elect him Bandit King twice for nothing.”

Laurent narrowed his eyes at Jordan. “So what should she do? Farsee once a day? Try her hand at this Making thing, whatever that means, and try not to worry about Midian showing up?”

“I couldn’t say, Your Grace,” Jordan answered.

Anger flashed in Laurent’s eyes. “Forgive me, Brother Jordan, but that will not do. You can’t drop the knowledge of this power on her without telling her how to use it.” He counted items off his fingers. “What’s it for? What is she supposed to make? How does it square with the prophecy? Are you being truthful about it?”

“Laurent,” Given said quietly.

Laurent kept going. “If you want her to wield this power, for the love of the gods, tell her how!”

Jordan’s expression remained as unflappable as ever. “The last person to possess the gift of Making was King Avenor. He died five hundred years ago, Your Grace. I’m a mage of Wesyfedd. I am not all-knowing. I watch, I See, and I serve Ter Isir.”

“Yes, but you swore to serve Given.”

“And I won’t be forsworn, nor will I be kept by a priest against my will.” As he finished the sentence, the door clicked. Slowly, it opened.

Laurent turned toward the door. When he turned back, his eyes were colder than the winds in the Wastes. “I care nothing for the latter, Jordan. But if you’re lying about the former, your parlor tricks won’t save you.” He extended a hand to Given. “Come, my lady. It’s been a long day.”

As they moved to the door, I lifted my voice. “I would speak with Brother Jordan alone.”

Laurent stopped and looked at me over his shoulder.

I kept my gaze on Jordan as I added, “With your leave, of course, Your Grace.”

“Of course,” Laurent said softly. He and Given left.

And I was alone with Jordan of Twyl for the first time since the beach in the Wastes.

Chapter Ten

VARICK

I didn’t bother shutting the library door. It wasn’t like I had secrets anymore. Jordan of Twyl seemed to know them all anyway.

“You could have saved a lot of people a great deal of trouble by speaking up sooner,” I told him.

He drew an even breath. “I could not, Lord Varick.”

“Why,” I said bluntly.

“It would have influenced your actions.”

“That sounds like an excuse. Something a manipulative person would say to get what they want.”

His shoulders lifted. He opened his mouth—

“If you’re about to foist some kind of veiled life lesson on me, I’ll puke.”

He shut his mouth. Then he went to the settle by the window and sat. He smoothed his hair, mussing the chocolate-brown waves before resting his elbows on his knees and lacing his fingers lightly together. “I was ten years old when I learned I was the Archmage. I’d had visions before, but never like—” He cut himself off. Looked up at me before dropping his gaze to the ugly carpet. “They came so quickly. Possibilities. Sometimes certainties. I knew everything everywhere all the time. If a vision was very strong, I would feel the pain of the person within it. There were cases where I knew someone would experience agony. Seemingly pointless agony but necessary for something more important to happen. And I’d have to stand by and say nothing.” He swallowed. “It became...unbearable.”

I stared at him, curiosity tugging at me despite myself. “So what did you do?”

“My teachers taught me how to turn it off.” He lifted one hand, palm up, and angled his other hand like a blade in the center of it. “The visions would never stop coming, but I could dam them up. Let them trickle through more slowly so I could see them when I wanted to.”

That sounded fine. “It worked?”

He nodded.

“Then what was the problem?”

“Dams don’t last forever, Lord Varick. Eventually, the visions piled too high. The weight grew too heavy.” He folded his topmost hand over, pressing his palms flat together. “They crushed me. I saw everything again—every vision—but it was worse this time because now I knew how it felt to be free of them. And I knew I’d never be free again.”

“Your teachers knew this would happen?”

“Yes.”

Anger sparked, making my voice gruff. “Why would they be so cruel? They could have just told you no.”

He offered a small, patient smile. “No, they couldn’t. I would have never believed them. And I’m not angry at them for doing it. I was free for a time.”

But now he knew what he was missing. “Some people might prefer to have never tasted freedom at all,” I said. “Given a choice, they might prefer prison.”

“Yes,” he said simply. “They might.”

I swallowed. “Do you...see everything now?”

“I do. Possibilities. Sometimes certainties.”

We stared at each other, the unspoken hanging in the air like smoke. He saw everything—and he felt it, too. The pain of the world.

The pain of knowing.

“Did you—” Emotion closed my throat. I shook my head. “Forget it.” What did it matter if he’d seen what happened to me on the beach?

But he knew what I’d started to ask. His voice gentled. “I had not yet come into my power, Lord Varick.”

Another question leapt into my mind, but I quickly smothered it. I didn’t want to know if Jordan would have stopped my father’s men that night.

I preferred the prison. The freedom of not knowing.

I looked at the window over his shoulder. Outside, the moon rose in an inky sky. The lawn was on the other side of the manor house, which meant the wounded Lar Katerins weren’t visible. But I didn’t need to see them. The charred bodies of the townspeople would live forever in my mind.

“I don’t like magic,” I said.

“I know.”

I looked at Jordan again. “I suppose you knew that before I said it. You’ve seen it.”

“Even a blind seer could tell you dislike magic, my lord.”

I allowed myself a small smile. When my dagger embedded itself in the carpet between his feet, he didn’t flinch. Just stared up at me with steady blue eyes and the

promise of a dimple in his cheek that was always there even when he wasn't smiling.

"Do you really have three sisters?" I asked.

The dimple appeared. "Yes, I do. And the nieces and nephews to go along with them."

"You said you'd swear another oath."

"That still holds true."

I gestured to the dagger. "Do it, then. Swear on your blood you won't betray Laurent of Nor Doru."

"You don't wish an oath for yourself?"

"No. And I'm not going to think too hard about how this is probably pointless, since you already know the future."

"Possibilities," he said.

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“And sometimes certainties.” I motioned to the dagger again. “Do it, if you’re willing. Pledge yourself to Laurent.”

He reached down and grasped the dagger. He pulled, but the blade wouldn’t budge. Bending, I grasped the hilt over his hand and yanked the blade free. We rose together, heads lifting and gazes colliding.

He froze, his face inches from mine. His eyes dipped to my mouth.

I released the blade and straightened. Stepped back and cleared my throat. “Get on with it, then.”

He pushed to his feet. Faint color touched his cheekbones as he grasped the blade until blood seeped between his knuckles. “I pledge my complete loyalty to Laurent, King of Nor Doru and Vessel of the Sacred Blood. I vow to be at his service, for whatever he requires. I swear it on my blood.”

“Good.” I extended my hand. When he stared blankly, I said, “The dagger, Jordan.”

“Oh.” He flushed. “Right.” He handed it over, and I wiped the blade on my sleeve. His eyes followed the movement. “You...” His gaze bounced to mine, and his flushed deepened. “You’ll stain your jacket.”

“I’m a vampire. I’m used to blood. And you can drop the act.”

He startled. A line appeared between his brows. “Act?”

The anger I'd felt at the start of our conversation flooded back. I sheathed the dagger. "You pretended to be afraid of me. Then you pretended to be my friend. You pretended to—" I snapped my mouth shut, my nape heating as an odd emotion twisted through me. It was both familiar and alien. Something akin to embarrassment, maybe. Which was ridiculous. I had nothing to be embarrassed about with him. I didn't even like him. I looked away and cleared my throat. "You pretended," I said finally. "I don't like being manipulated." I started for the door.

"Varick."

I stopped and looked over my shoulder.

For a moment, he just stared. Then he swallowed. "One of the first things a mage learns is that magic demands balance. Always. In everything. That was Avenor's fatal mistake. He thought he could invite evil into his land and then simply remake whatever damage the darkness caused. It doesn't work that way." Jordan lowered his gaze, and the color in his cheeks returned as he seemed to gather his thoughts. He looked at me, and his voice went low. "When magic gives great power, it always demands an equal measure of sacrifice. So often, the things we want most are the things we can't have."

Before I could respond, he moved past me, trailing the scent of leaves and rain. He stopped at the door. Hand on the latch, he turned his head just enough for me to see one downcast eye. "It was never an act. I hope you'll believe me one day. When you're ready to look."

He left.

For a long time, I just stood there. I didn't want to look. I tried not to. But I lost the battle.

I looked at the painting.

It wasn't night-blooming roses. I drifted closer, trying to make it out. A few feet away, I stopped. The painting was amateurish. Uninspiring. But the scene it depicted was as crisp and bright as sunlight on freshly fallen snow.

The inside of a tower room, gray and desolate—except for a window that revealed the life and color outside.

Chapter Eleven

GIVEN

“Is everything all right, baby?”

I lifted my head from the rolls of bandages in my lap as Laurent gave Varick a discerning look across the bedchamber's sitting area.

Heat snaked through me—something that never failed to happen every time Laurent said “baby” to his general. I suspected my husband knew this. Laurent was no mind reader. But in matters of sex, he didn't need to be. He seemed to know exactly where to press. Precisely what to say. No matter how deeply I buried my desires, he effortlessly dug them up, showed them to me, and made me beg for more revelations.

Varick turned from where he'd stood at the mantel since he returned from the library an hour ago. By unspoken agreement, Laurent and I had left him to his thoughts when he entered the bedchamber looking tense and brooding.

The brooding look was gone, replaced with an intensity that added shivers to the heat under my skin.

“I think we should fuck,” Varick said bluntly. “The three of us.”

“Now?” I asked, my voice breathless and uncertain. I wasn’t unenthusiastic. Quite the opposite. But the events of the day had taken a toll. We were all exhausted. The Council wanted to meet first thing in the morning. Jordan had just told me I possessed the power of creation.

Varick’s golden eyes pinned me in place. “Can you think of a better time?”

“Well—”

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“You heard Jordan. If you continue to suppress your magic, it could backfire. Now we know the things you did in the Middling were part of this new gift. If you’re not going to hold yourself back from farseeing, you shouldn’t hold yourself back from the Making, either.” He came to me and scooped the bandages from my lap, fitting the dozens of bundles easily in his big hands. He dumped them into the basket, pulled me to my feet, and tipped my chin up. “You made a beautiful sky in that clearing, halfling. And you restored Laurent in the Sanctum. I know next to nothing about magic, but I know yours is powerful. And I know I want you, and you want me. If you have to access this power through sex, I’m not complaining.”

Laurent came to my other side and slid a hand into the small of my back. He took Varick’s other hand, and the three of us stood in a small circle before the fire. “There’s nothing wrong with pleasure, princess,” Laurent said.

“I know.” My heart thumped faster, desire and apprehension twining together, each subtracting from the other. “I’m afraid.”

“Of us?” Varick asked.

“Never,” I answered, meaning it. “I worry about”—I tried to think of a way to avoid saying Midian’s name—“what’s in my head...and my blood.”

Laurent banded an arm around my waist and pulled me into him. His lips brushed my temple as he murmured, “Then we’ll go slow.” He trailed his mouth down, nosing through my hair until he reached my neck, where he sucked gently at my pulse fluttering rapidly under my skin. “Let the general and I heat you up, princess. And if you see anything you don’t like, we’ll stop.”

My response was more moan than words. “I don’t think I’ll see anything I don’t like.”

His smile curved against my neck. “Then we won’t stop.”

* * *

Varick took the lead, pulling Laurent and me toward the chamber’s big, curtained bed.

When we reached it, Varick picked me up and settled me among the mounds of pillows at the headboard. “You sit there for a moment, halfling. Be my good girl and watch.”

In an instant, my throat was parched, heat flaring so high it burned everything away except the moisture pooling between my legs. Because I knew what happened when Varick ordered me to watch.

And I wanted to see it. More than anything, I wanted to see these two powerful males together. I’d wanted it from the beginning, when Laurent whispered in my ear about how things were between them.

But no, my want had started long before that. I could make the argument it had started before I even met them, when I rode toward the Rift and hushed my brother’s squire as he spoke of King Laurent and his general. It was as if I’d known I was meant to end up exactly where I was now. Watching them. Wanting them.

Varick turned to Laurent, gripped the back of his neck, and yanked him into a kiss. They came together in a clash that stole my breath. Hot and fierce, their jaws and bodies met, Varick squeezing Laurent’s nape as he thrust his tongue against Laurent’s.

Laurent groaned, the sound low and plaintive. He clutched at Varick, pawing at Varick's clothes like he couldn't decide where he wanted his hands. I quickly realized Laurent wanted them everywhere. Because he wanted every piece of Varick.

But more than anything, Laurent wanted whatever Varick wanted. No matter what Varick demanded, Laurent would give it.

The kiss went on like that, Varick plundering Laurent's mouth while he worked his hips into Laurent's, grinding their cocks together. I drank them in, letting my gaze roam from their strong jaws to their thrusting hips. The sounds of their passion filled the chamber, every rasp of stubble and masculine groan stoking the flames inside me.

Varick moved a hand between their bodies, forcing space where none had existed before. He palmed Laurent's cock as he spoke against Laurent's lips. "You think you're going to be able to wait?"

"No," Laurent croaked.

Varick's chuckle sent shivers coursing down my spine. His fangs flashed as he caught Laurent's bottom lip between his teeth. He pulled at it, tugging Laurent's head forward before releasing him. "Oh, you're going to wait." His hand worked between Laurent's legs as he kneaded Laurent's dick. "You're going to be a good boy and get our princess nice and wet."

My lips parted, my breath coming in rasps I couldn't hold back. I fought the urge to squirm as need built in my core, everything between my legs hot and throbbing. I wanted to touch myself but I didn't dare. And I was grateful Varick had left me clothed. My gown afforded some measure of protection. A guard against temptation.

Varick used his hand on Laurent's nape to force Laurent's head back. "What are you going to do?" he demanded gruffly.

Laurent gasped, his mouth working soundlessly as Varick's hand on his dick tightened. "Whatever you say." He squeezed his eyes shut for a second, his brows pulling together. He whimpered and dragged in another breath. "F-Fuck. Anything. I'll do anything."

At last, Varick thrust Laurent away. "Strip and get on the bed."

Laurent obeyed quickly, his face flushed as he tossed his clothes aside. He was still pale after his ordeal on the lawn, his frame thinner than usual. But his eyes glowed more brightly than ever, his silver irises burning with lust as he bared himself. His erection bobbed hard and thick in the air, the round head shiny with moisture.

"On your back," Varick ordered as Laurent climbed onto the bed. And then they moved like poetry, some kind of unspoken exchange guiding their movements. Laurent stretched on his back with his body parallel to me. He hung his head off the side of the bed, and Varick was there to catch it, his golden eyes burning like stars as he traced Laurent's dark brows with his thumbs.

"You'll be such a good boy for me," he murmured, staring down at Laurent's upturned face. Laurent nodded, his handsome features beautiful and bereft. His chest lifted. Slowly, he parted his lips, stretching his mouth wide. His tongue ring glinted and his fangs slid lower as he held position, stripped bare and waiting to receive Varick's cock.

Varick kept him that way for a moment. Laid out and trembling. Inches from being broken. Completely willing to break.

Hooded eyes locked with Laurent's, Varick unlaced his pants and freed his cock. He didn't remove anything else. Didn't even pull his pants down. He kept everything intact but his shaft, which looked even larger than usual framed by black leather. Hands supporting Laurent's head, he let Laurent's head drop lower until the knot in

Laurent's throat poked hard toward the bed's canopy. Then Varick guided his dick into Laurent's waiting mouth.

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Varick didn't stop. Didn't wait for Laurent to adjust. He kept going, sinking his dick to the hilt, the nest of golden hair around his cock pressed firmly to Laurent's lips. He stayed that way, his eyes drifting shut.

"Yes," rasped. He tipped his head back and rocked his hips forward gently, stuffing himself that much deeper down Laurent's throat. Sinking into Laurent's obedience.

Laurent's legs jerked on the bed. He squirmed a little and then went still, the only sign of his effort the veins and tendons popping in his neck.

My heart raced as I devoured the sight. The manor house could have gone up in flames, and I couldn't have torn my gaze away. Maybe the display shouldn't have riveted me like it did. Maybe I shouldn't have whimpered with need, my sex clenching as I watched my husband swallow his lover's dick. Our lover's dick. But I couldn't be bothered with should. Because these males belonged to me. Each one so different. Both capable of turning me inside out in their own way. I wanted them both. I wanted them together.

I wanted.

Varick pulled from Laurent's throat, his cock glistening with saliva. He lifted Laurent's head, supporting it while Laurent coughed and sucked in air.

"Good boy," he whispered, stroking Laurent's brow. "So fucking perfect. Can you do another for me?"

"Yeah," Laurent said hoarsely.

Varick gave him a moment, then guided Laurent's head back down and thrust his cock between Laurent's lips. This time, he rocked his hips, pumping in and out of Laurent's mouth while Laurent breathed and gagged around him. Varick's cock stretched Laurent's jaw wide, the shiny, round shaft looking almost obscene as it pumped down Laurent's throat.

And then, Varick curled his big body over Laurent's and took Laurent's dick into his mouth.

Every muscle in my body tensed. I sat in the pillows with my gown puddling around me, and I waited to combust. I waited for flames to ripple up my skirts and engulf me, the heat matching the inferno licking between my legs and racing through my veins. I panted, my breasts heaving as I watched Varick spread his legs wider. Watched Laurent accommodate the new angle, his head bobbing as he slurped and sucked at Varick's dick while Varick slurped and sucked at his.

They moved beautifully together, hips rolling in a sensual rhythm as they fucked each other's faces. The sounds were almost as enticing as the visual feast they presented. The heavy, wet smacks of their dicks tunneling into each other's mouths were punctuated by their satisfied grunts and deep, rumbling moans.

Laurent spread his legs wider on the bed. He reached a hand up and stroked Varick's side, his rings on display as he moved his hand over Varick's ribs. The sight reminded me of his hand bunching my gown at my waist as he'd feasted between my thighs in the Midnight Palace.

My pussy ached. So did my breasts, my chest heavy and my nipples tingling. Suddenly, I stopped being grateful for my clothes. The fabric was too tight against my aching, heated skin. I wanted to fling everything off. Spread my legs and work my clit until I stopped aching. But I knew it wouldn't be enough. I needed to be filled, and these males had trained my body to only be satisfied when they filled me.

Front and back, I needed them, their dicks spearing me and leaving no quarter.

Varick straightened, letting Laurent's dick slip from his mouth and slap wetly against Laurent's stomach. He swiped the back of his hand over his mouth and pulled his cock from Laurent's throat. As Laurent gasped and caught his breath, Varick grabbed Laurent's hand and guided it to Laurent's shaft. "Stroke yourself," he ordered, then stepped away from the bed and began undressing.

Laurent shuddered and did as he was told, wrapping his fingers around his wet cock and stroking. He held his head up, the muscles in his shoulders straining with the effort of maintaining such an awkward position. But he didn't seem to mind. His fangs showed between his parted lips as he worked his dick.

I dug my hands into the pillows on either side of me and squeezed. It was either that or hike up my skirts and rub myself to a lightning-fast orgasm. Gods, I was ready to come without touching myself at all.

Laurent looked at me, his fist moving up and down his thick length. "Is that pussy wet enough for me yet, princess?"

I bit my lip and nodded. "Yes, my lord."

His hand on his dick faltered as lust flared in his eyes. "Oh, princess, I do like that." Abruptly, he tilted his head back. His hand stilled, and he drew an unsteady breath. "Fuck," he breathed. "I'm gonna come."

"You do, and you'll regret it," Varick responded. Nude now, he joined us on the bed. Once again, I was reminded just how huge he was—how much corded muscle was packed onto his overlarge frame. Everything about him was primed for killing, from his thick shoulders and ridged abs to his round, meaty thighs and long legs.

But as he grabbed Laurent's hips and jerked him fully onto the bed, I was also reminded of what Varick had suffered. His back was a ruin. Scar tissue covered him from shoulder to hip, the skin twisted and tangled in white, waxy ropes. He'd been savagely beaten. In some places, he must have been flayed to the bone.

And I knew the scars he bore inside were just as deep and tragic. Laurent's blood had healed what Varick's men had done to the rest of Varick's body, but nothing could touch the wounds in Varick's mind. Like the scars on his back, those would linger forever.

Emotion clogged my throat, love and desire mixing as I watched Varick haul Laurent up. He urged Laurent onto his knees so they faced each other, and then Varick took both their dicks in hand and stroked them together.

Laurent's nostrils flared. He swayed toward Varick, his dark head falling forward like it was too heavy to hold up. His lips landed in the space where Varick's neck met his shoulder, and he murmured something too low for me to catch.

Or maybe he said nothing at all. Senseless things that were nevertheless meaningful.

Varick continued to stroke, working their damp shafts together in one big fist. They were both dripping, both huffing and moaning as they rocked together.

I rocked, too, my body on the edge of a cliff I was prepared to tip over. I gripped the pillows hard as I watched Varick's hand sliding back and forth, every pass wetter and slicker.

"Feels so good," Laurent whispered into Varick's neck, turning his head so I saw every vulnerable slope and plane of his face. His slack mouth with its wet bottom lip. The taut lines between his brows. The pink flush on his high cheekbones. "I want to come."

“Not just yet,” Varick said, his tone a far cry from his general’s voice. He said it tenderly, and he was gentle as he stopped stroking and used his free hand to pull Laurent’s mouth to his. Still gripping Laurent’s dick, he kissed him with a reverence that stole my breath. It was a slow, thorough claiming. Years of history and shared experience poured into a kiss far more intimate than anything else I’d seen them do. Varick released Laurent’s cock and moved his hand to Laurent’s ass. He squeezed the muscle, pulling Laurent’s hips against his so their dicks rubbed together.

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Laurent's masculine whimper drew an echoing whimper from me.

Varick and Laurent stopped kissing. They drew apart. Slowly, they turned their heads, and two pairs of eyes—one silver, one gold—stared me down.

Predators. I had their attention now. Two males with straining cocks and hungry expressions.

No, I realized. Not hungry. Ravenous.

Laurent's silver eyes dipped to the pulse in my neck. Then his gaze moved lower, trailing down my trembling breasts to my gown puddled around me. He stared at the juncture of my thighs and licked his lips.

"Our princess looks lonely," Varick growled.

"Yes," Laurent said, the word emerging as a hiss.

They moved together, prowling to me on their hands and knees, heavy dicks swinging between their powerful thighs. And then, like animals with captured prey, they descended.

A cry of fear and lust caught in my throat. For a second, fear won out, and I tried to spring up.

The men subdued me easily, tapping vampiric speed I didn't possess. Male bodies blurred as fabric ripped and cool air hit my bare skin. One set of hands pulled me flat

onto my back while another grasped my bodice and split the fabric to my navel. A male tongue dipped into that indentation, introducing me to a novel and unexpected pleasure.

I cried out, arching and spreading my legs. Pitiful begging fell from my lips, the words nearly incoherent as I sobbed and pleaded for the tongue to venture lower.

My gown disappeared, and then my chemise. Rough hands—Varick’s I thought, although I couldn’t tell for sure—yanked my stockings down my thighs. A hot, wet mouth latched onto one of my nipples while firm fingers pinched the other. My thighs were spread, and then a mouth fastened over my clit and sucked.

I came.

And I came apart. “Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods, oh gods.” The words rolled from me in a mindless chant as pleasure crashed over me. It was perfect and too much all at once. Heavy and wet, it smacked into me. Sent me spinning into bliss that turned to fire. I burned up, toes curling and legs going wide, so wide I didn’t care if they broke.

“Yes!” I cried. Break me.

Shadows moved behind my closed lids. I opened my eyes and saw the room filled with white blossoms. My hair floated away from my head, each strand limned in light. The scent of fresh grass reached my nose, and I turned my head and saw long stalks of it waving against the bedchamber’s plastered wall.

Big hands held me down. Hot mouths sucked at my skin.

And then fangs pierced my flesh.

I screamed, eyes squeezing shut and back bowing as the wave of pleasure rebuilt and

crashed, stealing my breath. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't scream. Couldn't do anything but be as the pinpricks of pleasure fired over and over at my breast and between my legs. Pressure filled my sex—a finger, maybe two. I rolled my hips, screwing my pussy down on the fingers as the mouth on my clit sucked my blood and juices.

“Fucking gorgeous, princess,” a rasping voice praised. Laurent. Spiraling back down, I opened bleary eyes and saw him move down my body. Saw his bite around my nipple, twin puncture wounds trailing bright-red blood. He left the wound open.

A second later, I understood why. He and Varick switched places, Varick's golden eyes meeting mine as he bent over me and lapped up the blood streaming down my quivering breast. He took my nipple into his mouth, sucking at Laurent's bite. As another orgasm built inside me, Laurent positioned himself between my thighs and dragged the head of his dick up and down my flared, aching lips.

“Look at me,” he demanded, the command in his voice making my pussy clench. He swiveled his hips, teasing my entrance. Tiny white flowers floated around him, dusting his shoulders before winking away.

No. There was nothing small or pale about Laurent of Nor Doru. He walked in twilight, his steps soaked in blood.

I drew a deep breath, letting air fill my lungs. Gaze locked with Laurent's, I stroked my fingers through Varick's soft hair, cradling his blond head to my breast as he fed.

Boom. My heartbeat thrummed in my head. Laurent's silver eyes glittered. He pressed inside me, filling my pussy in one smooth thrust.

My hips lifted. My lips parted, breath pushing out as he pushed in. As I exhaled, the flowers behind him changed, night-blooming roses tumbling through the air.

Laurent's eyes gleamed as he began to fuck me, his hips moving in languid, controlled thrusts. He was masterful at it, holding back his own release with an ironclad will he'd honed on his knees in the Sanctum. Sex and sanctity. Passion and penitence. He nicked his thumb on his fang and pressed it to my clit, using his blood to get me slicker.

A second later, Varick abandoned my breast and moved to my pussy. He placed his big palm on my bare mound and pulled up, stretching my cunt taut. With his other hand, he used his thick fingers to spread my lips lewdly. My clit stood up like a tiny rosebud, the tight furl shiny and red with Laurent's blood. Both men stared at it, and I moaned at how utterly exposed I was. How completely at their mercy as their eyes devoured the center of my desire.

Varick bent his head and licked the place where Laurent's dick speared my opening.

I came again, my breath seizing in my lungs as I convulsed. The waves threatened to close my eyes, but I forced them wide, desperate to see Varick's tongue lapping at Laurent's cock as it tunneled into me, the shaft glistening with a mixture of Laurent's blood and my come. Roses continued to tumble, some landing gently on the bed before fading away.

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I tumbled, too, and I grew just as languid as my pleasure ebbed, leaving me sated and loose. The men shifted again, and I gave no protest as they repositioned me, rearranging my limbs and putting me where they wanted me.

Laurent sprawled on his back, his legs spread and his shoulders propped on the pillows. He lifted me effortlessly, his arms leaner than Varick's but plenty strong enough to swing me over him and stuff me onto his dick.

"Oh...fuck yes," I groaned, and both men chuckled.

Varick's chest brushed my back as he moved behind me and swept my hair aside. "Such a filthy mouth on you, halfling." He smacked my ass hard and then kept going, delivering rapid swats that made me gasp and squirm all over Laurent's dick.

"I-It's your fault!" I cried, wriggling forward as I tried to protect my poor ass. It was useless, though. I wasn't going anywhere with Laurent's dick spearing me. "You talk like that all the time!"

Laurent pulled me down and kissed me thoroughly, his hips thrusting as he ran his hands down my sides. "Poor princess," he murmured against my lips. "Come here, darling. I'll protect you from the general."

It was the sweetest lie, because the general was already slicking my asshole. He rubbed a roughened palm over the cheek he'd abused, stroking my pliant flesh as he fingered my ass. Laurent peppered kisses over my nose and down my neck, licking at my skin as Varick loosened me up.

The scent of night-blooming roses soaked the air. Light spilled around the bed, chasing away shadows and warming my skin. I wasn't sure if I was making anything. I had no idea how this power worked. But some deep instinct made me think I didn't have to try. I simply had to be.

The men's hands were everywhere, touching and caressing me. Loving me. Stroking places that shouldn't have set me off but did. The curve of my calf. The sensitive skin of my instep. The bend of my elbow. Mouths skimmed my skin, trailing featherlight kisses. Fingers plucked at my nipples and circled my clit, lingering only seconds before darting away.

All the while, Varick fingered my ass, pushing past the burn and filling me until his fingers weren't enough. I thrust back, speared on Laurent's dick and longing to be speared elsewhere.

Varick's breath coasted over my shoulder. "You want me in your little hole, halfling?"

"Yes," I sobbed. "Gods, yes, please."

His fingers left me, and then his dick prodded my pucker. "Open," he rumbled, fangs dragging down my neck. "Relax for me. Fuck, that's a good girl." He breached my rim, his breathing ragged in my ear as he worked his big dick into my ass one inch at a time.

Laurent wrapped his arms around me and stilled his thrusts, his lips finding my temple. My breasts smashed against his chest, my nipples tight and aching. He swore under his breath as he waited for me to adjust. His smoky voice teased the curve of my ear. "Your cunt gets so fucking tight when he's in your ass."

Varick traced what felt like his thumb down the cleft between my cheeks, the damp

caress sending sparks shooting up my spine. He found my rim and pressed firmly, making me clench and moan. “This sweet little hole is tight, too. You ready to move, halfling?”

He didn’t have to ask twice. I rocked my hips, gasping as their dicks slid together inside me. None of this was new. It shouldn’t have been surprising. And yet it felt new all over again, the wonder of their bodies filling mine making tears smart in my eyes. I sat up and braced my hands on Laurent’s shoulders as I moved my hips.

The men moved with me, slowly at first and then more confidently, grinding their cocks in and out of me and over one another. Their hair-roughened thighs brushed my softer skin and then brushed together, the rasp making my clit throb as another orgasm rose inside me.

Roses rained around the bed, the heady scent drenching the lust-soaked air. We sped up together, none of us needing words. If problems existed outside the bedchamber door, I no longer knew of them. My senses narrowed to the perfume of roses and the fleshy, sensual sounds of slick cocks filling me over and over.

Movement behind me, and then Varick’s bloodied wrist appeared before my lips.

“Feed,” he rasped.

I latched on immediately, the mild resistance of his flesh under my fangs almost as good as the rich taste of his blood flooding my tongue. I reveled in the bite. More, my mind cried, and I bit harder and gulped him down.

I came hard, shuddering and moaning as my pussy and ass clenched around the dicks thrusting rhythmically inside me. Red descended over my vision, and I felt myself go limp with pleasure. Strong hands caught me. Held me. Guided my hips and squeezed my breasts as I sucked and sucked, every draw tugging hard at my pulsing clit. I lost

control. One orgasm bled into another, my release an unending sweep of hot, pounding ecstasy. I stretched between Laurent and Varick, uncaring if I stretched too far and snapped in two. And maybe I did snap. Something within me cracked open, creating a space where there wasn't one before. It was hollow but not empty. There was beauty in it—formless and vague but also familiar. It smelled of green grass and sun that didn't burn.

The Making.

Total surrender. “In those few seconds, you're happy to die.”

Yes.

Yes.

Take me.

Unmake me.

Empty me and then fill me back up.

My head went back. Blood coated my tongue. A scream filled my ears. Mine. It was joined by masculine shouts. Loud and uninhibited. Hot moisture flooded me. Front and back, Laurent and Varick spurted inside me, coming together, their seed filling me until I overflowed.

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I couldn't have said when it ended. The next time I blinked open my eyes, I lay on my side facing Laurent, my thighs sticky and my body sore inside and out. Laurent rested his hand on my hip.

"You look better," I said hoarsely. The shadows under his eyes were gone. He was no longer pale.

His lips curved. "Thanks to you, princess."

"Look at this," Varick said on my other side.

Wincing, I rolled over and found him propped on the pillows, an arrested look on his face as he stared into the room. I followed his gaze...and caught my breath. Heart thumping, I sat up.

Night-blooming roses filled the room. They covered every surface, forming miniature hills and valleys on the floor. There had to be thousands of them. The roses' perfume drenched the air.

Varick looked at me. "Did you hear Midian?"

I shook my head. "Not even once."

Laurent reached down and plucked an errant rose petal from the rumpled sheets. He rubbed it between his fingers, and the scent of night-blooming roses grew stronger. He turned thoughtful eyes to me. "If you can make roses, why not trees?"

My heart thumped faster as his meaning sank in. I swallowed thickly. “You mean the Thicket?”

“Maybe that’s what you’re meant to do, princess. That’s how you save the realm.”

Chapter Twelve

GIVEN

I moved among the wounded of Lar Katerin, dispensing food and water and checking on healing burns.

It was afternoon the next day, and while the basket on my arm was heavy, my heart was lighter than the day before. I hadn’t solved all my problems. The lawn of injured knights and lowpeople was proof enough of that. But I felt better about the Making. I didn’t fully understand its purpose, but Laurent’s idea had merit. Every time I tapped into that deep, wild well of magic, I created flowers and grass. And I was getting better at it.

Most importantly, I hadn’t heard Midian last night. It seemed Jordan was right. In suppressing my magic, I’d dammed it up, forcing it to flow in directions I didn’t like.

A smile tugged at my lips. Jordan was right, but Igrith had warned me first. Something told me she’d have no trouble telling the Archmage to stuff it if she discovered he was taking credit for her wisdom.

The Archmage in question was nowhere to be found this morning. Jordan had made himself scarce since we arrived in Lar Budina. Ordinary Nor Doruvians paid him no mind, but the lords of the Council clearly viewed him with suspicion. Laurent and Varick were with the lords now, discussing possible next steps. Laurent had invited me to attend the meeting, but I knew nothing important would come of the Council’s

deliberations. Retaking Lar Katerin was off the table until the reinforcements from the Wastes arrived.

Besides, I could do far more good helping the survivors of yesterday's attack.

"We'll need more bandages soon, Your Grace," a soft voice said behind me.

I turned and smiled at Mira. She and Henrik were another reason for my improved spirits. They had arrived in Lar Budina at dawn, exhausted but otherwise unharmed. After a meal and a few hours of rest, Henrik had gone to help the knights tend the horses. Mira had insisted on feeding as many wounded as she could. When she'd grown too depleted, she became my shadow, helping me prepare salves for the vampires with minor burns.

"The ladies of the town brought more cloth," I told her now. "It's in the manor's Great Hall. I just have to tear it into strips and roll it."

Mira returned my smile with a shy one of her own. "I can do that for you." Her breath formed little clouds in the chilly air.

"Are you certain?" I searched her face, looking for signs of fatigue. "You walked through the night, and then you gave so much blood." I nodded toward the manor. "The most seriously injured are inside, but there's still plenty of room in the bedchambers upstairs. Take a day to rest."

Her smile grew, and her pretty brown eyes twinkled. "I'm not sure I'd know how, Your Grace. I grew up on a farm, and I'm the oldest of seventeen siblings."

I gaped at her. "Seventeen siblings? My goodness."

She nodded. "Trust me when I say sitting in the Great Hall making bandages sounds

like heaven. Put me in any quiet corner, and I'll be content."

"Just as long as you promise to eat something. The village baker delivered bread, and there's fresh juice in the kitchen. Once I'm done here, I'll fetch it for—"

"I can do it, Your Grace." Her cheeks went pink. "I couldn't let you serve me."

I balanced my basket on my hip, my arm stretched around the wicker rim. "Mira," I said softly, "you're serving all of Nor Doru just by being here." I looked around the sea of occupied cots. Most of the injured were bundled in blankets, eyes closed and chests rising and falling in the steady rhythm of sleep. Nevertheless, I stepped close to Mira and lowered my voice. "I'm half-human. I won't presume to know how you feel, but I've always felt like I never really fit in anywhere. And now that Sithistra has sacked the capital, I can understand why you might hesitate to help the North. But you haven't hesitated. You and Henrik have offered kindness and much-needed assistance. I'm grateful for it."

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Her eyes widened. “I... Thank you.” She frowned suddenly, and anger entered her tone. “I couldn’t believe my eyes yesterday. Green Guards were murdering innocent people in the street. Just...letting them burn.” She shook her head. “I want no part of that. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

“You already are.” I told her where to find the cloth and then sent her off to make bandages. Hefting my basket higher on my hip, I resumed walking up and down the rows of cots. The lowpeople smiled at me and murmured their thanks. Knights struggled to stand and bow until I sternly told them to sit their behinds down and rest. For the first time since I became Queen of Nor Doru, I felt like a queen. The title wasn’t about crowns or dresses or elaborate feasts in the Midnight Palace.

It was this—caring for Nor Doru’s people. They would never accept me as their queen, no matter how hard I tried.

I stumbled and almost went sprawling over a cot. The knight occupying it gave me a startled look.

“Are you all right, Your Grace?”

“Yes,” I said, my heart pounding. Heat touched my cheeks. “Just clumsy. I’m sorry to have disturbed you.”

“You didn’t, ma’am.”

I forced a smile and moved on before he could rise. I handed out the rest of the food in my basket, assuring several elderly Lar Katerins they would see their homes again.

But I was lying, and they knew it. They scented my falsehoods. Every lowperson on the lawn knew I was a liar. A pretender.

The enemy.

I froze, my blood pumping hard in my veins. And then bells rang in my ears, the doleful clang so loud it blocked everything out.

Everything except Midian's voice as he laughed in my head.

"Forgive me, Your Grace, I don't mean to interrupt while you're playing benevolent lady of the manor."

Tears burned my throat. I had to get to Varick.

"Why not the priest?" Midian asked. "Ah, I forgot. You're as big a whore as your husband, spreading your legs for the general." He stepped around the last cot at the end of the row. His pale hair streamed over his shoulders, and his dark-blue mantle swept the ground.

My gut twisted, disbelief pounding through me. He couldn't be in Lar Budina. He was trapped behind the Thicket. He can't be here.

He smiled. A beat later, he stood right next to me. He tapped the side of my head. "Ah, but I'm here."

Another beat, and he reappeared at the end of the row of cots. My throat thickened, tears threatening to spill down my cheeks.

He gave me a look that was almost apologetic. "I did tell you I'd never have to leave."

He's not real.

He tilted his head. "Now, Given, you know what happens when that particular thought enters your flighty little head."

A hand clamped down on my shoulder, and Valen of Lar Keiren growled in my ear. "Hello again, little doll."

Midian gestured toward me, as if to say, See?

"D-Don't!" I cried, squeezing my eyes shut.

Mistake.

I knew it the second I did it, but it was already too late. I opened my eyes and screamed as Varick's father loomed over me. His breastplate bumped my chest. I scrambled back, and he lunged, releasing a deep, barking growl as he snapped his blood-stained fangs an inch from my face. I screamed and scuttled backward, and he kept coming, barking and biting like he meant to gouge my face. His hot breath scalded my cheek.

A panicked, high-pitched scream ripped from my throat. My legs struck something hard, and I went down, landing on top of someone.

"Your Grace!" A male squirmed under me. Blankets and bloodied bandages flashed in my vision as reality and illusion collided. I was crushing an injured male, his pained gasps mingling with Valen's cruel laughter. Heart in my throat, I tried to extricate myself from the mess of blankets.

Valen seized my arm and hauled me to my feet. A second later, he flung me to the ground. I hit the frozen grass hard, a cry knocked from my lungs. Could he kill me?

The wild thought clawed through my mind as I flipped over and tried to get my knees under me.

A booted foot landed on my skirts, and then Valen bent and grabbed a fistful of my hair. He yanked me up, and I screamed as individual hairs ripped from my scalp. He jerked me against him, my back to his chest, and spoke in my ear.

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“I can kill you, bitch, but not just yet. I have so much to show you first.” He turned, taking me with him so I faced the open lawn. “Look.”

The cots were gone. Now, the lawn was a killing field. Sithistran soldiers swarmed everywhere, their mirrors flashing as they slaughtered the townspeople of Lar Budina. Boots slipped in blood and gore as males fought. Two Sithistrans ripped a bundle from a female. As she screamed and tried to claw it back, one soldier dropped it on the ground. The bundle wriggled, and a baby’s wail split the air.

“NO!” I yelled, fighting Valen’s grip. “No, please!”

The soldier thrust his sword through the bundle, and the wail cut off abruptly. The soldier holding the female released her and backhanded her across the face. His sword flashed. Blood sprayed.

Other horrors played out across the lawn. A Nor Doruvian knight crawled on the ground, the long, waxy ropes of his intestines trailing behind him. A richly dressed male bellowed on his back as two Sithistran soldiers stood on his wrists, pinning him to the ground. A third soldier jerked the male’s pants down, seized his testicles, and slowly cut them away as the male’s bellow climbed into an ear-splitting shriek.

I coughed, dry-heaving as vomit surged up my throat

Valen clamped a big palm over my mouth. “If you puke,” he growled, “you’ll lick every drop from the grass.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, tears streaming down my face. I swallowed convulsively,

willing myself not to throw up.

Midian spoke in my other ear. “No, no. You can’t close your eyes. You’ll miss the best part.”

Whimpering, I opened my eyes. Vomit rushed up my throat again as I watched a group of Sithistran Green Guards drag a bleeding Varick to the center of the lawn by a rope around his throat. They pulled him like a dog on a leash, then forced him to his stomach on the ground.

“Please!” he sobbed, rearing up. “Don’t—” His plea ended in a pained grunt as a boot caught him in the face. The men fell on him, cutting away his clothes and kicking his legs apart.

I came alive, fighting Valen’s grip like a wild animal. “You won’t hurt him again!” I screamed. “Fuck you! Let him go!”

“Given!”

“Let him go!” I fought harder, managing to free an elbow and slam it backward. It struck Valen’s breastplate, sending sharp, sickening pain shooting from my elbow to my little finger. My hand went numb.

Valen yanked me more tightly against him. He whispered in my ear, his gravelly voice almost tender. “Oh, little doll, don’t be sad. This is what Varick wants. Don’t you want him to be happy?”

“Given!”

Valen growled. His arm around my waist squeezed tighter, threatening to snap my ribs.

Midian glided in front of me, his black eyes glinting as a cruel smile curved his lips. Over his shoulder, one of the Green Guards knelt behind Varick, his penis dangling between his thighs. The soldier spat in his palm.

“Don’t!” I screamed, clawing at Valen’s forearm. “I’m begging you!”

Varick fought the men holding him. A soldier planted a boot on the back of Varick’s head and shoved his face into the dirt.

“Given!”

“Watch,” Valen growled.

“No!” I cried, squeezing my eyes shut. It isn’t real. Valen’s fingers tangled in my hair. Pain exploded across my scalp as he ripped the strands away. I cried out, nausea sloshing in my gut.

“GIVEN!”

“GIVEN, OPEN YOUR EYES!”

Varick?

The pain stopped.

Gasping, I opened my eyes. Varick stood before me, fully clothed and unharmed.

I threw myself into his arms, sobbing and squeezing his neck. “They had you,” I gasped, pressing my body tightly against his. I needed to feel him, to make sure he was safe and whole. “They had you and I couldn’t stop them.” I babbled between broken sobs. “Everyone was dead. The Sithistrans came and slaughtered the whole

town. They killed everyone, females and males and babes in arms. They were going to hurt you and I couldn't bear it. I love—”

“Given,” he said sharply, pulling at my arms. “Not here,” he said in my mind. “We aren't alone. Everyone is watching.”

I froze, awareness crashing over me. We aren't alone.

Slowly, I released him. Laurent stood at his side, mouth tight and silver eyes concerned. But there were knights and lords and lowpeople, too. The crowded lawn was still and totally quiet. Beside me, a cot was overturned, its blankets spilled across the ground.

Every set of eyes was fixed on me. Expressions ranged from stunned to fearful. Artur of Lar Guna stood with the lords of the Council, his brow furrowed and disgust pinching his lips together. His disdain confused me—until I realized half of Lar Katerin had just watched me fling myself at Varick and embrace him like a lover while my husband looked on.

Strands of long, pale hair littered the ground. As soon as I noticed it, my scalp burned. I'd ripped my own hair out. My fingernails were bloody. With the exception of Varick, no one on the lawn knew what Midian could do. How he wove illusions so elaborate they replaced reality. The regular people of Nor Doru had no idea what lurked behind the Thicket. They only knew what they saw in front of them, and they'd just seen me screaming at invisible demons and tearing the hair from my head.

I swallowed against a raw throat. The winter air touched the tears on my face, threatening to turn them to ice.

Laurent stepped forward. He put an arm around me and lifted his voice, addressing the crowd. "We've all been through a trying ordeal. The queen is tired and needs to rest." He steered me around and guided me toward the manor house. The crowd's scrutiny pressed in on me as the Nor Doruvians parted around us. We passed Artur of

Lar Guna, whose eyes remained hard and scornful.

“For shame, a male who would willingly allow himself to be cuckolded.”

I staggered, jolting Laurent, who stopped and gave me a worried look. “What is it?” he murmured. He tensed, as if he expected me to start screaming again.

“Nothing,” I said quickly. I couldn’t tell him I’d just heard Artur of Lar Guna’s voice in my head.

Laurent frowned. His eyes narrowed, but he urged me into a walk again. As we neared the manor, Lar Guna’s thoughts echoed once more.

“This has gone on long enough. If I can convince Lar Bassa, the Council can do what needs to be done.”

I kept my head down as Laurent and I neared the manor, Varick a silent presence on our heels. The buoyancy I’d started the day with felt foolish now. Childish and hopelessly naive. Did I really think it was going to be that easy? The voice in my head was mine, but it might as well have been Midian’s. I’d had it all figured out, thinking I could make a few roses and everything would be fine.

I’d been so stupid. Midian hadn’t gone anywhere. Surrendering my will during sex hadn’t banished him or made me stronger. I was right back where I started. He’d shown me that, parading the Sithistran threat before my eyes in bold color. The myriad problems that had followed me to Lar Budina remained. And now I had a new one.

Because if I wasn’t mistaken, I’d just heard Artur of Lar Guna planning treason.

Chapter Thirteen

LAURENT

“You lied to me out there.”

I took Given by the shoulders as Varick closed the bedchamber door behind us. “What happened?” I asked, searching her gaze. “You heard Midian?”

“And saw him. But I heard Lar Guna, too, and it wasn’t an illusion.”

I stiffened. “You heard Artur’s thoughts?”

“As clearly as if he’d spoken them.” Her expression turned stark. “Laurent, I think he’s plotting a coup. He called you a cuckold. He wants to convince Lar Bassa to do something. What, I don’t know. But if he can get Lar Bassa on his side, Lar Guna thinks he can get the Council to do ‘what needs to be done.’”

Ice slid through my veins. Without being totally aware of what I was doing, I dragged her closer. “You heard this?”

“Yes,” she gasped. “I swear it—”

“You have to be very, very certain of this, Given. Tell me exactly what you heard.”

“I did!” She spoke quickly, a tremor in her voice. “We walked past him and I heard him think, ‘For shame, a male who would willingly allow himself to be cuckolded.’ Then he thought, ‘This has gone on long enough’ and—”

“What’s this?” I demanded. “What’s gone on long enough?”

“I don’t know!” She winced. “Laurent—”

Suddenly, Varick was between us, his palm splayed on my chest as he forced me back a step. “Easy, Laurent. She told you what she heard.”

Shame swept me. “I’m sorry,” I said, bracing a hand on his bicep. I lowered my chin and squeezed my eyes shut. “I’m sorry.” The scent of cloves reached me, and I opened my eyes to see Given at my side. She was pale as a sheet. Blood matted her hair where she’d ripped strands from her scalp. If I lived to be a thousand, I doubted I’d see anything as terrifying as her sobbing at visions only she could perceive. She’d contorted her limbs into unnatural positions, gripping her own throat and throwing her body around. She’d screamed herself hoarse.

I squeezed Varick’s arm, then turned to Given and cupped my hands around her tear-streaked face. “I will never raise a hand to you. Do you believe me?”

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The flash of hesitation in her eyes gutted me. “Never,” I whispered. I bit down on my thumb and gently pressed it between her lips. “I will never hurt you in anger, my lady. Never. Levu.” The blood vow snapped against my skin. I let it settle, then pierced my thumb again. “Kesh,” I murmured, touching my blood to her tongue.

Her eyes widened, and she lifted a hand to her scalp. “You healed me.” The wonder in her gaze dimmed, replaced with worry. “You shouldn’t be using the bly’ad so soon after yesterday.”

“I’m fine. Your magic restored me.”

She stepped back and hugged her waist. “The sex didn’t work. Midian spoke in my head, and then he appeared to me.” She darted an anxious look at Varick. “And I saw Valen again. The Sithistran army was killing everyone in the village.” Tears sheened her eyes. “I don’t know if it was the future or just another trick.”

“Midian lies,” Varick said. “You can’t trust anything he showed you, sweetheart.”

“Yes, but...” She looked miserable as she shook her head. “We never thought the Sithistrans would attack, but they attacked Lar Katerin. What’s to stop them from coming here?”

We all fell silent. Because we knew the answer. Nothing.

Given looked at me. “You can sense lies. Can’t you just question Lar Guna?”

It was a smart question. I wasn’t surprised she’d thought of it. “I can, yes, but this is

one situation where senses are notoriously unreliable. When someone is plotting a coup, they typically don't think of it as a coup. If they're a true believer, they genuinely think they're doing something for the greater good. Artur is more devout than most. He was prepared to defy my father to save Nor Doru." I sighed. "That said, I don't need my senses to compel his honesty. I can speak the bly'ad to force the truth from him. But once I do that, word will spread quickly. The lords who planned to go along with Lar Guna's plot might flee or even attempt to raise an army of their own. The kingdom is already in a state of turmoil. The last thing we need is more instability."

Her shoulders sagged. "Well, fuck," she muttered, and it was so unexpectedly charming I couldn't help my grin.

"Politics is a messy business, princess."

Varick grunted. "I prefer the battlefield. Much simpler."

I nodded. "And less bloody."

Pounding on the door made all three of us jump. I cursed under my breath and called, "What is it?"

"News, Your Grace. The troops from the Wastes have arrived. The Council would like to meet immediately."

The Council that was probably plotting to overthrow me.

I raised my voice again. "Tell the lords I'll be with them in a moment."

"Yes, Your Grace."

As the footsteps faded, Varick and Given and I stared at each other. Then Given took one of Varick's hands and joined it with one of mine. She grasped each of our free hands so the three of us formed a circle.

I squeezed my fingers around theirs and spoke under my breath. "We go together."

Varick nodded. Given mouthed in everything.

I nodded back, and I gave Given's hand another squeeze. Whatever we were walking into, we'd do it together.

I just hoped we weren't walking into a trap.

* * *

Ten minutes later, I walked into an antechamber off the Great Hall with Varick and Given on my heels.

Artur of Lar Guna stood at the head of a long table, his head bent as Captain Radu pointed at something on a map. Another knight I recognized as the commander of the regiment from the Wastes stood on Lar Guna's other side.

"...and we could probably enter here, my lord," Radu was saying.

"Enter where?" I asked.

Every lord at the table looked up. An uncomfortable silence descended. Radu looked around the table of lords and frowned. Sergiu of Lar Bassa appeared just as perplexed as he swung his gaze between me and Lar Guna. But he was the only one. The rest of the lords wore the unmistakable air of guilt. None could hold my stare. I listened for their heartbeats and heard a chorus of collusion.

Lar Guna offered me a tight smile. “Welcome, Your Grace. We were just discussing options for retaking Lar Katerin.” He gestured to the Wastes commander. “Captain Drago says we should strike the city before the humans get word of our reinforcements.”

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Drago gripped the hilt of his sword. “A suggestion only, my lord,” he said, a hint of irritation in his expression. He covered it well as he gave me a short bow. “Your Grace, my men are at your disposal.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Captain Drago. How was the journey?”

“Cold.”

Someone unaccustomed to vampires of the warrior class might take offense at Drago’s bluntness. But I’d spent half my life with Varick of Lar Keiren. Drago wasn’t being rude. He simply saw no reason to expound on what had likely been a miserable march from the Wastes to Lar Budina. Warriors didn’t complain. They endured, shrugged, and moved on to the next mission.

The chair at the end of the table opposite Lar Guna was empty. I went to it and rested my hands on the back. “Don’t let me interrupt, Artur.” I gestured to the map. “Please continue.”

Lar Guna held my gaze a moment too long. Just as the lords began to shift in their seats, he cleared his throat and pointed at the marker someone had placed on Lar Katerin. “Right, so as I was saying, I think if we enter from here, we could...”

I tuned him out as I considered my options. I knew what my father would have done. If my sire were alive, Lar Guna would already be on his way to the Rift. But could I execute a male for his thoughts? If I did, where did it stop? Did I kill my entire Council for thinking about joining whatever rebellion he’d cooked up? Once I threw all the lords into the Rift, when would the rumors start? Madness, they would say. A

king who saw threats everywhere—just like his father.

History was forever repeating itself, and its laziness was on full display now. My father had ruled with Valen at his side, and he'd dispatched his "ghost" to spy on his lords in the most private and intimate settings. "If you want to know what a male is really thinking, listen to what he tells his mistress in bed."

My father hadn't been wrong. Like the other members of my sex, my dick had led me down numerous paths of stupidity. And now, like my father, I had access to power that wasn't mine. Given's ability allowed me to peer into Lar Guna's head. But thoughts weren't crimes.

And my situation was precarious. Lar Katerin had fallen on my watch. Everyone on the lawn had witnessed Given raving like a madwoman. The lords of the Council didn't fully trust Jordan, and I wasn't convinced they believed the stories about the demons behind the Thicket. The lowpeople outside knew nothing of mages or elves. Would they believe me when I told them Lar Guna had plotted treason in his mind? My ancestors had become kings because they controlled the Deepnight. I no longer did. I was fairly confident my army was still loyal, but I couldn't be entirely certain. My father's army had been loyal too—until it hadn't.

Given and Varick stood at my back. If I fell, I'd almost certainly take them with me.

What were my options?

"You think you're smart, boy. But you're weak."

I know, Father.

"—do you, Your Grace?"

I looked up to find everyone staring at me. Lar Guna's jaw was clenched. Captain Radu regarded me with an expectant look on his face.

I started to shove my hair back and stopped myself. "I beg your pardon. Did someone ask a question?"

"You were always too impatient to listen."

Radu motioned to the marker atop Lar Katerin. "Yes, Your Grace. We wanted your thoughts on the wisdom of striking the South. Lord Lar Guna believes retaking the capital will put us in a good position to push the humans back across the Rift."

And Lar Guna would do none of the pushing. That much was certain. I let my gaze fall on the map. It was beautifully illustrated, the major cities of Ter Isir drawn in precise detail. In Beldurn, the Towers of the Mir rose above the rest of the structures. Aberwas in Wesyfedd was a squat tower. Lar Katerin was a sparkling jewel, the Sanctum's spires stabbing the air. The map didn't show the bleached sky or the burnt bodies in the streets. On paper, Lar Katerin was as beautiful as ever.

"I am no soldier," I said. "I would like to hear Lord Varick's opinion on the matter."

Lar Guna made a sound.

There. Such a seemingly inconsequential noise. But it might as well have been a shout. Because in uttering it, Lar Guna threw down a gauntlet.

I picked it up.

"Is something wrong, Artur?" I asked as Varick moved to my side. Another awkward silence fell as Lar Guna looked between us. Then his gaze moved to a spot over my shoulder.

Given.

Dread slipped down my spine. Lar Guna's expression was the same one he'd worn outside the blacksmith's shop the day we crossed the Rift for Rolund's funeral.

"Everyone knows about us," I'd told Varick.

"Yes, but we've been careful. We allowed them to pretend."

But we hadn't been so careful lately. There was no Rose Room in Lar Budina.

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Lar Guna's eyes went cold. "We all value Lord Varick's insights, Your Grace, but you are the king. We trust you to guide us based on your communion with the gods."

Anger surged, and I welcomed it. Heard it in my voice as I looked Lar Guna square in the eyes and said, "You know nothing of the gods. I have bled—"

"I'm aware, Your Grace, but you have also strayed."

Varick had a dagger in his hand before I could draw a breath. "Say that again," he growled.

Lar Guna wasn't intimidated this time. He had the safety of the table between him and Varick. He looked around it now. "You see, my lords? This is what I spoke of." His eyes flashed as he addressed the Council but looked at me. "We look to the king as an example of faith and tradition. He is our conduit to the gods. It's right there in his title—the Vessel of the Sacred Blood."

My anger thickened, turning black and solid. "When have I failed to uphold tradition?" I demanded. But I already knew. I recognized the look in Lar Guna's eyes. Had seen it time and again in my father's face. And Valen's. And countless courtiers over the years.

And I saw it now. Around the table, the lords of the Council regarded me with contempt. But it wasn't just directed at me. There was plenty for Varick and Given as well.

The dark edge of my anger spread, the blackness seeping through me. It filled all of

my hidden places—the parts of myself I'd kept from the world. I'd hidden them away, not because I was ashamed but because I knew that showing them meant showing Varick too. Exposing him to scrutiny he didn't deserve.

But that was all done now. The hidden places were deep. So very deep. The anger spilled into them. Filled them. Began to rise.

“None of us can control our desires when we feed,” Lar Guna said. “But you take it too far, Your Grace. Your”—he glanced at Varick and spat out a word—“attraction is unnatural. You have allowed it to rule you. You've imperiled the kingdom by refusing to take a wife and sire an heir. And now you've angered the gods.” His voice climbed, indictments falling like the lash of a whip. “The Deepnight is crumbling. Lar Katerin has been taken. The South is invading, and we're crouching like insects who scatter in the light. Our High Priest is dead. You have yet to appoint a new one. By every measure, you have failed Nor Doru. You've succumbed to the pleasures of the flesh, peddling your wife to your general like a common whore.” Lar Guna's mouth twisted. “And you debase yourself with Varick of Lar Keiren. A male who would allow another male into his body is a weak vessel.” He leaned forward and slammed a fist on the table, making the marker over Lar Katerin jump. “Weak!”

Varick blurred.

“Ricti,” I said, and the bly'ad wrenched him to a halt.

There was no pain this time. Or if there was, I didn't feel it. The anger was too deep. It spoke with my voice, shaking the ground as it opened my mouth and said, “Rem.”

Varick fell forward and caught himself on the back of a chair. The lord occupying it didn't appear to notice. He was too busy looking at me.

The others did too, their eyes wide with fear.

Unimportant. The anger only cared about one, and it stared him down and spoke again. “The gods gave me these words, Artur of Lar Guna. RICTI.”

Lar Guna seized in place, his face a mask of frozen shock.

The anger nodded my head. “The gods gave me the power to still. You won’t move again until I release you.” The anger smiled with my lips. “I can keep you still until you die, Artur of Lar Guna. For days, for weeks. I can keep you standing until you perish of thirst and rot from hunger. Your allies on the Council can’t save you. They can kill me, and you’ll remain just as you are. Still. Because I’m the only one who can speak the word to let you move again.”

He stared, unblinking. Helpless in the anger’s grip.

“REM.” Release.

Lar Guna came alive. He sagged forward and gripped the edge of the table.

“AMET.” Stop.

He clawed frantically at his throat. Panic filled his eyes as he realized he couldn’t breathe.

“REM.” Release.

He wheezed, doubling over as he sucked in air.

“SABET.” Obey.

“No more,” he gasped, lifting a shaking hand. “Please.”

“Do as I say. Touch your nose.”

“I can’t— Ahhh!” He screamed and brought his hand to his nose so quickly that he smacked himself.

“Hop on one foot.”

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Lar Guna grimaced and obeyed, his eyes watering as he lifted his leg and hopped, his sword belt jangling.

“Stop.”

He stopped.

“Lower your hand from your face.”

With a whimper, he did as he was told.

The room was quiet as a tomb, shock and terror on every face.

I am not my father, to murder in cold blood.

But I couldn't be weak, either. Not anymore. The crown was too heavy. It had crushed my father. It wouldn't crush me. Not because I was strong enough to bear its weight. I wasn't. But unlike my sire, I didn't have to bear it alone.

And I was done hiding. Finished pretending.

“The South invaded more than our capital, Artur,” I told Lar Guna. “Its poison has infected your mind. However, you're correct about one thing. Nor Doru will no longer cower in this village.” I looked at Captain Drago. “Are your men prepared to take Lar Katerin today?”

“On your command, Your Grace.”

Yes. The anger liked that.

“Lord Lar Guna will ride with us. I want him to have a front-row seat as we enter the city.”

“Consider it done, Your Grace. Lord Lar Guna won’t miss a thing.”

Oh yes. The anger liked that too.

Chapter Fourteen

VARICK

Laurent was difficult to talk to when he was angry.

I’d never seen him this angry.

I stared at him across the lawn. He stood alone, swathed in black and throwing off enough menace to disturb the air around him. My knights gave him a wide berth as they saddled their horses. The lords of the Council shot him anxious looks, no doubt wondering if they would suffer the same fate as Lar Guna.

Laurent had yet to release the latter from the bly’ad. Until Laurent did, Lar Guna was bound to obey Laurent’s every command or suffer escalating agony.

Lar Guna sat stone-faced atop his horse, his shoulders hunched and his fingers tight on the reins.

I looked at Laurent. “Do you have a plan for invading the city?”

He turned his head toward me. At the same moment, Given descended the steps of

the manor house. A fur-trimmed cloak circled her shoulders. The tip of Avenor's sword peeked from under the heavy fabric.

Laurent said something to her.

She stopped and frowned.

Oh no.

Laurent stepped toward her. His frown deepened, and now his voice carried across the lawn. "...absolutely not. I won't compromise on this."

Given lifted her chin. Around the lawn, knights stopped what they were doing and stared.

"Go inside, halfling," I said in Given's mind as I strode toward her. "I'm on my way."

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She turned at my approach, and she allowed me to take her arm and lead her into the manor. Laurent brought up the rear as I ducked into a small solar with a mullioned window that overlooked the lawn.

Given rounded on Laurent as soon as I shut the door. "I'm coming with you."

"No," Laurent said. He folded his arms. "I won't hear of it."

"You can't stop me."

He raised his eyebrows. "Did you not see what I did to Lar Guna?"

"You swore a blood vow to never hurt me in anger."

He drew a breath. Then he scowled. "A battle is no place for a woman. Entering the city will be dangerous."

She flung her cloak aside and gripped the hilt of Avenor's sword. She stepped toward Laurent, her voice low and determined in the quiet room. "Women can do dangerous things."

They stared at each other, the air taut between them.

Laurent looked at me. "What do you think?"

Given bristled. "It doesn't matter what Varick thinks. I'm going." As arguments formed in Laurent's eyes, she closed the rest of the space between them and grasped

his arm. Her blue eyes were wide and clear as she looked up at him. “Less than an hour ago, you said that we go together. You, Varick, and me. The prophecy brought the three of us together, but...” She looked at me, and her eyes softened before she turned back to Laurent. “Even if the prophecy no longer mattered, I’d still want to be right where I am now. With the two of you. Both of you. But we move forward as equals. I’m already outnumbered by you two. Prove to me that you trust my judgment. Allow me to take my own risks and make my own decisions. I won’t break, Laurent, but if you insist on treating me like glass, you’ll break my spirit.” She waited a beat, then added, “And you’ll make me angry.”

Laurent sighed. The post in his ear caught the light as he bent and kissed her forehead. “I can’t count on you to obey my orders anymore, can I, princess?”

She smiled at him as he drew back. “Only the ones I agree with.”

Humor gleamed in his eyes as he looked at me. “Well, that’s not so bad.”

“What’s your plan for taking Lar Katerin?” I asked.

The humor fled. “I don’t need to take the city. I just need to reach the Sanctum.”

Understanding dawned. “You plan to petition the gods.”

“It’s the only thing I can think of.” Laurent hesitated. “I’m sorry for using a bly’ad on you. I wasn’t sure how deep Lar Guna’s influence ran. If he’d won the army to his side—”

“He didn’t,” I said bluntly. “And he won’t.” I glanced at Given. “I’ve bled alongside every knight captain under my command. When the male next to you is willing to step into the path of a sword to save your life, you don’t give a fuck what he does in bed.”

Laurent looked toward the window. A chill rolled off him as his gaze landed on Lar Guna. “If only everyone saw things that way.” He turned back to me, his silver irises several shades lighter. “Can your knights from the Wastes get me to the Sanctum?”

“Yes, Your Grace. It would be better if we weren’t going in blind, but I hesitate to send scouts ahead. We have the element of surprise on our side, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

Given spoke up. “I could farsee.”

I shook my head. “Not a good idea, halfling.” As her brow furrowed, I brushed a knuckle under her chin. “Midian connected with you today. You’ve made it clear you make your own decisions, but I’d rather not risk it.”

Slowly, her forehead smoothed out. Then she nodded. “All right. I agree.”

“That was easy,” Laurent murmured.

She gave him a look. “Don’t get used to it.”

He smiled. “Ah princess, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

* * *

The first skirmish happened on the outskirts of the city.

The Sithistrans were ready for us, but they had spread themselves thin guarding the city from all sides. We had the greater numbers. Given and the thrall Mira had also come up with the ingenious idea of wrapping us in bandages. The cloth couldn’t shield everything, but it bought us time—and gave us the protection we needed to form a flying wedge and smash through the Sithistrans’ line.

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We smashed their mirrors too. No sound had ever pleased me more than the crunch of glass under my charger's hooves.

And Captain Drago had been right. Hitting the South before they learned of our troops from the Wastes gave us an edge. In their victory, the humans had grown arrogant. And their arrogance had led to complacency. As their mirrors cracked and crashed to the cobblestones, the southern knights turned and fled.

Laurent dismounted and pursued them on foot.

I cursed and shoved my visor up. Immediately, the sun seared my skin. "What are you doing?" I demanded in Laurent's head.

He ignored me, his mantle flaring around his ankles as he strode up the street. Menace clung to him once more, black ribbons of power flowing off him. He was terrifying in his rage.

But he couldn't sustain it for long. Like the fireworks the merchants of Lar Katerin shot off every First Winter's Moon, Laurent's fury was fiery and short-lived. If he burned out in the street, the Sithistrans could kill him. Or he'd fall into blood lust, and I'd have no way to force him out of it this time.

A Green Guard charged from around the corner of a building. As I kicked my horse's flanks to intercept, Laurent flung out an arm. "Amet." Stop.

The male dropped to the ground, writhing as he clawed at his neck like he was choking. And he was. Laurent had stopped his heart and lungs.

Two more Green Guards skidded around the corner with swords drawn. They looked at the male on the ground, then lifted their eyes to Laurent.

He raised his hands.

The soldiers turned on their heels and ran.

It went on like that, my knights charging the Sithistrans and smashing their mirrors. They cut down stragglers, showing no mercy. Laurent took care of the few southerners who managed to evade the knights' swords. His voice throbbed with power, the bly'ad echoing in my ears. I could never repeat the power words. They didn't belong to me. Laurent had earned them, facing down death for the privilege of speaking the language of the gods.

The Sithistrans were unprepared for his rage. They were also ill-equipped to take on knights from the Wastes. The humans had attacked a city garrisoned by competent but comfortable soldiers and men-at-arms. The knights from the Wastes were no such thing. Honed by brutal winters and the direst fighting conditions, they cut through the Sithistrans with little fanfare. Their heavy swords swung, sparing no one. Soon, blood soaked the ground, the red forming tiny rivers that cut through the ash left by the city's fallen.

Even as we gained momentum, the sun was brutal. It turned armor into an oven, each knight's body the vulnerable meat inside. The bandages helped, but they couldn't block everything. We fought among the sickening scent of our own cooking flesh. My skin smoked under the cloth that encircled my limbs. Given had wrapped me herself, her efforts a macabre version of a lady tying her favor to a knight's lance. She'd kept the bandages loose per my direction, but the bands of cloth made it difficult to move. My reaction time was slower, my sword like a thousand-pound weight as I cut and slashed and protected my king and queen.

Radu stuck to Given like glue, and I was grateful for it. She didn't know I'd assigned him to protect her—and keep her in the rear of the action—but she'd probably figure it out. And if it displeased her, well, I could work with that. I'd enjoy it. And once she realized she'd enjoy it too, maybe she'd forget to be angry with me.

By the time we reached the Sanctum, the Sithistrans had all fallen back or fled. My knights searched the temple and pronounced it clear. The inside was untouched, as if the humans had feared disturbing the house of the vampire gods.

A wise decision.

Laurent paused on the Sanctum's threshold and addressed a bandaged and sweating Lar Guna. "Dismount and come inside. Bring the rest of the lords with you."

Lar Guna scrambled to obey before the bly'ad punished him. He landed on his feet with a jolt and staggered backward, nearly falling on his ass as the knights from the Wastes watched dispassionately.

I swung off my horse, then helped Given dismount. I cradled her face in my hands and spoke in her mind. "All right, halfling?"

"Yes," she whispered.

Lie. She was fierce, but she wasn't built for the carnage of war. It didn't make me think less of her. Bloodshed rarely made sense. Yet the world clung to it, repeatedly turning to violence as if it might offer some new solution. It never did. The only thing war had to offer was death. And Given was a creature of life. If that hadn't been clear to me before, it was now. The scent of her roses lingered in my nose.

She reached up and touched my cheek. "You're burned."

“It’s nothing.” My helmet was too close-fitting to allow for her bandages, so I’d roasted under the steel. But we’d reached the Sanctum like Laurent wanted. He and Given were alive. I’d accomplished my mission and protected the male and female I loved.

I couldn’t wish for better than that.

“Come,” I said, taking Given’s hand. “Laurent awaits.”

We entered the Sanctum that way, our hands joined for all the knights and lords to see as we went to meet our king.

Chapter Fifteen

GIVEN

Laurent forced the lords of the Council to kneel against the back wall of the Sanctum. A row of knights stood behind them, ensuring they couldn’t leave.

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The main temple was even larger than I remembered. There were no courtiers now. No carpet of rose petals to cushion my steps. Just Laurent nude on his knees before the great altar with its mass of blood-red candles and the grinning vampire skull. Varick stood on Laurent's other side with the golden, salt-coated dagger clasped in front of him.

I clutched my own dagger in a damp hand. I didn't want to see the Rite of Destruction again. Didn't want to watch Laurent bleed and turn gray. I didn't want to watch him die.

But I had to—and I understood why he was doing things this way. Lar Guna had publicly questioned Laurent's right to rule. Laurent was showing him and the other lords why he deserved his crown. But I also knew the gods had been fickle lately. Laurent couldn't always reach them.

Please, I thought, my gaze on the skull with its candlelit eyes. If you're listening, please help Laurent. He loves Nor Doru. Please talk to him. I bit my lip as Laurent's chant echoed through the Sanctum. He rocked on his knees, the muscles in his back flexing. He was so vulnerable like this, the soles of his feet and the cleft between his buttocks exposed. But he was also beautiful. My gaze lingered on the long column of his spine and the round tops of his cheeks.

"It's a total surrender," he'd said. "I leave everything behind." Even modesty. For the longest time, I'd thought the priesthood was a side of Laurent. Now I knew it was Laurent. His devotions weren't duty. The chant that fell from his lips lifted the hair on my nape. He sounded enraptured. I recognized the tone. He spoke to the gods the same way he murmured his passion in my ear when he thrust inside me.

The candles trembled. Their heat flowed from the altar and warmed my face. Red, waxy trails ran down the altar and puddled on the obsidian floor.

Varick stepped forward, which was my cue to step forward too. We knelt on either side of Laurent and held our knives at the ready as he stretched out his arms and switched to the common tongue.

“I come as I am, in awe and humility. I offer the Rite of Destru.”

Gritting my teeth, I plunged the blade into his forearm and dragged it to his wrist. Blood flowed red and thick. The scent hit my nose, making my mouth water. But the sound of it hitting the bowl turned my hunger to nausea. Some primitive part of my mind urged me to flee—to get up and run from death. But I forced myself to stay and watch as Laurent’s voice grew fainter and his face drained of color.

He kept his eyes closed as he swayed, sweat breaking out on his forehead. His blood filled the bowl. His chant filled my ears. A breeze tugged at my hair. It set the candles dancing in the corner of my vision. I looked up, expecting to see the altar and the skull.

Instead, I saw white.

Everywhere.

My heart stuttered.

Laurent’s eyes shot open, and he jerked his head toward me. “Given?”

“I...” My mouth worked, but no sound emerged. I looked down at myself. My dagger was gone, but I still wore my gown. I knelt on nothing and everything. The air was mist, and yet I could see Laurent clearly.

The ground shook, and a towering male stood before us. He came from nowhere, yet the second I saw him I knew he'd always been there. In fact, I couldn't remember a time when he hadn't. There was no before. Just now.

I stood. I'd always stood.

Had I always stood? I couldn't remember.

Laurent grabbed my hand and squeezed. "It doesn't matter."

The male observed this. As I observed him, I saw him—and I realized I hadn't truly seen him before.

My heart lodged in my throat. Because he wasn't a male. He was death.

DORU.

Like the mist, the name of the god was nowhere and everywhere. It wormed into the deepest recesses of my mind. Slipped under my skin and leaked into my veins. Something warm trickled from my ears. I smelled my own blood.

DORU. The god of death. But he was also the god of life. And blood. They were all the same, I realized. Three in one being. Three in one and one in three.

He resembled Laurent and yet he was nothing like Laurent at all. Cloaked in black like a priest of the Sanctum, his face inside his cowl was beautiful and terrible, with noble features and burning red eyes. His fangs were long and tapered to fine points. Blacker than black, his pupils threatened to swallow me whole. Instinctively, I knew not to stare into them. That I could get lost in those dark circles if I looked too long.

But his most arresting feature was his skin, although I wasn't sure it was skin at all.

Transparent, it stretched over his skeleton, revealing the vein and bone beneath.

My fangs throbbed. I swayed toward him, and I looked into his red eyes and his pupils that were blacker than black.

He smiled.

And then he came for me.

Laurent stepped between us. My husband's broad shoulders filled my vision. In this place, Laurent wasn't drained and gray. He was beautiful and golden.

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And he'd just stepped between me and death.

Doru's red eyes fixed on Laurent. Slowly, the god took Laurent's face in both hands and...looked at him. For the longest time. For an eternity and no time at all. Laurent's shoulders shook, and I couldn't see his face but I knew he was sobbing.

After a moment—how long I couldn't say—Doru moved Laurent gently aside. Now, the god stood before me. Just when I expected him to strike me down, a female stepped from behind him.

She was as beautiful and terrible as Doru. Her skin was whole, but there was no mistaking her for anything other than a goddess. Her body was perfect—most of it bared by the ropes that served as her sole covering. Thin and red, they formed a diamond-patterned web over her torso. Her full breasts were circled by rope and totally exposed, the plump mounds swollen in their bindings. Nipples as red and glossy as her hair puckered in the center of each firm breast. More rope passed between her legs, nothing but a thin red strip covering the seam of her sex. A knot lodged firmly against her mound. Two thick bands circled her upper thighs. Another band wrapped around her neck.

Her lips were black, as were the glyphs under her bright golden eyes. Regret filled me as I realized I didn't know what they meant. Rolund had forbidden me to learn.

The goddess's black lips curved. She stepped close and took me into her arms. Her breasts brushed mine as she bent her head and kissed me.

LEGA.

Of course. She was the goddess of restraint.

She deepened the kiss, her hot, silky tongue stroking against mine.

YOU ARE GIVEN.

Yes, I thought, confusion clouding my thoughts. I was Given. But even as the thought formed, I knew it was wrong. Lega spoke again, her voice as terrible as her beauty.

YOU ARE GIVEN. I GIVE MY BLY'AD TO YOU.

Her fangs punched into my tongue. Blood filled my mouth in a scalding rush.

RICTI.

My body ripped apart. It wasn't pain. Pain was nothing. Pain was not this.

This exceeded pain. The air grew teeth and tore me to pieces. I turned inside out, the raw pulp of my flesh exposed to the cruel jaws of death. Blood poured down my throat, and I swallowed so I didn't choke. The bly'ad stabbed into my tongue. It lodged there, a thousand tentacles burrowing under the muscle. Digging in and becoming part of me.

RICTI.

I had to speak it.

RICTI.

If I wanted to own it, I had to spit it out.

RICTI.

If I didn't, I would fall into Doru's eyes and lose myself forever.

But it hurt. It hurt so badly.

Laurent's hand filled mine. Squeezed. His pulse fluttered against my wrist. His heartbeat filled my ears, and then our hearts beat together.

I opened my mouth and screamed until my heart tore loose from the sinew and ligaments that fastened it to my spine. "RICTI!"

Lega broke off our kiss. As I panted, I wondered if she'd kissed me the entire time. She breathed against my lips, gorgeous and unsettling. Her nipples poked my chest, and her golden eyes seemed to stare directly into my mind. She licked blood from the corner of my mouth.

REM.

The bly'ad landed on my tongue like ripples widening after a rock splashes into a still lake. Instantly, I understood that rem—release—was part of every power word. It was useless on its own. I'd earned it by speaking ricti.

Lega turned to Doru, and he lifted her hand to his lips. A forked tongue flashed between his lips as he tasted her skin. The next moment, she was gone.

Laurent kept a firm grip on my hand as Doru's gaze settled on him once more. The god lifted a hand and stroked a bloody thumb from Laurent's forehead to his heart.

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A hissing sound slipped around me, followed by a wet, sickening crunch. When I tried to describe it later, I could never find the words. It was a thousand bones breaking. A bundle of veins yanked from the skin. Older than ancient. More powerful than I could comprehend.

Doru's lips moved, and his deep voice rumbled the mist. "ESHTO."

A high-pitched ringing filled my ears.

Laurent bowed his head.

Wonder spread through me as I watched Doru place a hand on Laurent's hair. I sank to my knees and bowed my head too as I acknowledged the new High Priest of the Sanctum.

ESHTO. I didn't hear it this time, but I knew Doru had repeated it. Kill. He'd given Laurent the bly'ad for death. But Laurent had already earned it. This time, the bly'ad was a gift.

FOR MY FAVORED ONE.

Doru stepped back. Laurent lifted his head. Glyphs covered his face.

WHO LOVES MY CHILDREN MORE THAN HIMSELF.

The glyphs glowed red.

SAVE MY CHILDREN FROM THE SUN.

Laurent nodded once, his face wet with tears. The glyphs shimmered and sank into his skin.

Doru's gaze shifted to the left of Laurent, and suddenly Varick was there. His eyes were wide, his body seemingly rooted to the spot. After a second, he quickly lowered his head.

The god didn't smile, but I could have sworn I sensed what might have been laughter. Or perhaps affection. He glided forward and touched Varick's hair. As Varick lifted his head, Doru pressed a bloody thumb to Varick's forehead.

Varick's lips parted. His big chest swelled as he drew an unsteady breath.

Doru looked past Varick, peering at something I couldn't perceive. His red eyes narrowed. For a second, he wasn't beautiful.

Only terrible.

Then he was gone.

Someone was weeping.

I lifted my head from where I knelt in the Sanctum. The candles sputtered. I still held the golden dagger in my hand. But now Lega's bly'ad dwelt on my tongue.

Laurent turned from the altar and faced the back wall of the Sanctum. He was strong and whole, his body fully restored. His eyes glowed so brightly they cast shadows on his cheeks. The line of blood Doru had painted glistened from his forehead to the center of his chest.

The sound of weeping grew louder. I turned toward it. Lar Guna sobbed into his hands. On either side of him, the other lords of the Council openly wept. Behind them, the row of knights went to one knee and bowed their heads.

“I am not finished here,” Laurent said, his voice crackling with power. “Hesseth,” he hissed. Light streaked around the room.

Sealing the Sanctum shut.

Chapter Sixteen

LAURENT

I bound them to each other first.

My first love...and my last. How perfect that they should come together this way. How privileged I was to bind them.

I went to him and undressed him. So beautiful. My hands shook, and he caught them. Pressed them to his lips and steadied me, even though it was I who should have steadied him. The others watched, and I didn't like it. I had no way to shield him from eyes that would reopen his wounds.

But then she came—my last love—and she knew how to fix it. Her roses rained, fat bulbs that fell from the roof of the Sanctum and disappeared before they touched the ground. They cascaded in a curtain, concealing my first love's hurts.

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I kissed her, tasting my tears as they trickled down my cheeks and into our mouths. Thank you. I held her face in my hands, telling her with my lips and tongue how much she meant to me. How her love for him had nurtured my love for her. He was strong and broken, with hurts that would never heal. But he was ours, hers and mine, and we would hold him together.

But I also loved her for herself. I had summoned her across broken ground and then I'd broken everything between us. She forgave me. And despite everything, she loved me. Our love wasn't like the love I shared with him. Not yet. It was still a slender sapling. But it would grow stronger, its roots sinking deep. We would tend it. With him beside us, we'd watch it grow.

These were the vows I poured into my kiss, and they shone from her eyes as I eased back and beckoned him closer.

He helped me undress her. His big hands that could heft a shield and swing a sword held her hair aside as I undid her buttons. Together, we bared her. Together, we prepared her.

I sank to my knees and kissed her soft, damp lips, gathering her salty-sweet silk on my tongue. I let my fangs descend, and then I placed my thumbs on her slick folds and spread her wider. He moved behind her and pulled her leg up, leaving her balanced on one foot.

Her pussy was a temple where I would worship. On my knees, I prepared to pray. Pink, glistening cunt. Lush core bared to my gaze. Her whimpers fell down to me like whispers from the gods.

“You like his eyes on you,” he said in her ear. He made it a statement.

She answered anyway, a sob in her voice. “Yes.”

“Do you want his mouth on you?” he whispered.

“Yes. Oh yes.”

He pulled her leg higher, until her knee was to her shoulder and her pretty foot dangled in the air. “You’ll have no secrets,” he told her. “Not from us.”

Her eyes slid shut, then flew open again when he reached down and pushed two fingers between my lips. I looked up at her as I sucked, and then I watched as he pulled his fingers from my mouth and used my saliva to stroke the swollen bud the way he knew she liked.

When she came, he kissed her, swallowing her cries. As she shook, I held her cunt open and thrust my nose and lips into her heat. I licked inside her. Feasted inside her. Fucked her and ate her and opened her wide. I buried my face in her pussy and sank my bite into her pink, tender walls, piercing her channel and preparing the way for him.

She jerked and cried out. Her silk and blood flooded my mouth. He held her as she came a second time, his deep voice flowing around her moans, both sounds so sweet to me.

“Put her on her back,” I told him, and now his hands shook as he obeyed.

I kissed him, feeding him her essence. Tasting him and her together. Her roses fell in a curtain, red blooms tumbling and shielding him. She’d shielded him in Vai Seren, too, braving the Thicket to bring him back to me. My eyes burned as I parted from

him and retrieved a dagger.

She was a vision on the ground. Pale hair spread over obsidian, her creamy body laid out like a feast. Her big, round tits trembled. Pink nipples matched the lush color of her panting mouth. She spread her legs wide in welcome, blood and desire smearing her inner thighs.

I knelt at her side and drew the blade in a vertical path down her lips, opening her kiss the same way I'd opened her cunt. Two gleaming mouths. Two wet, hungry slits eager to be filled.

He was waiting for me when I rose, and he watched with heavy-lidded eyes as I stroked his shaft. I took my time, savoring the heft and heat of him in my hand. Moisture swelled at his tip, and my vision narrowed to that tantalizing bead as I drew the tip of the dagger over his velvety skin.

Another flash of the dagger, and his lips were bloodied the same as his cock.

Ritual. I knew this rite by heart the same as I knew all the others. But words failed me as he lowered himself on top of her and moved between her thighs. He touched her pussy, then touched his fingers to his tongue.

"Now," I said.

She spread wide. Her hair spread around her. Night-blooming roses drenched the air.

"Now," I repeated in the ancient tongue, and he thrust inside her, mingling their blood. He kissed her as he rolled his hips, his beautiful ass flexing and his heavy balls swaying as he pumped into her.

He buried his face in her throat and gave her his bite. He left it open and continued to

fuck her.

“Levu,” I said, the bly’ad shaking the tumbling roses and the foundation of the Sanctum.

She sank her fangs into his shoulder. He gasped and fucked her faster.

“Levu.” Bind.

Tangled in blood, they drank from each other. The blood binding snapped, jerking on the one embedded deep in my chest. Because she was my wife...and now I shared her with him.

They finished together, their cries soaring high enough to reach the gods. After, he gathered her in his arms and held her. I prayed, ritual mingling with their sighs as they caught their breath. Roses fell and time ceased to matter. He cherished her.

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And then he rose and turned to me.

Was there ever a time I wasn't hard in his presence? If there was, I couldn't recall it. He came to me and took the dagger from my hand.

"On your hands and knees, my prince."

Yes. That was how we'd begun. I was his. I had always been his prince.

I went to all fours before him, and I shuddered as he knelt behind me and pressed me down with a warm palm between my shoulder blades. I rested my cheek against the obsidian and closed my eyes as he put his swordsman's hands on me.

He started with my ankles, squeezing gently before skimming up my calves. Goosebumps lifted on my skin as he reached my thighs and then my sack. He tugged gently, fondling and caressing until I thrust my ass higher, a suppliant desperate for another kind of worship. I was the temple now. The eager, hungry mouth.

He gave me his. One hand on my dick, he pressed his tongue flat against my hole. He held it there a moment, warm muscle covering my flexing entrance. When my moans turned to pleas, he moved again, licking in slow circles. Curling around my rim and then dipping inside. He thrust his tongue into me, and I rocked on my knees as he fucked me with it. I prayed again, an altogether different kind of ritual emerging in whimpers and moans. I'd memorized these words, too, and I whispered them against the obsidian as I trembled and rocked on my knees.

"Beautiful prince," he breathed between flicks of his tongue. "So beautiful for me."

Roses, and then she was with us. She knelt at my shoulder with a dagger in her hand and blood drying on her lips.

Yes, that was perfect. She would attend us.

He trailed his slick tongue down to my sack, drawing the swollen globes into his mouth and sucking gently before letting them slip free. He took my shaft in a possessive grip and stroked, milking beads of moisture from my slit as he used his other hand to push one cheek aside so the cool air of the Sanctum teased my damp hole.

My prayers grew louder.

His stubble scraped my skin. Touched me everywhere, raising fire in its wake. Slowly, he set me aflame, brushing my aching balls and leaking dick. His prickly caresses abraded the sensitive skin of my cleft and the small of my back. His tongue followed, painting warm, wet lines across my skin.

Only when I was shivering and begging did he return to my hole. A wet finger pushed inside. His thumb joined it and stroked my rim, pushing past my barriers.

Movement at my side, and I knew she'd given him the dagger. A second later, I felt its kiss and the warm trickle of blood down my sack. I opened my eyes and saw roses tumbling and never touching the ground.

She brushed my hair back from my forehead. Her blue eyes glowed as she placed the tip of the blade at my lips and sliced down with a steady hand.

"Good," I told her.

She rose and moved behind me. A whisper of sound as she drew the blade over his

tip.

His breathing grew ragged.

“Now,” I told him breathlessly.

He pushed my cheeks wide and breached me.

“Levu,” I rasped against the obsidian. His entry burned, and I arched toward it. As always, I longed to be consumed.

“Laurent,” he cried softly, pushing until his hips were snug against my cheeks. We waited, both of us trembling. He squeezed my ass with callused fingers as my channel gripped him, the burn and stretch melting into bliss that had me squeezing his dick like a fist. And the clench must have been too much, because he hauled me up and banded an arm around my chest. With his dick lodged inside me, he pulled my back tightly against his thick, round pecs and huffed against my lips.

“Laurent.” He made my name a one-word ritual. “I can’t wait,” he whispered. “Not one minute longer.”

Agreed. We’d waited far too long.

“Bite,” I instructed, tilting my head back. I groaned as his fangs pierced me, and he groaned when I squeezed my ass around his cock.

“Laurent,” he said again.

“I know, baby. Give me your wrist.” I bit him quickly, and when his lips returned to my neck, I swallowed his blood and gasped, “Levu.” Bind.

The vow squeezed my chest. Wrote itself across my heart. He gasped against my neck, and then his lips found mine as he began to move.

Knees spread wide, I bowed my spine and shoved my hips back, meeting his thrusts. His other arm came around me. He wrapped me up in him as he pumped harder and deepened the kiss.

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We didn't seal our bites. By unspoken agreement, we left them open, blood and two decades of devotion flowing down our limbs. He gathered it on his palm and used it to slick my shaft as he fucked me.

I moaned into his mouth and jerked my hips, impaling myself on his dick as I burned up. Turned to cinders and reformed just so I could go up in flames again. Eventually, our movements grew too frantic to maintain our kiss. Gasping, we stared into each other's eyes.

"Are you going to come for me?" he asked, his hips slapping loudly against my ass. His fist flew up and down my dick, which was red with our blood.

I couldn't speak. Could only nod and let my head loll on his shoulder.

"Do it." He fucked me hard, his thrusts forcing me off my knees. He bared his fangs and pumped my dick. "Right now, my prince. Come for me."

My body leapt to obey, my release slamming into me and stealing my breath and most of my mind. I spurted onto his hand and the floor of the Sanctum. A second later, he shuddered and emptied deep inside me. Hot seed filled my ass. As our vow pulled taut in my chest, I remembered that levu was the first bly'ad I'd ever earned. From the beginning, I'd only ever wanted to be bound.

When it was over, he pressed his lips to my cheek and breathed me in. We embraced, both of us full and empty.

She waited for us. With soft hands, she pulled us to our feet. One by one, we kissed

her. Wife. As far as I knew, the only halfling to have ever uttered the language of the gods.

“Go finish it,” she told me with a glance toward the others I’d forgotten until just now.

“Yes, my lady.”

I walked through her roses, my steps leaving bloody footprints. Blood coated my skin and my sated cock. Seed dripped down my thighs. I strode down the center of the Sanctum with Doru’s favor clinging to me. Halfway to the others, my feet left the floor.

Power.

It was mine now. I glided on it, drifting through the air to stop before the one who had tried to remove my crown.

“Artur of Lar Guna,” I said. “Look at me.”

He lifted his head. Red, swollen eyes followed my progress and filled with awe as I floated down to the floor. The other lords kept their heads bowed. The knights behind them rose, ready for my command. With just one word, I could wipe my Council clean. But...

I am not my father to murder in cold blood.

I am not my father.

I am not.

I am.

I am enough.

“I took your advice, Artur,” I said. “I appointed a High Priest. Me.”

Around the Sanctum, candles flared high, the flames spitting and hissing.

Lar Guna bowed his head. His tears splashed the obsidian as he spoke in a broken whisper. “May the gods forgive my ignorance. I have looked upon Doru this day, and I am humbled, Your Grace. Forgive me.”

I looked at the rest of the lords, letting my gaze linger on each one. They were pale and trembling, except for Sergiu of Lar Bassa, who met my eyes unflinchingly. A soft smile touched his lips.

I spread my arms. “Let it be known that my first act as High Priest was to bind Varick of Lar Keiren and Given of Eldenvalla and Nor Doru in marriage. My second act was to bind Varick of Lar Keiren and myself in marriage.” I looked at Lar Guna. “So you see, Artur? Varick is my husband now. By law, I can’t deny him my bed.”

Lar Guna nodded, his tears flowing faster.

I raised my voice. “My queen and general and I are bound before the gods. Does anyone object?”

Silence. The knights waited, their glowing eyes steady. The lords tensed. One closed his eyes and released a shuddering breath, clearly prepared to feel the bite of steel on his neck.

“Good,” I said. “Rem.” The temple doors flew open. Lar Guna sagged, released at

last from the bly'ad I'd set upon him in Lar Budina.

He lifted his gaze, hope kindling in his eyes.

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I bared my fangs and hissed. “Don’t betray me again.”

“N-Never,” he rasped. He fell into a fervent babble. “Never, my king. High Priest. I will s-spend the rest of my days speaking for you and the queen...a-and Lord Varick. If any dare to impugn you, I will be a mighty sword of the gods—”

“Shut up.”

He clamped his lips together.

“That goes for the rest of you too.” I turned and strode toward the altar, where my wife and husband waited. “Now fuck off.”

Chapter Seventeen

VARICK

By late afternoon, the knights from the Wastes had killed enough humans to send the Sithistrans fleeing the city.

By nightfall, crimson and black banners bearing the night-blooming rose of Nor Doru flew from the spires of the Midnight Palace.

Scouts reported that the humans had retreated across the Rift.

I didn’t fool myself into thinking they would stay there.

“Lord Rellan overplayed his hand,” I told Laurent now, “but if he’s the experienced commander we think he is, you can be certain he’s regrouping.”

“Do you think that’s why the humans retreated so quickly?” Laurent asked.

“I think we should count on that being the case.”

Laurent nodded. He sat at the head of the stone table map of Ter Isir. It was nearly midnight, and the Council chamber was much emptier than usual. Given sat at Laurent’s right hand. I stood beside her so I could point out troop locations. Captains Radu and Drago occupied seats at the opposite end of the table, their elbows planted in the Blacktop Mountains and the Meadowlands, respectively.

Jordan was still conspicuously absent. I hadn’t seen him since he and I spoke in the manor house’s library. His final words to me lingered in my mind. I resisted the urge to examine them too closely—or to attempt to decipher just what I’d seen in his blue eyes as he turned from the door.

His absence was for the best. I had no time for fickle mages. Right now, a full-scale war brewed on Nor Doru’s doorstep. I had to figure out what to do next. Not tomorrow or some undefined point in the future. Now.

The only other soul in the chamber was Sergiu of Lar Bassa. After speaking with him, I was confident he’d taken no part in Lar Guna’s plans. So far tonight, Lar Bassa had been quiet and attentive, occasionally asking smart, pointed questions. He hadn’t said anything irritating yet. That was a bonus.

Laurent studied the miniature Rift that bisected the table. “The gods gave me a gift today. Doru himself granted me the power to kill without tiring. I don’t know how long this gift will last. A day or two. Perhaps forever. But right now, it resides on my tongue.”

No one spoke. Around the table, everyone remained still, their faces showing various degrees of wonder and fear. Everyone in the room had seen the god. I could happily go the rest of my life without seeing him again.

I'd never felt so helpless as I did in the Sanctum today. It was bad enough seeing Laurent drain himself, but then Given had abruptly lost consciousness. I'd frozen in panic, unsure how to help—or if I even could.

Then I'd looked up and into the face of Doru, the god of life and death and blood. Nor Doru's chief deity. To look into his eyes was to stare into the mystery and terror of death.

"This power changes everything," Laurent said quietly. He met my gaze. "I believe we should use it immediately. Tonight."

Drago nodded. "We'll have the advantage of fighting under cover of darkness. Without the sun and their mirrors, the humans are greatly diminished."

"They're also reeling from today's losses," Radu added. He pointed to the map. "Our scouts report Lord Rellan and his son, Edwin, are camped about a half mile behind the Sithistran edge of the Rift. The fact that they've pulled back that far likely means they're digging in and preparing for a fight on southern soil."

Drago grunted. "We don't want to give them an opportunity to dig trenches. The land around the Rift is open and flat. If the humans spread out, we'll have no easy way around their lines. Motivated soldiers can dig in deep within a few hours. Come morning, they could have a wall of mirrors shining in our faces."

"Yes," Given said, "but the mirrors won't help them at night."

"A fair point, my queen," Drago said. "However, the daytime remains a vicious

enemy. The Bleak Pass is the only way across the Rift. Our knights can't risk crossing and getting trapped by the humans' mirrors. Rellan knows this, so you can bet he'll have his soldiers on high alert during the night. Each assault we launch will be met with the full resistance of the South."

I folded my arms as I stared at the table. "Captain Drago is right. The sun restricts us, limiting us to nighttime battle. Rellan will be prepared for it. Every time we attack, he can pick us off a bit at a time. And he can spend all day shifting his men around and laying new traps. Worse, we no longer have the Deepnight to shield us if we need to retreat. The daylight hours are a major vulnerability on both sides of the Rift."

Lar Bassa spoke up. "Lord Rellan undoubtedly knows his history. Nor Doru had never lost a battle to the South until Lar Katerin fell. It's possible Rellan expects us to immediately throw everything we have at him, especially now that we've forced the Sithistrans from the city."

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Radu sat back in his chair, his eyes on Lar Bassa. “Pride,” he said. “Rellan will expect us to want to save face.”

Lar Bassa nodded. “So maybe we shouldn’t give him what he expects.”

It was a fair point. Vampires of the warrior class didn’t like to lose. When my father led King Nicolae’s army, he’d executed knight captains who lost too many men in battle.

“North and South have skirmished for centuries,” Lar Bassa said. “The humans resent us—”

“Jealousy,” Radu said.

“No,” Given said suddenly. As all eyes swung to her, she offered Radu a gentle smile. “Jealousy is part of it, Captain, but Lord Lar Bassa is right.” She swallowed. “I spent the first twenty years of my life trying to conceal every vampiric trait I possess. It didn’t work. And it didn’t matter that I was Baylen’s daughter or Rolund’s sister. No one in the South ever let me forget where my mother came from. They whispered their insults and stuck their knives in whenever they could.” She looked at the table, her gaze on Beldurn. “The insults always got worse when it was time to send thralls over the Rift. Soldiers would visit the poorest villages, pressuring families to volunteer their sons and daughters. The lowpeople hated it, but they did it for the money it would bring.” She hesitated, her brow furrowing.

Laurent touched her hand. “Please keep going, sweetheart. You’re telling us things we need to hear.”

She chewed her lip as she looked at him. Then she drew an even breath. “The thralls aren’t mistreated here, my lord, but they’re...”

He frowned. “What?”

“Food,” she said bluntly. “You treat them like food. And they’re not food. They’re people with minds and hearts and loved ones back home across the Rift. Mira and Henrik helped me so much—”

“Who?”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” she said. A flush spread down her neck as she grew more impassioned. “You don’t even know their names.”

Laurent’s expression turned perplexed. “Well I don’t need to—”

“Mira and Henrik are thralls I met in Lar Budina, and they’re both lovely.” She turned blazing blue eyes to me. “It was Mira’s idea to use the bandages for the knights. A human woman helped you retake this city, General.”

Abruptly, I found myself standing in a cold sweat. A dozen possible responses sprang into my mind. I quickly ran through them in my head, each one sounding more stupid than the last. Better to keep my mouth shut.

Given stared at me, obviously waiting for some kind of acknowledgment.

I grunted.

Her eyes narrowed.

“Your Grace...” Lar Bassa ventured. As Given looked at him, I exhaled with relief.

Idiot. But a useful one. He hadn't been in her crosshairs before, but if he wanted to sacrifice himself, so be it.

Lar Bassa continued. "I share your concerns about the thralls, Your Grace. I believe the practice has allowed anti-vampire sentiment to flourish among the Brotherhood for centuries."

Radu scowled. "If we don't have thralls, Lar Bassa, how are we supposed to survive?"

"We don't have to figure that out tonight, Captain," Lar Bassa said kindly. "But I think it's important to understand our enemy. If Lord Rellan wants to be king, he needs to motivate his men to fight. Toppling tyranny is a powerful reason to go to war. Whether we set out to treat the thralls like food or not, that is how the South perceives us. You heard it directly from Queen Given. If I had to guess, Lord Rellan thinks we think we're superior to humans. And if we're honest with ourselves, we should probably admit that's the case." Lar Bassa lifted his shoulders. "That's what makes me think he'll anticipate retaliation tonight. And that's why I believe we should think very carefully before we give it to him."

With a nod, he fell silent.

Radu and Drago stared at him, their faces reluctantly impressed. Given watched him with a soft smile playing around her full mouth.

When I looked at Laurent, I found him looking at me. Awareness sizzled through me.

"This is not the only war on our horizon," he said softly.

"No, my king."

Laurent stood and came to my side. He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed—a casual display of affection he wouldn't have risked before.

But things were different now, I thought, my heart pumping harder. We were wed. Husbands. The word stuck in my throat like one of his bly'ad. I wasn't sure I could say it just yet. It was so new. Delicate, somehow. Maybe I worried I would break it.

And maybe I worried what others might think. A glance at Radu and Drago revealed nothing but a pair of seasoned knights waiting for their king to speak. Given's eyes were shining. Lar Bassa watched us with an odd expression. Not judgment. I knew what that looked like. Before I could figure it out, Laurent released me and gestured to the miniature cast iron trees that represented the Thicket.

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“History repeats itself. The last time Nor Doru went to war with Sithistra, the elven empire sought to rule us both. The elves failed, which opened the Rift and gave us the Thicket.” Laurent looked around the table, meeting each person’s eyes. “We can’t afford to wage a protracted battle with the South. That’s exactly what Midian wants. Only this time, he doesn’t plan to fail.” Laurent reached out and swept the trees aside, leaving the border between Eldenvalla and Wesyfedd open. “If the Thicket falls, none of us will survive. No humans. No vampires. Everyone in Ter Isir will die.”

A tense silence fell, the weight of the world descending upon the chamber.

Drago was the first to speak, his gruff, no-nonsense voice somehow soothing after the heavy moment. “We’ll do whatever you ask of us, Your Grace. For you. For Nor Doru. We are yours to command.”

Laurent nodded. “I’m grateful, Captain. And I agree with Lord Lar Bassa that we shouldn’t invade with our full forces. Rellan knows how to fight a traditional battle. He’ll expect swords.” Laurent turned his head and smiled softly at Given. “So we’ll give him the unexpected.”

Given returned his smile with a soft one of her own.

“Lega gave you the bly’ad for still.”

“Yes,” she said.

“With Doru’s gift, I can kill without tiring, but it could be a challenge getting across the Bleak Pass.” Laurent pointed to the tiny strip of wood that represented the Pass.

“Rellan has massed his forces on the Sithistran side on purpose. He knows we have to cross the Pass to invade. We have to expect the South to be guarding it closely. All it takes is one Sithistran Green Guard knocking me into the Rift for our plan to fail.” He looked at Given. “Would you consider using your bly’ad to immobilize any southern soldiers guarding the Pass?”

Her eyes went wide. “You’d let me do this?”

“I have to think Lega gave you her bly’ad for a reason.” He hesitated, and his next words emerged stiffly. “Just because I believe you’re meant to do this, my lady, doesn’t mean I like it. If I had my way, you would remain behind in the palace.” A bemused look entered his eyes. “But I seem to recall you telling me you only follow orders you agree with.”

Radu snorted, then quickly covered it with a cough.

Given’s eyes twinkled. “I agree with this one.”

Laurent nodded. “If you use your bly’ad to immobilize the men guarding the Pass, I can cross quickly and start the attack.”

She swallowed. “You mean start killing.”

“Yes,” he said simply. “It’s war. The South didn’t hesitate to slaughter our people in the streets.”

Her gaze hardened, and I knew she was remembering the horrors she’d witnessed as the city fell. “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

Drago cleared his throat. “You and the queen will need knights to provide cover, my king.” He looked at me. “What do you think, General? Thirty knights from the Wastes?”

I nodded. “Thirty is a good number.” I leaned forward and pointed to a spot behind the mouth of the Bleak Pass. “We could lie in wait here while the king moves over the Rift. If he encounters any trouble, we’ll be ready to respond. Once he’s across, we’ll follow.”

“It’ll have to be on foot,” Radu said. “I wouldn’t risk a horse’s weight on that bridge.”

Drago grunted. “That works in our favor. We’ll be harder to spot on foot.”

“So we’ll follow behind the king and kill anyone who gets close to him.” I looked at Laurent. “Do you agree with that plan, Your Grace?”

“Yes.” Laurent’s shoulders lifted as he sighed. “I think it’s the best option. Our only option. Because if we don’t do this now, we’ll end up fighting a war on two fronts: one against Rellan and another against Midian. I don’t relish killing, but the alternative is losing everything.” His gaze fell on the scattered trees that covered the table. “I ignored the threat of the Thicket for a long time. Lord Varick tried to tell me it posed grave danger, but I refused to listen. I kept my eyes closed against the truth.” He looked at me. “My eyes are open now. I just have to hope it’s not too late.”

My heart pumped hard. Emotion clogged my throat, and I had to clear it before I could speak. “We’ll get you and Given to the Rift and we’ll protect your flanks after you cross. And when you’re done, we’ll get you both safely home.” Because if I lose either of you, I’ll die.

His silver eyes gleamed with emotion that reflected my own. “All right.”

Lar Bassa spoke up. "I'd like to ride with you, Lord Varick." My surprise must have shown on my face as I swung toward him, because he flashed a self-deprecating smile. "I'm not a warrior, but I believe someone from the Council should go." The humor in his eyes faded, replaced with a determined glint. "If our king and queen are riding to war, the Council should ride with them, even if only one member of the Council remains." He looked at Laurent. "I am honored to have your trust, Your Grace. Allow me to have your back."

Laurent's tone held reverence as he said, "And I'm honored to have your loyalty, Lord Lar Bassa. You are welcome at my side." He turned to me. "As long as Lord Varick agrees."

I pinned Lar Bassa with a look. "You'll follow every command or I'll shove you in the Rift myself."

He swallowed. "Yes, my lord."

Radu grunted. "That's settled, then. We go tonight."

“Within the hour,” Laurent agreed.

The captains and Lar Bassa rose together. After a brief discussion about logistics, Radu and Drago left. As Lar Bassa followed, Laurent called him to a halt.

Lar Bassa turned with eyebrows raised. “Yes, Your Grace?”

Laurent walked to the end of the table and leaned against it. “Why.”

Confusion clouded Lar Bassa’s eyes. “I beg your pardon, my king. I don’t—”

“Why did you stay loyal when no one else did?”

“Ah.” Lar Bassa’s gaze faltered. His cheeks colored slightly as he seemed to gather his words. When he spoke, he kept his gaze on the floor. “My father was a...traditional sort of male, Your Grace. His fondest wish before he died was to see me wed.”

“But that didn’t happen,” Laurent said quietly.

Lar Bassa’s lips curved in a humorless smile. “No, Your Grace.” He cleared his throat. “I, um...” At last, he lifted his head and looked directly at Laurent. “I don’t want a wife, Your Grace. I will never want a wife.”

Laurent straightened from the table. The scent of cloves and roses teased my nose as Given stood, her shoulder brushing mine. I took her hand and squeezed her slim fingers.

Lar Bassa's expression was earnest. "What I saw in the Sanctum today gave me hope for the first time in a really long time. I am new to my title, Your Grace, but you have my support. You have always had my support."

For a long moment, no one said anything. Then Laurent went to Lar Bassa and put a hand on the other male's shoulder. "Thank you, Sergiu. And you have mine." He glanced at Given and me over his shoulder. "Ours."

Lar Bassa smiled wide enough to show his fangs. "That means more than you know."

Laurent squeezed Lar Bassa's shoulder. "We'll see you in the courtyard." He waited until Lar Bassa reached the door before saying, "And Sergiu?"

"Yes, Your Grace?"

"I know you don't wish for a wife. But if you ever wish for someone else to share your life with, I would be honored to perform that rite. And that someone else would be most welcome at my court."

Lar Bassa swallowed hard. "Thank you, Your Grace. I..." He ducked his head and dashed a knuckle under his eye. When he looked up, his eyes were suspiciously bright. "I might have someone in mind."

"I look forward to meeting him."

Lar Bassa left. Laurent turned, and for a second he was sixteen years old again, his face so open and happy I could have wept. I wanted to freeze him that way—to race back through time and scoop that boy into my arms and save him. He always claimed I had saved him, but I hadn't. Not really. Because I'd been sixteen too, and my rescues had been as clumsy and plodding as the oversize body I'd grown into too quickly.

Neither of us would have dared to think of a wedding in the Sanctum. Standing up next to each other and declaring our love before the gods? It was unthinkable then.

But it wasn't now. Because Laurent had changed everything. Today...and tomorrow and all the tomorrows after that. He didn't care what others thought.

And, suddenly, I didn't, either. My feet moved, carrying me across the chamber. I got a glimpse of his eyes widening before I crushed my lips to his. His gasp of surprise filled my mouth and then turned into a moan as I dipped him backward. I kissed him hard, the way I did when we were in private. And I knew I'd kiss him like this always. Anywhere. Because he was my husband and I loved him. He and I had earned our love. We'd worked hard for it, and I wasn't going to hide it anymore. And if people didn't like it, well, as Laurent would say, fuck them.

When we broke apart, his eyes were bright and touched with more than a little surprise. "I thought you'd fight me about going to the Rift tonight."

I grunted.

"You don't like it," he said.

"I'm..." Afraid. The word lingered in the air. I wasn't afraid for myself. But I was terrified of the things I stood to lose. The promise of happiness hovered. My fingertips brushed against it. And tonight could see it snatched beyond reach.

Laurent heard all the things I didn't say. He stroked my cheek and murmured, "I do miss that beard."

"I'll grow you another one." If... I didn't let my mind complete the thought.

He turned and extended his hand to Given. She came to us, and he pulled her into our

small huddle and kissed her temple. “Sorry to leave you over there by yourself, my lady.”

“Are you kidding?” she asked, shivering as I nipped her neck with my fangs. “I’ll watch you two kiss any time.”

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Laurent laughed softly against her cheek. “Wicked princess.”

“It’s your fault,” she sighed, snuggling into our embrace. “You corrupted me.”

“Well,” he said, “that’s probably true.”

Chapter Eighteen

GIVEN

“I want you to use your bly’ad on me,” Laurent said.

Anxiety spiked in my chest. “Now?” We rode side by side in the weak light cast by a crescent moon, our horses’ hooves muffled by leather booties the knights had fastened on them before we left the palace. I’d refrained from telling the knights the booties made their chargers look absolutely adorable. The leather was for stealth, which we needed if we hoped to get near the Rift undetected.

Near was as close as we would go. We planned to stop a few hundred feet from the chasm and creep forward the rest of the way on foot. We’d have to move slowly, since the Sithistrans almost certainly had lookouts posted in the small fort on their side of the Rift.

Laurent’s eyes gleamed from inside his cowl, reminding me of Doru. “Everyone speaks the bly’ad differently. Some can go hours without feeling any negative effects. Others become instantly ill. You won’t be able to root your word in blood. It will probably cause you pain, although your human blood might blunt those effects.” He

offered me a gentle smile. “Regardless, I don’t think we should wait to find out.”

He was right—and I’d avoided thinking about how I was going to use my new power once we reached the Rift. Varick had ensured I would have plenty of protection. Before we left the palace, he’d huddled with Radu and Drago, and the three of them had come up with a simple plan for getting Laurent across the Bleak Pass.

The knights would take me as close to the Pass as possible, where I would speak the bly’ad to freeze any Sithistrans I saw. And seeing was critical. According to Laurent, power words didn’t work outside of visual range. My bly’ad was also limited to one or, if I were lucky, two soldiers at a time. Unfortunately, I couldn’t stand on one side of the Rift and freeze the entire Sithistran army.

But I didn’t need to. If I could freeze enough enemy knights to allow Laurent to cross the Bleak Pass unharmed, he would take care of the rest. And Varick and his knights would keep me safe while Laurent decimated the humans and hopefully stopped the war.

“Hit me,” Laurent said now. “Tell me to be still.”

My stomach flipped over. “I just...say it?”

“Yes. It belongs to you. Do you feel it on your tongue?”

As soon as he said it, the word was there. Ricti. For a second, I tasted Lega’s kiss. An echo of pain frazzled through me like someone pressing a bruise. “Why do they hurt so much to speak?” I asked.

“The language of the gods isn’t meant for us.” Laurent’s smile was soft. “Vampires are mortals the same as men. Don’t be afraid, princess. Tell me to be still.” He flashed one of his mischievous grins. “And then be a good girl and release me.”

I drew a deep breath. Before my courage could desert me, I opened my mouth and said, “Ricti.”

He froze in the saddle.

Nausea surged, and a wave of dizziness washed over me. Saliva flooded my mouth as Laurent started to tip off his horse. “Rem,” I gasped.

Varick appeared, grabbing a fistful of Laurent’s cloak and hauling him back before he could crash to the ground. Laurent laughed softly as he scrabbled for his saddle’s pommel.

“What in the name of all the gods are you two doing?” Varick said under his breath.

“I’m sorry!” I told Laurent. I reached for him, but he was already recovered, happiness dancing in his eyes.

“Don’t apologize, princess. That was very good.” He beamed at me. “You’re a natural.”

“I am?”

Varick glared at us. “Will you keep it down?”

“Sorry, baby.” Laurent patted Varick’s gauntlet. “We were just practicing. Given said her first bly’ad.”

Varick looked like he wanted to murder us both. “No more practicing,” he muttered.

“We promise,” I said solemnly.

He grunted and faced forward. Laurent caught my eye and winked, and we smiled at each other like naughty children scolded by a strict parent. Proud of you, he mouthed.

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Warmth spread through me, along with tendrils of desire. We hadn't spoken about the Sanctum, but the experience resonated between us. Laurent had put himself between me and Doru. He hadn't even hesitated. And afterward, he'd wept as he kissed me, telling me more loudly than words that he loved me. It was new for both of us. I was determined to give it a future.

But first I had to make sure he crossed the Bleak Pass—and then returned to me.

We rode in companionable silence for the next few minutes with nothing but the soft sound of the horses' muffled hooves on the frozen ground to accompany our progress. Varick's thirty knights were the most elite warriors in Nor Doru's army. It was hard to feel frightened when I was surrounded by towering males with glowing eyes and armor as black as the night. They'd traded their crimson cloaks for black too. Each warrior wore his hood pulled up, rendering our party almost invisible.

I wore black, too, including a pair of leather trousers donated by one of the squires. "Skirts won't do, halfling," Varick had said when he brought them to me. He'd rubbed his mouth and muttered "fuck" when I appeared in the courtyard wearing them a few minutes later.

"Are they too tight?" I'd asked, craning my head over my shoulder as I struggled to see.

He'd cursed again and promptly thrown a cloak around my shoulders. "It's more a matter of them making mine too tight." His eyes had glinted dangerously as he tossed me none-too-gently into the saddle. "You're going to wear those for me when we return."

“Yes, General,” I’d said breathlessly.

Without skirts to manage, Avenor’s sword lay flat against my thigh. I hoped I wouldn’t need to use it, but its presence brought me comfort.

An owl hooted softly.

Instantly, knights surrounded me, male bodies blocking my view. The rasp of steel on steel filled the air as the knights drew their swords.

“Stop right there,” Varick said somewhere ahead of them, his deadly tone sending a frisson of fear down my spine.

A familiar, lilting accent reached my ears. “You vampires are an unfriendly lot.”

Varick cursed, and I heard him sheath his sword.

The knights relaxed. I nudged my horse forward, nosing through the cluster of warriors in time to see Rhys the Fair lower his hood and offer Varick a smug grin. Jordan and Igrith emerged from the shadows behind Rhys and reined in on either side of him. A small band of Wesyfeddans appeared behind them. All wore brown cloaks fastened with broaches that resembled a leaf. Leather armor peeked from under the fabric.

Rhys’s grin softened to a smile as he looked at me. “Given. It’s good to see you.”

I couldn’t help but return his expression. “You too.” I looked at Igrith, joy bubbling at the sight of her freckles and smiling hazel eyes. Like me, she wore leather trousers and boots that climbed to her knees. Her dark-brown hair was pulled back from her face. A quiver of arrows rose over her shoulder. “I can’t believe you’re here,” I said.

“I told you we’d meet again.”

Laurent gave Rhys an assessing look. “Your presence is a surprise, Chieftain. Wesyfedd is famous for its independence. I thought you were committed to not choosing sides.”

“We heard there was a fight brewing. We were in the area and bored, so we thought we might join in. Assuming you’ll have us.” Rhys shrugged. “Also, Rellan Blackmun is a cunt.”

Any lingering animosity Laurent bore Rhys appeared to drain away as he smiled at the Wesyfeddan chieftain. “Nor Doru can use a few extra swords.” He looked at Igrith. “And arrows, especially those loosed by the Huntress of Aberwas.”

“I name my arrows, Your Grace,” Igrith said. “Are there any names in particular I should add to my quiver?”

Laurent’s expression went cold. “Crasor, Prelate of the Brotherhood.” He turned to me.

“Lord Rellan Blackmun of the Meadowlands,” I said.

Igrith nodded. “It will be done.”

Jordan spoke, his eyes on Laurent. “I believe congratulations are in order, Your Grace, for your ascension to High Priest...” His gaze strayed to Varick. “And your marriage.”

Laurent smiled thinly. “Thank you, Jordan.” His voice turned silky enough to make me shiver. “It’s a shame you couldn’t attend.”

“As you told me once, Your Grace, your gods and mine are not the same.”

“That’s true.” An edge entered Laurent’s tone. “How fortunate you made it out of Lar Budina safely. We were concerned when you disappeared.”

Jordan’s blue eyes remained steady. “No need for concern, King Laurent. I can look after myself.”

Drago leaned into Varick, murmuring, “We are wasting the night, my lord.” Varick nodded, but Laurent obviously overheard because he wheeled his horse around. He lifted in the saddle and addressed the knights.

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“You are the finest warriors in my army. There is no one else I’d have at my side as we defend our land and defeat our enemy.” His face darkened, and his voice echoed with some of the power he’d displayed in the Sanctum. “Sithistra violated our city. Killed our people and dared to march in our streets. This will never happen again.”

Growls rumbled from the knights. Their eyes glowed within their hoods. Even knowing they were on my side, the sight lifted the hair on my nape.

“We go to avenge our dead,” Laurent said. “Tonight. Right now. Are you with me?”

Heads nodded. The knights kept their voices low, their quiet growls more sinister than battle cries.

“To the Rift,” Laurent said, then he spun his horse around and set off again. We moved faster now, trotting at times as we approached the chasm. The time passed quickly, and suddenly the Rift’s dark, yawning blackness loomed.

The knights from the Wastes moved swiftly and quietly, dismounting and falling into position around me. My heart thumped as we walked forward, Laurent and Varick leading the way. My palms grew damp, and I wiped them on my cloak as I turned Lega’s bly’ad over and over again in my mind, preparing to use it the moment I spotted a Sithistran soldier. My role was simple. All I had to do was stick to the plan.

But as Varick would tell me later, one constant in war is that battle plans are doomed to go awry. Because as we neared the Rift, the ground began to shake.

I staggered, stumbling into a knight. Before he could steady me, the ground shook

again.

A loud, ominous cracking sound filled the air.

“Earthquake,” one of the knights hissed.

“The Bleak Pass!” another yelled.

Ahead, the wooden bridge swayed violently. Rocks crumbled along the edge of the Rift and tumbled into the chasm. Shouts went up on the Sithistran side. Seconds later, soldiers appeared, their armor glinting in the weak moonlight. Someone pointed straight at us.

“Vampires!”

Our plan had failed. We’d been seen.

And now the land was rolling under our feet.

Chapter Nineteen

LAURENT

For several minutes, chaos reigned.

Knights staggered. Horses screamed, their eyes rolling wildly as they threatened to bolt. Beside me, Varick was thrown to the dirt. He was back up within seconds, looking furious. He drew his sword, and for a moment I thought he might stab the ground as punishment for daring to knock him off his feet.

Instead, he turned to me, shouting, “We need to fall back! They know we’re here. We

don't have the men to fight them!"

Nodding, I turned and searched for Given. She clung to a knight who was doing his best to keep them both on their feet. As I opened my mouth to shout, the ground stopped moving.

Everyone froze, the sudden cessation of movement almost as unsettling as the quake. For a moment, things were utterly silent. Then shouts lifted from the Sithistran side of the Rift. As I turned, a Green Guard stepped onto the Bleak Pass. He stood in place for a moment like he was testing the bridge. When it held, he thrust his sword in the air and bellowed, "Advance!"

He raced across the Pass. Immediately, other Sithistran knights followed.

"Fuck," I muttered.

Varick grabbed my arm. "Come on. I'll get the horses."

"No." I shook him off. Fuck no. I was finished running. I strode forward, whipping the halves of my cloak behind me. Doru had granted me a gift—and given me an order. I had no intention of disobeying. And I wouldn't see my people burned in the streets again.

The Green Guard who'd stepped onto the Pass first pounded toward me.

I thrust out my hand. "Eshto!"

He fell to the ground. Dead.

I waited for the nausea to strike.

It didn't.

So I kept going.

Soldiers raced toward me. I flung out my hands. "Eshto."

Dead.

"Eshto."

Dead.

More crossed the Pass. I spoke the bly'ad, killing as I walked to meet them. But there were too many now. As I'd suspected, Doru's gift had limits. I couldn't kill in thick waves. Maybe that was too much power for a mortal to handle. Maybe Doru didn't trust me to wield it without becoming corrupted. I set these thoughts aside as I spat the bly'ad as quickly as I could.

But I wasn't fast enough.

Swords drawn, a dozen Green Guards pounded over the Nor Doruvian mouth of the Pass with murder in their eyes.

"Eshto."

The one in the front went down. The others leapt over him and kept coming.

“Ricti!” Given’s voice rang out. Two of the Sithistrans fell to the ground, their eyes wide with shock.

I killed them quickly—and then two more. Given appeared beside me, her face pale as she spoke Lega’s bly’ad.

My brave, beautiful queen with Avenor’s sword strapped to her hip. She strode into battle beside me, stilling our enemies and buying me time. We seemed to go on for hours that way, although I knew it was probably mere minutes. Time slipped away as my vision narrowed to soldiers and swords and men’s bodies dropping to the ground.

I killed. With my wife at my side, I killed men with wives and families of their own. I wished I could have spared Given the toll I knew it would take on her. But Fate had dealt us this hand.

And my queen was strong. “She’s stronger than I am, and it’s not even close,” Varick had told me. He’d seen Given’s strength long before I did. They were both so strong. Somehow, I’d convinced them to love me. I wasn’t sure how I’d managed it, but I was not going to lose them. Not ever, and certainly not today.

I charged toward the Rift, power throbbing at my fingertips. The Sithistrans stopped coming. I felt Varick at my back. As always, I felt him even when I couldn’t see him. He marched with his knights, guarding my back in the moonlight. The Sithistrans were weak without their mirrors and the sun.

My lips curved. The night belonged to Nor Doru.

Torches bobbed on the Sithistran side of the Rift. A second later, a white flag waved.

“They’re calling for a truce,” a knight shouted behind me. I lifted a hand, signaling a halt. Given stopped next to me. She’d worn her pale hair in a long braid. It trailed

over her shoulder, most of it unraveled. She was wan, sweat beading her brow.

I took her hand and spoke in a low voice. "Go to the rear, sweetheart. Please."

She gave her head a single shake. "Elissa," she said, her gaze on the other side of the Rift.

I looked and, sure enough, Rolund's First Queen approached the edge with Lord Rellan at her side. More figures accompanied them. As they moved closer, I recognized Lidia and Crasor. The Prelate's gray robes flapped around his ankles. His ever-present mirror bounced against his chest. A younger man in full armor walked beside him. With his reddish hair and passing resemblance to Elissa, this could only be Edwin, Rellan's heir.

The Sithistrans stopped at the edge and faced us across the Rift, a line of Green Guards behind them. Dead Green Guards littered the Bleak Pass. Dozens of dead Sithistrans cooled on the ground at the mouth of the Nor Doruvian side of the bridge.

I kept my hand joined with Given's as I stared across the chasm. Varick and the knights from the Wastes were a solid wall of muscle at our backs.

There was a whisper of movement behind me, and then Igrith stepped forward and stood at my shoulder. She trained a hard gaze on the Sithistrans as she nocked an arrow. Jordan appeared on her other side.

Crasor's gaze landed on them, and his mouth twisted with disgust. "Humans standing with the devils! You are traitors to your own kind!"

The ground shook, the tremors less violent this time. I tugged Given backward anyway. On the other side of the Rift, the Sithistrans moved back too. Rocks tumbled from the edges of the chasm, pebbles breaking off and sliding down the jagged walls.

The trembling stopped. Everyone seemed to hold their breath. Just as they appeared to collectively release it, a voice rose from the Rift. It spoke a foreign tongue that echoed off the walls and spun into the air.

It was a pleasant voice—deep and rich and strangely compelling.

Then it changed.

It shifted, the tone climbing unnaturally high before dipping into a range low enough to vibrate the ground. The language was unlike any I'd heard, the words indecipherable and in some cases more like a growl than speech.

Midian. One look at Given confirmed it. She stood frozen, her blue eyes stark as she stared into the Rift.

On the Sithistran side, everyone wore identical masks of shock. Soldiers exchanged terrified looks. Rellan gripped his sword. Lidia did an about-face like she meant to flee, but Elissa clamped a hand on her arm and forced her back around.

As abruptly as it started, the voice stopped. Nobody moved. Everyone stared at the Rift, waiting for something else to happen.

Given released my hand and drew Avenor's sword. The rippling elven steel reflected the moonlight as she pointed it at the chasm. She spoke, her voice carrying over the Rift. "The devils are here, Prelate Crasor." She lifted her sword and pointed it in the direction of the Thicket. "And there. Our enemy is the same. If we continue to fight each other, neither of us will win. The evil will spill into our lands and overtake everything. We must work together to stop it, and then both North and South can live in peace."

My heart swelled. She was breathtaking in the moonlight, my halfling queen. Courageous and inspiring. Someone men would gladly follow.

Rellan's voice boomed. "You dare to sue for peace when you murdered your own brother." He spit on the ground. "You deprived Sithistra of its rightful king, and you will pay in blood, whore."

A bowstring twanged in my ear. One of Igrith's arrows whistled across the Rift and struck Lord Rellan in the throat. He staggered back, choking as blood poured from the wound.

Elissa let out a bloodcurdling scream.

I turned to Igrith, shock pounding through me.

She gave me a mild look. "I don't miss."

"Given was trying to negotiate a cease-fire."

Igrith shook her head. "A pointless exercise. Rellan would have attacked under the white flag."

I stared at her. "You're certain of this?"

Her eyes gleamed as green as the leaf pin at her throat. "My Sight doesn't miss either, King Laurent."

"Incoming!" a knight bellowed behind me. I looked up in time to see arrows streaking from the Sithistran side of the Rift.

A gauntleted hand clamped down on my shoulder and dragged me backward. I was shoved to my knees, and then a shield slammed down in front of me.

Thunk, thunk, thunk. Arrows struck the shield, one sharp arrow tip bursting through

the wood an inch from my eye. I stared at it, my vision blurring.

“Fucking cowards,” Varick rasped in my ear. “They used the truce to get into position.”

“Where’s Given?” I asked, turning my head

“Here.” She crouched just behind me, Drago’s shield embedded in the ground in front of her. She gripped Avenor’s sword. Her pale braid gleamed in the moonlight. I didn’t want her anywhere near the Rift.

“You’re unhurt?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she said. “We should attack.”

“What?” I scowled at her. “Listen, my lady—”

“Now!” Igrith yelled, popping up and taking off at a run. Several Wesyfeddians followed, their brown cloaks flying. Igrith drew and nocked an arrow as she ran.

Given sprang up and followed.

“Given!” I shouted. Varick and I stood at the same time. We glanced at each other, then sprinted after her.

The Sithistrans poured onto the Pass, which swayed violently under their boots.

“Fuck,” Varick growled. He blurred as he streaked toward the bridge.

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Given and Igrith reached the mouth just before he did. “Ricti!” Given cried, Avenor’s sword in her fist. Two of the Sithistran soldiers pounding toward her crashed to the ground. Igrith loosed an arrow. It struck a Sithistran in the center of his chest. He staggered, lost his balance, and plunged screaming into the Rift.

The Sithistran soldiers on the bridge froze, their eyes wide as they watched him fall.

Varick caught up to Given and Igrith. He passed them, charging onto the Bleak Pass and directly toward the Sithistrans.

I ran faster, reaching the mouth of the Pass. “Eshto!” I called, my gaze on the knot of Sithistrans huddled on the other side. Two Sithistran soldiers collapsed. The ones crowded behind them turned and ran.

Igrith’s laughter echoed back to me as I raced onto the bridge. Ahead, she drew and fired an arrow. It streaked past Varick and slammed into a fleeing Sithistran’s back. He dropped to the ground. Varick leapt over him.

The thunder of hooves filled the air, and then a Wesyfeddan rider shot past me. The horse moved so swiftly, its hooves barely touched the bridge. It flew past Given and Igrith and barreled into the remaining Sithistrans, sending men toppling into the Rift.

The Pass creaked under my feet. Knights from the Wastes raced past me, their bodies a blur as they tapped their superior speed. I grit my teeth and ran faster. Relief swept me as Given cleared the bridge. Varick was waiting for her, his sword at the ready. I put on a burst of speed, my lungs burning as I ran past fallen Sithistrans. On the other side of the Pass, Igrith swung into the saddle behind a Wesyfeddan rider. The man

kicked his horse's sides, and they charged off.

More knights from the Wastes thundered past me. The Sithistran side of the Rift loomed, and then I was across, Varick and Given at my sides.

The three of us locked gazes as we caught our breath. Two more Wesyfeddians on horseback charged past us, racing over the scrubby grass.

Sword in hand, Given watched them go. Horses and men moved on the horizon. Green cloaks flashed.

"The humans are preparing another charge," Varick said.

I put a finger under Given's chin and tipped her gaze to mine. "You've been braver than most soldiers this night, my lady. There is no shame in retreat. Varick and I will finish this."

"I'm coming with you." Her eyes hardened. "I've grown tired of being called a whore."

Everything within me wanted to order her back across the bridge. I could have done it. If I'd told Varick to sling her over his shoulder and force her to safety, he would have obeyed. But I couldn't take this battle from her. All I could do was stand at her side and fight it with her.

I brushed the backs of my knuckles over her cheek. "Then let's go get your vengeance, my queen."

Chapter Twenty

VARICK

The Sithistrans reformed and advanced toward us. Infantry in front and cavalry in the rear, they came at us at full force.

We were vastly outnumbered, but several things worked in our favor. We had the night, which meant Sithistra didn't have the sun.

We were vampires. Faster and stronger. The knights from the Wastes topped most of the humans by two feet.

We also had the Wesyfeddans. With skills honed by a lifetime of smuggling and evading capture, they were excellent riders and even better archers. They harassed the Sithistran footsoldiers, riding swiftly forward and launching volleys of arrows before quickly falling back.

Finally, we had a king and queen who spoke the language of the gods. My knights and I formed a half circle behind Given and Laurent, guarding their backs and flanks. With the Wesyfeddans running unpredictable patterns ahead of us, we marched toward the humans.

After a minute, the Sithistrans broke into a run, a battle cry lifting from their ranks.

"They're singing to us," one of my knights said, amusement in his tone.

"Just as long as you don't sing along, Andrei," another said.

A third knight chuckled. "No, let him. The humans will throw down their weapons as soon as they hear."

"All of you shut up," Drago barked.

Laurent kept walking, his shoulders relaxed as the humans advanced. Given kept pace

with him.

I motioned to my knights. Swords rasped as they drew their blades.

The humans charged, eating up the ground between us.

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“Steady,” I told my men. My heart pounded as I stuck to Laurent’s heels. Radu and Drago shadowed Given. The sight of the two formidable captains should have made me feel better about her being in the field, but it didn’t. Fear turned my guts to water. I wanted to pick her up and carry her back across the Rift—and then spank her ass for making me so fucking terrified.

And then maybe spank Laurent’s ass for letting her participate in a war, for fuck’s sake.

“Eshto!” Laurent cried. At the same moment, Wesyfeddan arrows flew. They sailed true and found their targets. Dozens of Sithistrans dropped to the ground, tripping the men behind them.

Laurent walked faster. “Eshto!” he called.

Given strode at his side, her cloak flowing around her long legs. Her pale braid swung down her back. “Ricti!” she yelled, and a Sithistran fell to the ground.

Laurent flung out a hand. “Eshto!”

Two more humans perished.

More Wesyfeddan arrows whistled.

More Sithistrans went down.

The humans slowed, some of them stumbling to a stop.

“Eshto!” Laurent cried.

“Ricti!” Given echoed.

Soldiers hit the ground. Instantly, arrows sprang from their backs.

“Eshto!” Laurent’s voice boomed with power. He kept walking, Doru’s gift ensuring he never tired.

The same was not true of Given. After another minute, she stumbled. Radu steadied her and would have held on, but she waved him off and kept going.

“Fuck,” I said under my breath.

“Eshto!” More humans fell. The mounted knights behind them trampled their corpses as they struggled to reach the front.

“Eshto!” Two Sithistrans crashed to the ground, then two more. Laurent’s cloak snapped behind him. Power boomed in his voice. He struck again and again, not tiring as he took down the Sithistrans one by one. Green Guards with gold piping on their cloaks crashed to the ground, and I realized he was targeting the commanders.

The strategy worked. As more and more high-ranking men fell, the humans slowed their assault. Fear flashed across men’s faces. The Sithistrans’ front line started to break up.

“Their line is starting to break up!” one of my knights shouted.

“Watch for reinforcements!” I bellowed. On the far end of the Sithistran front line, a Green Guard shouted at a group of soldiers. The men started to run in one direction. As the Guard yelled and gestured sharply, they changed course and ran the other way.

An arrow caught one in the leg. He went down screaming.

Grim satisfaction filled me. “They’re leaderless,” I said, turning back to my knight. “With Rellan gone—” I sucked in a breath. Laurent had gotten away from me. He ran toward the humans, his bly’ad trailing in his wake. As I cursed and sprinted after him, Given doubled over and vomited.

Radu and Drago were on her in half a second.

“Get her out of here!” I yelled, racing past them.

A group of Sithistran riders burst through the other end of the humans’ line and thundered toward Laurent.

Too many.

He stopped.

But there were too many of them.

The Sithistran riders bore down on Laurent. A Wesyfeddan raced to intercept them. As he leaned over his horse’s neck, an arrow struck him in the shoulder. He fell, his hands tangled in his reins. As he went down, he jerked his horse’s head sharply. The beast reared, lost its balance, and crashed on top of him.

Everything slowed.

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The Sithistrans split into two groups and raced around the fallen rider. Swords drawn, they neared Laurent.

My heart lodged in my throat as my feet flew over the ground.

Laurent flung out his hands. “Eshto!”

One rider dropped.

The rest kept coming.

With a bellow, I hefted my sword and launched myself at the rider closest to Laurent. As I flew through the air, I brought my blade down and caught the Sithistran in the neck. Blood sprayed across my face. The rider reeled in the air with me, and then we fell. Just before I hit the ground, I tucked my head. Scrubby grass reared up, and I rolled as I struck, tumbling and jumping to my feet in a practiced movement.

“Eshto!” Laurent shouted, killing another rider. My knights clashed with the others, slashing at their horses’ legs. Something struck me from behind.

I grunted and pitched forward, my ears ringing. Reflex kicked in, and I spun, swinging my sword as I went. Steel clanged, and pain shot up my arm as a blade blocked my blow. With a grunt, I knocked the enemy sword away and swung again. A Green Guard’s blue eyes glared at me inside his visor as he parried.

“Time to die, asshole.”

“For you, dick face,” I agreed. We fought, swords clashing. He was good, but I was better. When he fainted and tried to spin into a killing blow, I stepped into him. His blade found a gap in my armor and bit into my ribs, but I was too close for him to have much leverage. As his eyes widened, I head-butted him. He stumbled back, and I shoved my sword into his stomach.

Chest heaving, I swung around, searching for Laurent. The ground was littered with Sithistrans. Knights from the Wastes fought stragglers in single combat, their swords flashing in the moonlight.

“AMET,” Laurent shouted behind me.

I yanked my sword from the Green Guard’s gut and spun. Laurent stood over Crasor, who was sprawled on his back with his robes tangled around his legs. The Prelate’s face was red and turning purple, his eyes bulging with terror. His mouth hung open, and drool slid down his cheek. His body twitched, his fingers curling into claws.

Laurent’s face was a mask of icy fury. “Choke on your own bigotry,” he told the suffocating man.

One of Crasor’s eyes popped from its socket. It spilled down his cheek, dangling from a string of pink flesh. The smell of human excrement reached me as he lost control of his bowels.

“Die,” Laurent told him. “And when you meet your god, beg for his forgiveness.” Laurent bared his fangs. “I hope he’s more merciful than you were.”

The terror in Crasor’s gaze intensified. Then he went still.

Laurent swayed on his feet. I rushed forward, intent on getting to him before he fell. Something brushed my side.

A Sithistran Green Guard streaked around me, his sword plunging toward Laurent.

“NO!” I cried. A flash of brown cloak, and then Rhys the Fair appeared out of nowhere. He stepped in front of Laurent and blocked the blow. For a second, he stood toe to toe with the Guard, then he whipped his other hand up and thrust a dagger into the Green Guard’s side. The Guard collapsed in a heap, his sword falling from his hand.

Laurent stumbled back and lifted wide eyes to Rhys. “Thank you.”

The Chieftain of Wesyfedd bent and wiped his dagger on the Green Guard’s cloak. He straightened, a smile pulling at his lips. “No problem, Your Grace, but now you’ll owe me—” His voice cut off abruptly.

An arrow stuck out from the side of his neck. For a second, he just stood there, a bewildered look on his face. “I think I’ve been hit,” he said quietly, then he crashed to the ground.

Elissa stood a distance away, a bow in her hands. Her mouth trembled, and tears streaked her pale cheeks.

An anguished cry split the air. Across the field, Igrith watched Elissa from atop a horse. She let out another cry and kicked her heels against the beast’s sides.

Elissa dropped the bow. She gathered her black skirts and ran.

As fast as a vampire, Igrith drew an arrow and fired. It struck Elissa between the shoulder blades, sending her stumbling forward. She fell on her face in a flurry of black skirts, her arms stretched in front of her.

Igrith fired again, hitting her in the shoulder. Elissa screamed and writhed on the

ground. The earth shook as Igrith thundered to her, slipping from the saddle before the horse came to a halt. She strode to Elissa and kicked her onto her back.

Rolund's First Queen screamed again as the arrow in her back snapped, the tip no doubt sinking deeper. Blood bubbled on her lips as she tried to rise. "You fucking Wesyfeddan bitch!" she screamed up at Igrith. "I'm the Queen of Sithistra. You can't kill me!"

Igrith's eyes burned with contempt. "I already have." In one smooth movement, she whipped an arrow from her quiver, knelt, and plunged it into Elissa's throat. She struck in the same spot Elissa had struck Rhys.

Elissa died instantly.

A horn sounded. Deep and velvety, it rolled through the air, bringing everyone to a halt. A second later, a torch waved in the distance.

“What the fuck?” one of my knights muttered.

Laurent came to my side. I was plenty furious with him for running at the Sithistrans, but I stuffed my anger away as we braced for a new assault.

It never came. Instead, Edwin Blackmun emerged from the gloom with his sword in his hand. His armor was dented in several places, and he had a deep cut across his cheek. The torchbearer at his side carried a white flag of truce.

Laurent stiffened. Around me, my knights did the same.

Edwin stopped a distance away. The torchbearer stopped too. Edwin’s brown eyes strayed to his sister, and he swallowed audibly before swinging his gaze to Laurent. “I...come under a flag of truce.”

“Like you did before?” Laurent asked.

“No.” Edwin lifted his sword. I tensed, prepared to step in front of Laurent, but Rellan’s heir merely turned the blade over as if he meant to show it to us. “I haven’t killed a vampire this night, Your Grace. I couldn’t get close enough.”

Laurent’s voice was hard. “That’s fortunate for you, Lord Edwin, because you would

not have survived such an encounter.”

Edwin’s mouth worked. “My father is dead. Crasor is dead. My sister is dead.” He looked toward the Rift. “I heard that voice. We all did.” He stared a moment, then turned back to us and went to one knee. He balanced his sword on his palms and extended it toward Laurent. “I don’t know if I should believe your queen, King Laurent, but I have no choice. Sithistra surrenders.”

Chapter Twenty-One

GIVEN

“He’s going to make himself sick again,” I said, my eyes on Laurent.

For the past hour, he’d moved among Sithistras’ fallen on the other side of the Rift, kneeling and murmuring prayers. The sky had lightened to purple. We couldn’t stay much longer or we’d get caught in the sunrise.

Varick stood behind me. He slid an arm around my waist and kissed the top of my head. “No,” he said softly, “he’s not saying Nor Doruvian rites this time.”

I frowned. “What’s he saying?”

“The funeral prayer of the Brotherhood. He has to say it twice—”

“Twice, I know,” I said, tears stinging my eyes. “Once for the Tower of the Mind and once for the Tower of the Heart.” The stinging in my eyes increased as I watched Laurent sink to one knee beside a Green Guard. He pulled the man’s cloak gently over his face, then placed the Guard’s sword on his chest. Laurent put his own hand on top of the sword and bowed his head.

A hot tear streaked down my face.

Varick rested his chin on the top of my head. “Now you see him as I do.”

“Yes,” I whispered. I reached behind me and found Varick’s hand. He threaded his fingers through mine. Knights moved around us, readying the horses as we prepared to return to Lar Katerin. Edwin Blackmun was going with us. Until we dealt with Midian and the Thicket, he would remain Laurent’s “guest” in Nor Doru.

Which was a kinder way of saying “prisoner.”

Varick sighed, his breath tickling my hair. “I’m going to fetch Laurent. I’m worried about the Pass holding.”

Alarm shot through me. “Do you think it’s damaged?” I asked, my eyes going to the bridge. A Wesyfeddan stepped onto it, leading a horse from the Sithistran side. A body wrapped in a brown cloak was slung over its back, and my heart clenched as I recognized Rhys’s boots. Seconds later, Igrith strode to the Pass wearing a wooden expression. She and the other Wesyfeddan walked on either side of the horse as it carried Rhys forward. The bridge creaked.

“I don’t know if it’s damaged,” Varick rumbled above me, “but I’d dearly love it if the Wesyfeddans kept their horses off it. At least until Laurent is back on Nor Doruvian soil.”

I bit my lip. “Igrith is a Seer. She probably knows it’s safe for now.”

Varick’s voice softened. “She didn’t foresee Rhys’s death. Her shock was apparent to anyone who saw her watch him fall.”

Guilt rose in my chest, along with embarrassment. I hadn’t witnessed Igrith’s shock

because I'd been too busy dry-heaving as Radu carried me to the Nor Doruvian side of the Rift. The nausea and fatigue had faded, but my embarrassment remained.

And a third emotion brewed within me, but I buried it before it could grow and alert Varick.

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Igrith reached the mouth of the Pass. She murmured something to the other Wesyfeddan, who nodded and pulled the horse toward the knights. As Igrith started forward again, Varick stepped away from me. He waited until she reached us, then offered her a solemn nod.

“I am sorry about your cousin, Igrith,” he said. “Rhys was a fine man. Wesyfedd’s loss is Nor Doru’s, as well.”

“Thank you, General.” Igrith rubbed her face. “It’s difficult to believe this is real.” She dropped her hand suddenly, and her eyes sharpened as she called out, “You could have warned me.”

Varick and I turned. Jordan stood silently, his brown cloak reminiscent of the gray robes he’d worn when I first met him. But he was no Brother from Sithistra. He was the Archmage, and he seemed to know everything before it happened.

Igrith strode to him, her slender body vibrating with anger. “How could you—”

“Not here,” Jordan said, his voice throbbing with a hint of the deep, unruly power he sometimes allowed others to glimpse. Behind him, the knights from the Wastes ceased their preparations. Curious gazes moved from Jordan to Igrith.

A tear streaked down her face, and she brushed it away angrily. Jordan remained still, his face boyish and attractive with the hint of a dimple in his smooth cheek. He said nothing. Just watched her with steady blue eyes.

She drew a deep breath. “Sometimes I wonder if you have a heart at all.” She turned

on her heel and started for her horse. At the same moment, a woman's sob rang out behind me.

I turned as a Nor Doruvian knight led a terrified-looking Lidia across the Bleak Pass.

Although, upon closer observation, the knight looked more terrified than Lidia. As she sank to the wooden planks in a puddle of black skirts, he cast me an expression that could only be interpreted as a plea for help.

I jogged toward the Pass. "Lidia?"

She jerked her head up. "Given!" Her delight was fleeting. A second later, her face crumpled and she buried her head in her hands. "Oh gods, I don't want to die!" she wailed. Her glossy dark curls bounced as her shoulders shook.

Footsteps, and then Varick was beside me. We slowed as we reached the bridge, and he cast me a puzzled glance and spoke in my head. "Does she think we're going to execute her?"

"Probably," I muttered, stopping at the edge of the Pass. Lidia possessed a flair for the dramatic, but her heart was kind. She was also intelligent, although life in Rolund's court hadn't afforded her many opportunities to use her mind. Elissa had always been jealous of Lidia's youth and beauty, and she was forever suspicious that Lidia might try to steal Rolund away from his First Queen.

Knowing Lidia as I did, I couldn't see that happening. But it didn't matter now. Lidia was widowed—and finally out from under Elissa's thumb.

I waited at the mouth of the Pass as the knight coaxed Lidia to her feet and brought her to me. She gaped when she saw Varick.

“It’s all right,” I told her, beckoning her forward. As she stepped onto the ground, I took her hands in mine. “We’re not going to hurt you.”

She hiccuped, her green eyes huge in her pretty face. “You’re not? Oh, Given, you look amazing.” Her gaze traveled down my body, her eyes widening as she noticed my pants. “You’re like...scary.” She jerked her head up. “I mean, not bad scary. Good scary! Pretty scary.” Her dark brows pulled together. “That didn’t come out like I intended. You look—”

“I know what you meant,” I said, holding back laughter. I kept one of her hands in mine as I turned to Varick. “Lidia, this is Lord Varick of Lar Keiren. He’s—”

“King Laurent’s general,” Lidia breathed. Pink stained her cheeks as she tipped her head back and drank Varick in. “My ladies would kill to meet you, Lord Varick. We’ve heard...” She swallowed. “All good things.”

I cleared my throat before she could list examples.

“Who is this?” Igrith said behind me.

Lidia’s gaze shifted over my shoulder. In an instant, she went from starry-eyed to curious.

I turned. “Igrith. This is Lidia. She’s my brother’s...”

“Widow,” Lidia said. She shrugged. “Well, one of them.”

Igrith frowned. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Don’t be.” Lidia looked at me, her cheeks turning pinker. “Oh, Given. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine,” I said before she could apologize. I’d killed Rolund, and while everyone within earshot probably knew it, I didn’t feel like discussing it at the Bleak Pass. “Lidia, I want you to come to Lar Katerin.”

She gasped. “To the vampire court?”

Varick gave me a sharp look.

“As a prisoner,” I added.

“Smart,” he murmured in my head, and I could sense his objections melting into approval.

Lidia blanched. “All right,” she whispered, clearly picturing torture chambers

I grabbed her hand again. “You’ll be treated well. No dungeons.”

The tension eased from her face.

“She can ride with me,” Igrith announced. She extended a hand. “This way, my lady.”

I braced myself for Lidia to balk, but she smiled and took Igrith’s hand like it was the most natural thing in the world. They moved off, Igrith slightly taller, Lidia’s dark skirts brushing Igrith’s legs. Jordan stepped out of their way and watched them pass. When he met my gaze again, I thought I glimpsed a smile in his eyes. But then he strode toward the horses, and I wondered if I’d imagined it.

A creaking sound had me spinning back around.

At last, Laurent crossed the bridge, a pair of knights behind him. He looked tired but unharmed, the silver post in his ear catching the first hints of sunlight.

He looked between me and Varick. “What was all that crying on the bridge about?”

“We’re taking Lidia home with us,” I said. “As a political prisoner.”

He nodded. “Smart.”

I smiled.

Varick narrowed his eyes at Laurent. “Why did you run toward the South’s line?” He spoke in a tone one level below his general’s voice.

A chastened look crept over Laurent’s features. “I saw Crasor but I couldn’t get a clean shot at him. I know it was stupid.”

“It was careless,” Varick growled. “It probably cost Rhys his life.”

Laurent stiffened as I sucked in a breath. “We don’t know that, Varick,” I said.

Anguish filled Laurent’s eyes. “I don’t know what to say.”

“How about starting with I’m sorry?”

“You think I’m not?”

“I haven’t heard you say it.”

Laurent took a quick step forward. “What is wrong with—”

I moved between them and planted a palm on each of their chests. Mindful of the knights nearby, I pitched my voice low as I looked at Varick. “We were in the heat of battle. Crasor did a lot of harm. Laurent saw a chance to remove a threat, and he took it. He’s the first to admit he’s not a warrior. He acknowledged his mistake.”

The men were silent, their hearts thumping rapidly under my palms.

“It’s not fair to blame Laurent for Rhys’s death,” I said. “Maybe Jordan can see the future, but the three of us cannot.”

After a long moment, Varick’s chest relaxed under my hand. “You’re right.”

I swung my gaze to Laurent. “You love each other, don’t you?”

He stared at Varick with hurt in his silver eyes. “Yes.”

I looked at Varick. He dropped his chin down and exhaled heavily. “Yes. I love him.”

“We forgive those we love,” I said, “even when we make mistakes.”

Varick nodded.

Laurent lifted my hand from his chest and kissed it. “You could give lessons in forgiveness, my lady.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “I think that’s what I’m doing now. Or maybe just trying to keep my husbands from brawling in front of the knights.”

Varick looked up. He and Laurent stared at each other, and I knew they were thinking about the new layers in our relationship—and theirs.

Husbands.

“I’m sorry,” Varick told Laurent. “I was wrong to blame you. Battles are chaos.”

Laurent swallowed. “I’m not eager to see another one.”

My stomach knotted. We were almost certain to see more battles.

“The sun is rising,” Varick said. “We can’t linger.”

Laurent nodded. “Edwin instructed his knights to bury the dead. Let’s go home.”

Within minutes, we were headed back to Lar Katerin. As we rode from the Rift, I looked toward the Thicket in the distance. And I finally allowed the emotion I’d buried to resurface.

Fear.

It had gripped me since I heard Midian's voice rising from the Rift after Crasor flung his insults at Igrith and Jordan. The unnatural pitch had been just as terrifying as the first time I'd heard it booming off the chasm's walls. But this time had also been different. Because I'd understood his words.

"Savior of the realm," he'd said, his voice rising to a shriek before dissolving into mocking laughter. Then he'd dipped into a growl. "You know what you have to do, Given. You've always known where to find me. I'm waiting. Don't make me wait much longer."

His words had swirled around me as clearly as if he'd spoken the common tongue. There was no mistaking his message. And he was right. I wasn't certain how I was supposed to save the realm, but I knew where I had to go. On some level, maybe I'd always known.

If I wanted to save Ter Isir, I had to enter the Rift.

Chapter Twenty-Two

GIVEN

The feast was subdued, but it was still a celebration of sorts.

It was the next evening, and I sat between Laurent and Varick in the Great Hall as one of the knights from the Wastes stood and toasted Captain Drago.

"Without you leading us, Captain," the knight slurred, "we'd be dread"—he hiccuped—"dead." The knight's expression turned sentimental as he swayed on his feet. "You're just about the nicest captain I ever met," he rasped, his eyes growing

damp.

“Gods,” Drago muttered. Farther down the table, Radu laughed.

“All right,” the knight next to the toasting knight said, “that’s enough blood-wine for Sir Alin.” He reached over and plucked the toasting knight’s goblet from the table.

“Hey!” Sir Alin cried, swiping for it and missing. “I wasn’t”—he hiccuped again—“finished with my speech.”

“Yes, you were,” his friend said. He rose and slapped Sir Alin on the back. “Come on, big boy. Bedtime.” He slung Sir Alin’s arm around his shoulders and helped the oversize knight stumble from the table.

“Not tired,” Sir Alin said sullenly.

“Uh-huh. Tell me about it in the morning when you’re staring at the inside of a bucket.”

Varick chuckled as he watched them go. “Drago will make Sir Alin regret calling him nice.”

I toyed with my goblet of blood-wine. “I thought vampires from the warrior class couldn’t get drunk.”

“Not easily, no.” Varick glanced at the knights’ table, where a raucous song about the “lovely ladies of Gate Street” had broken out. “But the lads from the Wastes don’t let that stand in their way. I think that’s their twentieth barrel of blood-wine.”

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“Twenty-second,” Laurent murmured on my left. He gestured to my plate. “You’ve barely eaten, princess. Are you feeling all right?”

“Just not that hungry,” I said, smiling. I nodded toward another table. “Igrith seems to be feeling better.” She sat across from Lidia, who had her chin propped on her hand and appeared engrossed as Igrith spoke animatedly, her slender hands flying and her hazel eyes far happier than they’d been when we left the Rift. Laurent had come up with the idea of having Igrith serve as Lidia’s “jailer” while Lidia was in Nor Doru.

I turned to him. “I take back what I said. I thought Lidia would drive Igrith crazy, but now I think you were right to put them together.”

Amusement shimmered in his eyes as he lifted his goblet. “Oh, I still think Lidia will drive her crazy.” He winked at me over the rim.

The knights’ song grew louder, the versus more ribald. The only other person in the Hall was Jordan, who sat alone at a table near the big double doors. The sight of him erased any pleasantness I’d felt watching Igrith and Lidia. He was a stark reminder of the one thing I longed to forget.

Prophecy.

In a strange way, Sithistra’s attack on Lar Katerin and the fight at the Rift had been a reprieve. It felt wrong to view it that way, but now that the South no longer posed a threat, I had no choice but to face the prophecy.

On my right, Varick chuckled at the knights’ song as he continued eating. Laurent

sipped wine on my left, his posture easy and relaxed. They were enjoying themselves, and rightly so. The sky above the city was still exposed to the sun, but Lar Katerin was in vampire hands again. Rellan and Elissa were gone. We had eliminated Crasor as a threat and significantly neutered the Brotherhood. Why not take an evening off? Why ruin this brief moment of rest?

The double doors opened, and Midian entered the Hall.

The knights' singing cut off.

Between one breath and the next, everyone was dead.

My heart pounded, but I didn't cry. I kept my eyes on the demon king as he strolled past the table of slaughtered knights. Radu sprawled on his back, his throat slit from ear to ear in a gruesome red smile. Drago was slumped over the table, a sword lodged in his back. Goblets were turned over, blood and blood-wine forming rivers that dripped onto the flagstones.

Midian kept coming, his gaze touching on Igrith and Lidia, who lay on the ground, their sightless eyes staring at the ceiling.

"You're not going to look?" he asked me.

Varick and Laurent. I didn't need to look. I knew what I would see.

Midian smiled. "Oh, I don't think so. You don't seem to know very much, Given." He waved a dismissive hand in the air as he glided toward me. "You're such a good girl. So innocent and kind. And quite the seductress. You've fixed everything with that magic cunt of yours, haven't you?" He stopped a few feet from the head table and brushed his hands together. "Problems? Easy. Just fuck them away."

“What do you want?” I said, letting my exhaustion leak into my voice. Because I was so tired of him. Tired of worrying. Tired of running. Tired of surviving from one day to the next when each day only dumped more misery in my lap.

His eyes turned black, and his voice shook with rage. “I WANT YOU TO LOOK AT THE MESS YOU’VE MADE.” As he finished shouting, Varick groaned next to me.

I shouldn’t have.

I shouldn’t have looked.

But I was as stupid as Midian claimed because I did it anyway. I turned my head and looked at Varick.

He stared back at me, except he didn’t have eyes. They’d been gouged out, nothing but empty sockets in their place. Blood ran down his cheeks. More dripped down his mouth, and I realized his tongue was missing.

“Don’t tell yourself it’s not real,” Midian said in my left ear, and when I jerked my head toward the sound, he was sitting right next to me, one arm slung casually over the chair’s armrest.

“Where’s Laurent?” I demanded.

Midian rolled his eyes. He snapped his fingers, and Laurent took his place. The top of Laurent’s skull was missing, brain and pulp scattered over his shoulders. Chunks of scalp with dark hair attached floated in his goblet.

“Happy?” Midian said, and now he was in front of me again. As I looked past him, I saw Jordan sitting at the table near the doors. He watched Midian, but as he felt my gaze on him, he looked at me. He held my stare for a moment, then returned to

watching Midian.

“...you killed your mother,” Midian was saying as I shifted my focus back to him. “One could argue you killed your father. You murdered your brother, and today you slaughtered his people. You bring death wherever you go, Given.” Midian spread his arms. “Don’t you see that now? Until you do the right thing, death will continue to follow you.”

“I control the Making,” I said, gripping the arms of my chair. I poured all the disgust I felt toward him into my voice as I bared my fangs. “Nothing you make is real. You’re pathetic.”

For a moment, he was more terrifying than Doru. Hatred gleamed in his black eyes, the malice so raw and deep it should have killed me. It should have stopped my heart like the bly’ad Laurent used to kill Crasor. For one terrible moment, I stared at Midian and saw my own death.

Then he was inside my head.

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His voice filled my mind, and this time it spoke with my mouth, working my jaw like I was a puppet and he controlled my strings.

“Do you know what’s pathetic?” he asked, and I spoke the words as I looked out over the carnage of the Great Hall. “What’s pathetic is that the prophecy tells you precisely what you need to do and yet you refuse to do it. To save the realm, you need to be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift.” Midian laughed in my head, and my shoulders shook as I laughed too. “You’re bound to the priest and his general now. So there’s only one thing left to do, you stupid bitch! What is it? Think!” My hand flew up and smacked my forehead. As I struggled to force him from my mind, my hand smacked my forehead again and again, the slaps echoing around the Hall.

“What comes next?” he asked with my voice. Slap. “What does the second”—slap—“part”—slap—“of the prophecy say?”

“Stop!” I cried, squeezing my eyes shut.

“But. I. Don’t. Want. To,” I said, punctuating each word with a slap. My hand fell to the chair’s armrest, and my lips curved into a smile. “I’m bound to you, too,” he said with my mouth. “There is power in blood, remember? And I gave you mine.” My shoulders shrugged. “Fine, I’ll make it easier for you. We were destined to meet in the Rift. And you’re destined to try to stop me from razing the Thicket. There is power in blood, and you have to spill yours to keep those trees standing.” He laughed. “The mages have always known this. They raised you like a lamb for slaughter.”

Sweat trickled down my back. My forehead stung from his abuse. I blinked and he sat at Igrith’s table, one long leg crossed over the other. Igrith sprawled on the ground in

front of him. He bounced his foot, nudging her shoulder a little with each bounce.

“The barrier is weakening, Given,” Midian said in Rhys’s lilting accent. “It’s been happening for years.” He dropped Rhys’s voice, and his black eyes glittered. “You’re going to just...let it fall, aren’t you?” Midian tilted his head. “That’s pathetic.”

The knights’ song roared in my ears. Lidia threw her head back and laughed at something Igrith said. Next to me, Varick wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin and then tossed it on the table.

“I can’t eat anything else.”

Laurent leaned across me and touched Varick’s wrist. “You sure about that, baby?”

The air shifted. Varick’s golden eyes flicked to me. “I might have room for dessert.”

Laurent’s low laugh teased my ear.

Jordan sat in the back of the Hall, his blue gaze steady as he watched us.

“Given?” Varick asked, and when I turned my head, his brows were pulled together. “Are you all right?”

Can’t lie. “Are you?” I cupped his cheek, feeling his stubble under my palm. “You took that blow to the ribs.”

“Already healed, halfling,” he said absently. His frown deepened. “Your forehead is a little red—”

“Let’s go upstairs.” I pushed my chair back and stood. When Varick opened his mouth, I arched a brow at him. “Do you want your dessert or not, General?”

His hot gaze roved down my body. “I want it,” he muttered.

I turned to Laurent. “What about you, my lord?”

Silver eyes traveled the same path as Varick’s. “Do you really need to ask, princess?”

I smiled. “Well, then, come and get it.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

VARICK

Given instructed us to wait for her in the Rose Room.

Then she took her sweet time coming to us.

“What could she possibly be doing?” I grumbled as I sat on the edge of the bed.

Laurent shot me a wicked look over his shoulder from where he stood lighting candles. “You don’t have any guesses?”

My face heated.

He chuckled. “You are so fucking cute when you’re embarrassed.”

I scowled at him.

“That’s just making you look cuter.”

“Never mind,” I grunted.

He blew out his taper, then came to me and climbed into my lap. He straddled my thighs, his silver eyes dancing with a combination of heat and amusement as he tugged my head to the side and whispered in my ear. “If you’re going to pound that big, fat dick of yours into someone’s ass tonight, General, you’ve got to give them time to prepare.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, breathing him in. Only Laurent could turn the practical side of sex into something stimulating. “Maybe you could distract me while I’m waiting.”

He pulled back and surveyed me with heated eyes. “I love how battle always makes you so eager to fuck.”

I palmed his erection through his pants. “You’re one to talk. And I’m always eager to fuck.”

“Yes, you are,” he murmured. “Husband.”

My breath hitched.

His wicked smile melted into a tender one. He rubbed his thumb over my cheekbone. “Does it bother you?” he asked softly. “We don’t have to use the title.”

“I want to use it,” I rasped, realizing how much I meant it. “I’m proud to be your

husband.”

Movement in the corner of my eye made me turn my head.

Given stood at the top of the stairs, her blue eyes lit with desire as she watched us. “Are you starting without me?” she asked lightly. She wore a tight-fitting black gown in the Nor Doruvian style, her flat stomach and the plump swells of her breasts framed by the plunging neckline.

Laurent left my lap and sat beside me. “If this is the dessert you promised us, princess, I already want seconds.”

She smiled at him and shook her head. “You’re impossible.”

“I know.”

“Come over here,” I growled. “Wife,” I added, liking the way the word felt on my tongue.

She must have liked it, too, because the desire in her eyes flared higher as she obeyed, the gown’s skirt flowing around her long legs. She wasn’t a very obedient wife, though, because she stopped at the foot of the bed and began undressing.

It didn’t take her long.

The gown fastened with a tie at her waist. One tug and the whole thing slid to the floor, leaving her completely bare.

My mouth went dry.

Laurent made a sound like he was dying.

I took a long moment to appreciate my good fortune, my dick swelling painfully as I stared at Given's firm, round tits with their little pink nipples. They puckered tighter under my gaze. Her breathing quickened, and she curled her hands into fists at her sides.

"Widen your stance a little," I told her.

With a whimper, she did as she was told. Her pussy was already glistening.

"Spread it open," I said. "Use both hands."

Laurent cursed softly.

Given hesitated, then reached down and pinched each smooth labia. With another whimper, she slowly pulled her lips apart, revealing her swollen clit and shiny, pink center.

I stared at her pussy for another long moment before lifting my eyes to hers. "Are you wet enough to satisfy your husbands, halfling?"

Her cheeks turned as pink as her pussy. "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

“Yes, General.”

I stood, and I kept my eyes on her cunt as I removed my jacket. As I pulled my shirt over my head, Laurent followed my lead and began to strip.

Given watched us, her teeth dug into her bottom lip as she held her pussy open. When Laurent and I were nude, I pulled him away from the bed and stroked his dick. As he moaned and muttered curses at me under his breath, I turned him so Given had a perfect view of my fist working up and down his cock. After a minute, I cupped his balls and met her gaze.

“He’s pretty swollen, halfling. I’m not sure my pussy can hold everything he has to give it.”

Her nostrils flared as she registered my possessive phrasing. “Please,” she whispered. Between her legs, her clit stood up, the little bud begging for attention. “Please touch me.”

I continued working Laurent’s dick. “Both of us?”

She nodded.

“Say it,” I ordered. “Say I want both of my husbands to fuck me.”

Her eyes darkened several shades, lust swirling in the deep-blue depths. “I want both of my husbands to fuck me,” she said in a rush.

I pulled Laurent to the bed by his dick, then smacked his ass as he climbed into the center. I climbed in after him and crooked my finger at Given. "Get over here, wife."

She obeyed this time, scrambling to the bed and crawling to the top of the mattress on her hands and knees. I sat with my back propped against the pillows. Laurent copied my position and held out his arms to Given.

"Come here, princess," he said in a voice thick with desire. "I want to feel that pussy on my dick."

She looked to me for permission, and I had to bite back a groan at how perfect she was. They were both so perfect, my husband and wife.

"Go ahead," I told her. "But don't sit on his dick yet."

They both whined at that, but they seemed to forget their disappointment as she straddled him and rolled her hips, dragging her sopping folds up and down his cock. Laurent gripped her waist and let his head fall back against the pillows, his eyes narrowing to burning silver slits as he helped her find the perfect rhythm.

"Oh, princess," he murmured. "That is a very good girl." He slid his hands up her back and around to her tits. He cupped the full mounds and then plucked at her nipples. I reached over and helped him, and she made a high-pitched mewling sound as she watched our fingers pinching and rolling the hard tips.

"Kiss him," I ordered.

She obliged, twining her arms around his neck and pressing her lips to his. Her pussy made slick, sexy sounds as she continued grinding on his dick. I had a perfect view between her legs, and my mouth watered at the sight of her puffy lips flaring around his swollen shaft. She slicked him with her juices, wetting him from root to tip.

Their mouths tangled, her dainty jaw such a gorgeous contrast to Laurent's larger, stronger one. The sleek muscles in his arms flexed as he slid his hands up and down her sides, occasionally cupping a breast or squeezing one of her thighs. He trailed his lips down her neck. When he got to the hollow of her throat, he bared his fangs and dragged one sharp tip around the tender divot.

She groaned and bowed her spine, thrusting her tits out so her nipples abraded his chest.

Fuck, I had to taste her.

I leaned down and sucked one ripe nipple into my mouth. She cried out, then cried out again as Laurent bent his head and latched onto the other one. Together, we feasted on her breasts.

"Oh gods!" she moaned, working her hips faster. "Yes... Oh, yes." Laurent and I sucked her noisily, our heads so close together his cheek rasped against mine. The sweet, heady scent of Given's desire wafted around me. I released her nipple with a pop, then reached between her thighs and grasped Laurent's shaft.

"Fuck," he grunted against her nipple. He started to turn his head.

"Keep sucking," I ordered. He groaned and complied, but he kept his gaze on my hand as I pulled his dick up and worked Given's juices over and around his hard length. I squeezed his base hard and kept up the pressure until I reached the top. Given opened her eyes, and the three of us watched as a thick bead of pearly fluid seeped from Laurent's slit.

He moaned around Given's breast.

"Look at me," I told him. The second he lifted his head, I grabbed his jaw with my

free hand and seized his lips in a sloppy kiss.

Given whimpered, her hot, panting breaths fluttering against my cheek as I pumped Laurent's dick and stroked my tongue against his. The weight of her gaze made everything hotter. Better. Knowing my halfling—my wife—watched me with the husband we shared was more erotic than I could have ever imagined. I wanted to swallow Laurent whole and then gobble her up too.

Dessert? I wanted the entire fucking feast.

But as the saying went, I was mortal the same as a man, and I couldn't hold out forever. I broke off the kiss with Laurent and looked at Given. "Is my pussy wet enough yet?"

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Her eyes were bright as stars, her bottom lip ragged where she must have chewed it as she watched me kiss Laurent. “Yes,” she whispered. “Please, Varick. I’m so ready.”

“I’ll need to feel for myself,” I said, and I thrust my hand between her legs and stroked over her folds. She was dripping, her entrance so sopping wet it sucked at my fingers as I pumped them inside her. I gathered her juices on my hand and carried them around to her ass. My dick throbbed as I delved between her cheeks and smeared the moisture around her tight, pleated pucker.

She arched and cried out, her hips rolling faster. Laurent rubbed his thumb over her clit. His dick bobbed between them, his slit shiny with precome.

After a few more firm strokes around her rim, I pushed my finger into Given’s ass.

“Oh!” she cried, and then she keened, her slim body shaking between us as she came with my finger in her ass and Laurent working her clit furiously. A flush spread down her tits, and her nipples drew impossibly tight. She shook, her asshole clenching around me. I watched her closely, pumping my finger in and out of her hole until she went slack and sagged against Laurent, her forehead on his shoulder.

“Beautiful girl,” he murmured, pulling his fingers from her pussy. He offered them to me, and I sucked them into my mouth, tasting Given’s cream. He parted his lips as he watched me, his fangs sliding down.

“That’s my dessert,” I murmured around his fingers. “More.”

His eyes glowed. “Baby...” he breathed, then pulled his fingers from my mouth and swiped them between Given’s legs. She moaned softly and turned her head, watching as I licked more of her sugary cunt from Laurent’s fingertips. He repeated the motion, dipping between her legs and pushing glistening fingers past my lips.

Beautiful prince. And our princess. There was so much I wanted to do with them. A lifetime of things I needed to see.

Starting now.

I pulled Given off Laurent and put her on her hands and knees in the center of the bed. She swayed a little, setting her tits swinging. “Fuck, halfling,” I murmured, sliding my hands under her and fondling her breasts. “This is a view I need to see more often. I might make you start crawling to me when I tell you to come.”

She moaned in response. Laurent watched from the top of the bed, one hand slowly stroking up and down his dick.

I pinched Given’s nipples sharply, making her squeal. “I’m going to fuck your ass while you suck our husband. How does that sound?”

“Yes,” she gasped. “Gods, yes.”

I looked at Laurent, drinking in his spread thighs and big dick and smooth balls underneath—all of it mine. He continued his languid strokes.

“Am I boring you?” I asked gruffly.

He gave me one of his more sullen looks as he worked his cock. “I’m just waiting for you to decide you’ve tortured everyone enough.”

“That sounds like something a bad boy would say.”

His jaw tightened.

“Are you going to be bad?”

“Fuck,” he muttered, his hand stilling on his dick. He closed his eyes for a moment as he clearly struggled to stave off his release. After a second, he exhaled a shaky breath and opened his eyes.

I lifted an expectant brow.

“I’ll be good,” he mumbled.

“Say the whole thing.”

He dragged in another breath. “I’ll be a good boy.”

“Come here and show me how good you are.” I moved my hands to Given’s hips, and Laurent scooted down the bed. I pointed, and he went to his knees in front of her.

“Kiss her,” I ordered, his obedience setting a fire inside me. The blaze crackled along my veins as he drew her mouth to his, his gorgeous body curled forward to meet her. I watched them, stroking her back and squeezing her ass. Running my fingers down her pretty cleft and skimming my fingertips around her sensitive hole.

I kept Given and Laurent at it for a long time, making them wait for me. When their moans turned to whimpers, I said, “That’s enough.”

Laurent lifted his head. His dick was so hard it looked painful.

I palmed Given's cheeks and spread her open, baring the tight hole I couldn't wait to get inside. "He's being a good boy," I said. "Are you ready to be a good girl?"

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“Yes,” she moaned. She looked at me over her shoulder, her eyes burning with lust. “Please, Varick.” Her little fangs flashed as she panted, so fucking beautiful in her need. “Please fuck my ass.”

“Suck him first,” I answered. “Then you’ll get this cock.”

A pitiful whimper escaped between her lips, making dark satisfaction twist through me. My little halfling loved being told what to do.

Laurent knew it. He’d figured her out long ago, and his eyes gleamed as he threaded his fingers through her hair and tugged her gaze to his. “Open, princess,” he murmured. A second later, he groaned, and I knew she’d taken him into her mouth. Her head bobbed gently. I didn’t have the best angle, but I got flashes of her hollowed cheeks and round, pink lips as she sucked his dick. Her gorgeous tits bounced, and her ass jiggled with her movements. I watched for a minute, then spread her cheeks wider and worked more of her juices into her hole.

She moaned around Laurent’s dick, and he echoed it as he watched me palm her ass and push two fingers inside her. She was so wet I didn’t need oil. I pumped her juices into her hot channel, opening her gently. When I felt her relax, I bit back a groan of relief. Her pink hole was so pretty stretched around my fingers, but I needed to see it gaping around my dick.

“Ready, halfling?” I asked, and the muffled sound of assent she made with her mouth stuffed full of dick threatened to unravel the control I was normally so proud of.

I abandoned my pride now, taking my cock in a shaking hand and pressing the damp

tip to Given's hole. I pushed inside, and those first few seconds of heat and clutch were so incredible, my vision wavered.

"Fuck," I gasped. "Fuck."

Laurent stopped thrusting. He held Given's head and murmured encouragement to her, telling her how perfect she was and how great she was doing. He gazed down at her with love and lust in his eyes, and I savored that look and the long, elegant sweep of her back as I sank my dick all the way into her ass. Her glossy rim stretched wide around me, and she stiffened and groaned around Laurent's cock.

"Relax, sweetheart," I whispered, holding her open with a hand on her cheek. I stroked my thumb down her cleft and traced her taut rim, almost coming on the spot at the sight of my dick filling her hole. Her ass was so tight and hot it was a struggle to breathe. Every inch of my cock was surrounded by perfect, intense heat. The only thing that could make it better was feeling Laurent's dick in her pussy.

I met his gaze. "I want you on top."

We'd been together long enough for him to know what I meant. He stroked Given's hair as he pulled his dick from her mouth. "Let Varick move that beautiful body of yours around, princess. I promise you'll like this."

With careful maneuvering, we got into position. Given moaned loudly as I kept my dick stuffed in her ass and rolled onto my back with her on top of me.

"What...?" She floundered for a second, trying to get her bearings. Laurent solved that problem by grabbing her hands and pulling her upright so she straddled me in reverse.

"Oh," she said, and Laurent and I chuckled.

He swung a leg over my thighs and planted his foot near my hip. “How’s that dick feel, princess?” he asked her, skimming his hands up her spread thighs. I clenched my jaw and stared at my dick buried in her hot little hole.

“Big,” she breathed. “Deep.”

“Do you love it?”

“Yes.”

“Show me,” he said as I placed my hands on her hips. “Be a good little wife and ride our husband’s dick. Show me how much you love having it in your ass.”

With a desperate-sounding cry, she spread her legs wider and bounced on my dick, setting the ends of her pale hair bouncing too. I held her hips steady and thrust up to meet her. My shaft tunneled in and out of her jiggling ass. It was so good. Too good.

“Laurent,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Can you handle another cock, princess?” he asked her.

“Yes. Please, Laurent.”

His lips curved, revealing his sharp fangs. “That’s my good girl.” He pressed her gently backward and into my waiting arms. Her back met my chest, and she turned her head and sought my kiss. I gave it to her, stroking my tongue deep and palming one full breast as Laurent pushed her thighs to her chest and sank his dick into her pussy.

Pressure.

Perfection.

I felt every fucking inch of him, and I couldn't hold back. A growl ripped from my throat as I pumped my hips, spearing Given's asshole as Laurent fucked her cunt. She squealed into my mouth. Panted against my lips. Sapphire eyes stared into mine.

Wife.

I looked up at Laurent and found him watching us as he drove into Given, his dark hair falling over his forehead in a way that never failed to make my heart beat faster.

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Husband.

Tears burned my eyes. Given was so sweet and soft on top of me, her gorgeous tits bouncing wildly. They filled my hands like the gods had sized them just for me. Her reams of hair trailed across my chest and, fuck, I liked it. I liked being all tangled up in her, the scent of cloves and forest and female in my nose.

And Laurent. My Laurent. Sleek muscle and silver eyes and an ass made for my dick. He'd always smelled like cinnamon and spices, the whisper of prayers clinging to him. My dark prince. My beautiful priest.

King and queen.

They were mine.

Laurent threw his head back and shouted the ceiling down. He came so hard, I felt his seed pumping into Given's body. With a grunt, I plunged my hand between her legs and stroked her clit. Two tight circles and she shuddered and cried out. I followed a second later, and the three of us filled the Rose Room with our sighs and moans.

At some point, we recovered enough to rearrange ourselves so no one was crushing anyone else. I closed my eyes and let myself float for a minute.

So I didn't notice at first when Given left the bed. A soft sound brought my head up in time to see her fasten her gown.

"What are you doing?" I asked. Beside me, Laurent rolled over and sat up.

Given stood before us with eyes shimmering with tears.

My stomach dropped. “Did we hurt you?” I flung the covers back.

“No!” she cried, thrusting a hand out to ward me off. When I froze, she shook her head. “You didn’t hurt me.”

“Then what?” Laurent rasped, tension in his voice. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

She swallowed thickly. Lifted her chin.

My heart pounded. “Given...” I breathed, a horrible awareness settling over me. She hadn’t glowed during sex. She hadn’t made any flowers. “What have you done?”

“I have to go,” she whispered. “I have to do this.”

“Go where?” Laurent demanded, and now fear colored his tone. He jumped from the bed and stalked toward her. “Where are you going?”

“I love you both,” she said, backing up swiftly. “Don’t come after me. Please. I’m already gone.”

Laurent reached for her.

She disappeared.

Chapter Twenty-Four

GIVEN

Jordan was waiting for me.

His solemn blue eyes were the first thing I saw as I reentered my body. He reached down, and I let him help me to my feet. I didn't ask how he'd found me, or how he'd known I planned to ride to the Rift.

The chasm lay about a hundred feet ahead. Mindful of the patrols Varick had stationed at the Bleak Pass, I'd chosen a spot well away from the bridge. The Rift was much wider here, Sithistra nothing more than a hazy suggestion on the other side.

I turned and walked toward it. Jordan fell into step beside me, his hands clasped behind his back and his gaze on the inky horizon.

Neither of us spoke. The moon was much brighter than the night of the battle. It illuminated our steps, splashing over the scrubby grass and sunbaked ground. Limning everything in silver and reminding me of Laurent.

"Have you always known?" I asked finally, and I thought of Helen. Maybe I didn't want to know if Midian told the truth. Maybe it was better to believe she'd protected me because she loved me and not because she wanted to keep me alive so I could die.

Jordan stopped and turned to me, his eyes still solemn in his youthful face.

I huffed a joyless laugh. "I thought you might finally be honest with me."

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“There were always multiple paths,” he said. “Millions of rivers flowing all at once. I’ve seen every path you might have chosen. In the end, you chose this one.”

“What if I hadn’t chosen this?” Anger rose, and I let it flood my voice. “If I’d had a child with Varick, would you have done everything in your power to see it sacrificed to the Rift?”

“I would have done whatever I had to do to protect the realm,” he replied. “And its savior.”

“By letting an innocent child die.”

“We are all fated to die, Given.” His voice softened. “You ask what I would have done. That’s the wrong question. Ask yourself what you did.” Power swelled around him, transforming him from an ordinary young man into a quiet, devastating force. “You crossed the Rift. You wed Laurent. You saved Varick. You would never conceive a child to kill it, so you didn’t. You fell in love with two imperfect men. You accepted their flaws and forgave their stubbornness and betrayal. Those are all choices. You could have made different ones, and then all the rivers around you would have flowed differently.” He took my hand. “It’s a waste of time to reflect on what might have been. Every choice you made led to this moment, and that’s all that matters. You chose this path, even though it ends at the Rift. ”

I stared into his eyes that were as beautiful and terrible as Doru’s. “Is that why you’re here? To make sure I finish the journey?”

“No.” He squeezed my hand. “I’m here to thank you. All of Ter Isir is in your debt,

Given of Eldenvalla. You will not be forgotten.”

My throat burned. “Will you walk the rest of the way with me?”

“To the very end.”

We turned together and moved forward again. The Rift was a short distance that felt miles away. Numbness spread through me, and I might have stumbled if not for Jordan’s warm hand in mine. I clung to it, focusing all my attention on that heat.

Fire in your hand.

He warmed but didn’t burn.

“I’m afraid,” I whispered, tears running down my face. I hadn’t noticed them until that moment.

“We are all afraid,” he said, and the wild, untamed power that dwelt within him spoke too. Its voice was deep and ancient, and I knew I couldn’t look at it. So I kept my gaze straight ahead and simply listened as it murmured, “Who stares down death and doesn’t feel the terror of the unknown? But here is a secret. At the end of our journeys, we all become courageous.”

We reached the edge of the Rift.

Jordan held my hand.

We looked at each other.

At the end of our journeys, we all become courageous.

I turned and stared over my shoulder. Lar Katerin was somewhere in the distance, the city's snow-covered roofs sparkling under snow.

"I'm glad I got to see it," I said softly.

"Was it what you imagined?"

"No," I said. "It was better."

I turned back to him. "Why did they ring bells in Vai Seren?"

"In the last days, the elves did everything they could to keep the demons from their minds. They thought the bells would drive the demons back to the Shade."

"You've seen this?"

His smile was gentle. "I've seen everything."

"Will I die?"

"Yes."

"And I'll be reborn?"

His blue eyes held mine. "No mortal knows what comes after, Given."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:04 am

Past and present melded. Combined and swirled together. The snap of black and crimson banners. The scent of night-blooming roses. Laurent's raspy voice. Varick's golden gaze narrowing at me across the Rift. His tears soaking my hair.

Jordan's steady blue eyes.

Courage hovering in front of me.

I released Jordan's hand and reached for it. Stepped forward.

And plunged into the Rift.

Chapter Twenty-Five

LAURENT

The savior of the realm will be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift.

Given didn't tell us where she'd gone. But Varick and I knew.

It was an hour's ride from Lar Katerin to the Rift.

Varick and I made the journey in thirty minutes. We thundered toward the chasm, the knights from the Wastes behind us. Igrith and the Wesyfeddans rode with us too. I was happy to have them—and their swords and arrows. I had no idea what waited for us at the Rift.

But I prayed to the gods that Given did.

My heart pounded in my ears, rivaling the scream of the wind that ripped at my hair and cloak. Varick was an intense, impatient presence at my side. We were a pair of idiots who thought with our dicks. Given obviously knew this, and she'd outsmarted us. Blinded by lust, we hadn't noticed anything awry in the Rose Room.

We'd failed to see what was missing.

Roses. Given hadn't tapped her gift of Making because she hadn't been there at all. She'd made us wait for her, and she'd used the time to ride to the Rift. Then she'd prevented us from following by farseeing back to us.

She'd returned to say goodbye.

Fuck that. It was not going to be one. I wouldn't allow it.

The Rift loomed. Moonlight shone down on the Bleak Pass.

Varick and I reined in and dismounted. Knights from the patrol jogged toward us with questions in their eyes. Captain Radu moved to intercept them.

I had no patience for any of it. My heart raced, and a sense of helplessness gripped me as I walked to the mouth of the Pass. With blood rushing in my ears, I looked over the edge and saw nothing.

Emptiness. Blackness. Death.

My knees loosened, and the pounding in my ears grew louder.

Of course I saw nothing. What had I expected to see? A dozen wild thoughts spun

through my head, chief among them the horrible, wrenching knowledge that Given was not here. She was gone.

Varick's bellow of rage spun me around.

He stood in a bright shaft of moonlight, one hand locked around Jordan's throat. Fangs bared, he growled, "Where the fuck is she?"

"Varick!" Igrith cried, her cloak flying as she raced toward them. "Lord Varick, let him go!"

Jordan's eyes were as steady as ever as he gazed into Varick's enraged face. "She's not here, Lord Varick."

"Where?" Varick demanded. "The Thicket?"

"No."

"Then..." Varick glanced at the Rift, and his voice broke. "Damn you, what have you done?"

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Everyone stilled. Waited. Knights stood frozen, confusion and fear on their faces. Igrith watched with worried eyes.

And I continued breathing. Somehow, I drew air into my lungs and kept my heart beating as I accepted what I'd known from the moment Given said "don't come after me."

Varick and I were too late.

"How?" I asked, my vision blurring as I stared at Jordan. "How could you stand here and watch her throw herself to her death?"

Jordan kept his gaze on Varick as he answered. "She is the savior of the realm, King Laurent. The choice was hers, and she made it."

Tears trickled from Varick's eyes. He tightened his grip on Jordan's cloak, but I didn't think it was in anger. Now, it was as if Varick was afraid to let go.

"I could kill you," I told Jordan.

He looked at me. "You could."

Varick released him and stepped back. He lowered his sword, letting the tip rest in the dirt. "What happens now?" he rasped, sounding so forlorn I wanted to sink to the ground and sob.

"You're not scared, are you, Varick? You can tell me if you are."

“No, my prince. I’m not scared of anything.”

My chest tightened. I pressed my lips together.

“Don’t think about the pain, my prince. If you don’t think about it, you stop feeling it eventually.”

But I wouldn’t. Not this time.

I looked at the knights. At Igrith. I turned and gazed over the Rift. Slowly, anger replaced my sorrow. And then my anger turned to bitterness. I swung back to Jordan and lifted my arms. “It’s all the same,” I spat. “Given died, and it didn’t change a damn thing.” I pointed at him, all the bly’ad I’d earned springing to my tongue. “Fuck your prophecy! You look me in the eye and tell me the truth, or so help me I will kill you where you stand. Tell me!” I screamed, my voice echoing off the walls of the Rift at my back. “Tell me why Given had to die!”

The ground rumbled.

Then it shook.

Several knights were thrown to the ground. The others staggered as they tried to stay on their feet.

“Laurent!” Varick cried, pointing behind me.

I turned and caught my breath. Crack! One of the anchors holding the Bleak Pass in place on the Sithistran side of the Rift snapped. The bridge sagged. Crack! The other anchor went, and the bridge dropped. It swung down and slammed against the opposite side of the chasm.

Someone grabbed me and jerked me backward. Varick. The scent of forest and sword oil filled my nose as he dragged me away from the Rift.

The ground in front of us lifted and rolled like a wave in the ocean. Knights bellowed. Somewhere behind me, horses screamed.

The ground under my feet moved violently, tossing me into the air. Varick caught me as I fell, rolling so he landed first. We hit the ground hard, and I tasted blood.

“Fuck,” he muttered. Worried golden eyes stared into mine as I sprawled on top of him. “You all right?”

“Yeah.” I scrambled off him, fell on my ass, and faced the Rift. Across the chasm, the Sithistran fort broke apart and tumbled into the void.

“Fall back!” Captain Drago shouted nearby. “It’s opening up! Fall back!”

My heart thumped painfully as I watched the ground crumble and buckle.

He was right. The Rift was widening.

A knight sprinted past me. He stumbled and fell to his hands and knees.

The ground heaved.

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Loud cracking sounds filled the air, dozens of sharp pops firing over and over. But the sound was muffled, as if it came from a distance.

The shaking stopped.

Everything went still.

But the cracking sounds continued. Knights stood, their eyes wary as they gazed around. Dust filled the air. Everyone searched for the source of the sound.

“There!” a knight shouted.

I followed where he pointed. My stomach dropped to my knees. The Thicket loomed large in the distance, moonlight highlighting the trees. And they were falling. One by one, they crashed to the ground, giants toppling with mighty cracks that echoed all the way to the Rift.

Jordan stepped beside me, his eyes on the Thicket.

“They’re coming.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

GIVEN

I fell.

For hours. For minutes. I got used to falling. Grew weary of waiting for the ground to meet me.

Tumbling through the blackness, I thought of my mother. And then I saw her. Pale and beautiful, she lay on a bed with her weeping ladies around her. Her blue eyes flashed open, and she grasped Rolund's hand.

"Protect her. It's important."

I saw Queen Amantha.

"She's the wicked product of unholy lust."

I fell faster, scenes flashing at the edges of my vision.

I saw a tree with silver branches, a crescent moon tipped on its side above it.

I saw the tree set ablaze.

I saw the Rift. Saw Varick waiting for me.

"We'll start over, you and I."

Laurent flashed before me, a broken boy rocking on his knees. He prayed for forgiveness he knew he didn't deserve. He prayed to stop being afraid.

I saw things I shouldn't have been able to see. Other people's memories. Varick hiding from his father, his eyes squeezed shut as he pressed his back against a wall in a dark, quiet room. I saw Laurent's mother bite into Laurent's wrist and then turn her head and spit out his blood.

“You taste just like him. Pray to the gods that you don’t go mad.”

The visions came faster, flowing like a million rivers. Possibilities and certainties. Mistakes and Tragedies.

Avenor lay on his bed and closed his eyes.

Avenor rode to war.

Avenor terrorized his enemies, showing them possibilities more terrible than death.

“They invited the demons into their bodies,” Rhys said. “They lusted for power.”

There was power in blood.

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I saw Jordan in a library, a blush in his cheeks as he looked at Varick across a table.

The past flowed around me, the scenes of my life tumbling as quickly as I did. Jordan stood in another library and touched a ribbon that dangled from a book.

“Those who read closely enough know the sword of the Kings of Eldenvalla didn’t always stay in its scabbard.”

I saw Rhys smiling before the fire in the Great Hall at Aberwas.

For a moment, he tumbled beside me, the wind whipping his hair.

“We knew you were special.”

I fell. And I saw Rolund weeping over a tiny bundle. Elissa stood dressed in black at his side.

I saw night-blooming roses. The obsidian walls of the Sanctum. Laurent’s blood splashing into a golden bowl.

YOU ARE GIVEN, Lega said, her golden eyes glowing above the black glyphs shimmering on her cheeks.

“This isn’t the end!” Queen Vara cried. “Speak it into being, my king. Use your gift.”

Avenor shook his head. He looked at me across the dusty floor of the hall of statues in Vai Seren, his blue eyes the same shade as my own. “I give the last of it to you.”

I stopped, my gasp echoing in my ears.

Blackness.

It was everywhere and nowhere. I hung suspended above it, my body parallel to nothing. Not the ground. There was no ground in this place. There was nothing at all in the Shade.

As soon as I thought it, I felt him.

Midian.

He was part of the nothingness. Formless and ancient. Jealous and full of hate that had no bottom. There was power in it, just as there was power in blood.

Blood and life and death. Three in one and one in three.

He was everywhere and nowhere, and he was more dangerous because of it. I couldn't see him. There was nothing to see in the Shade.

But I could make him reveal himself.

I could make.

Light.

It flooded my vision. The light was everywhere, but I was still nowhere, with no sense of up or down.

Sky.

It stretched overhead, the same hazy blue I'd seen in my dreams my whole life.

No, I thought. Not dreams. I'd made it. And I could make more.

Tall, fragrant grasses. Plants and trees.

They appeared, the Middling forming in the void. The temperature was perfect. White blossoms drifted through the air and disappeared before they touched the ground. I looked at the sky.

Sun.

I made all these things with mere thought. I didn't have to surrender through sex. Didn't have to open my veins and abdicate my will as Laurent did when he petitioned the gods. I'd already surrendered, leaving my will at the edge of the Rift.

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But I wasn't dead. I'd been reborn.

I was going to save the realm.

Joy sparked, becoming laughter that trembled in my chest. I released it, and it bounced around the Shade, filling it with life. Smiling, I stepped forward. The grass spread under my foot, stretching farther and expanding the clearing. I took another step, and it happened again, green grass spreading and canceling the nothingness.

I kept walking. The grass kept growing. It flowed outward, spreading like a carpet that could go on forever. And I realized it could. I could make it, walking forever forward and erasing the void. I could make anything.

"Or everything," Midian said, walking at my side. He wore a hooded black robe, his face within it a mangled collection of veins and bone. His eyes were two round sockets with red flames that danced in the center.

It was the best he could do, I realized. I'd brought the Middling into his plane, pushing something into the nothing of the Shade. Midian couldn't take a proper form because he didn't truly understand life. He could only pretend.

"It's the curse the elves thrust upon us," he said. "They gave us the knowledge that there was something. Don't you see? Once you have something, you don't want to lose it."

The grass under my feet turned brown as his sorrow filled my mind. In this place, there were no barriers between us. His pain was genuine—another curse the elves had

forced upon him. Pain was part of life. But the demons weren't part of the Making. There was no place for them in a realm made of something.

"We can make a place," he insisted.

I shook my head, brown grass spreading under my feet. "You tried that. But you can only exist by taking from others. Life is a gift. It can't be stolen. Only given."

The grass under my feet turned black. Jealousy flowed through our connection. An image of Laurent and Varick appeared in my head. They tangled together on twisted sheets, their nude bodies locked in a passionate embrace.

"They'll go on without you," Midian said. "They are enough for each other. They don't need you."

"I know." The grass turned green. It spread thick and lush under my feet. Tiny white flowers drifted around us. "They loved each other before they met me. They will love each other after I'm gone."

"How noble of you," he spat. "Do you think anyone will remember your sacrifice? They won't. The living are selfish. They think only of themselves."

"Yes," I said.

My acquiescence enraged him. It flowed through our connection like acid, burning away the image of Laurent and Varick on the bed.

"Everyone will forget you," he insisted. "The best you can hope for is a statue." He thrust his arms out and turned his palms up in a mocking version of Queen Vara.

I kept walking, filling the Shade with life. Watching the flowers tumble and

disappear.

“Where’s your sword?” he demanded, circling me. He walked around and around, his robe brushing my skirts. “You think to defeat me. Why not bring it?”

I shrugged.

He stopped in front of me, and I held still as he thrust his mangled face into mine. The flames in his eye sockets burned brighter as he dug into my mind, rifling through it and seeing everything. He overturned every memory. Dumped out each thought and deed. Paved through every embarrassing moment as he searched for my plan.

“I don’t have one,” I told him.

“You do,” he snarled. “You didn’t enter the Rift expecting to die. I’ve seen everything in your head. You hoped to be reborn. In your heart of hearts, you believed it might happen. You have everything now. The priest and the warrior. You’re a queen. You have the Making—”

“And that’s what you want,” I said.

He pulled back. Around us, the Middling dimmed.

I nodded. “The promise of the Making is the only thing that could have persuaded you to abandon Avenor’s body.” The Middling flickered. I ignored it and kept going. “The Making is all you ever wanted. But Avenor gave it away before you could steal it.”

“He tricked me,” Midian growled, and the Middling flickered again.

“He kept it from you,” I corrected. “And when you realized what he’d done, you

waited for another chance to steal it. You waited five hundred years for Avenor's heir."

"You," he said, his voice dripping with scorn. "What a disappointment."

"It could have just as easily been my child. Any son or daughter I had with Varick would have likely inherited the gift of Making. And when Laurent sacrificed it to the Rift, you would have seized its body. I believe that was the outcome you preferred, although you would have been just as happy to force Varick and me to create children in Vai Seren. And you would have stolen them too. Anything to possess the Making. Anything to escape the pain of knowing there is something and you're nothing."

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The sun overhead dimmed. The grass browned, then shriveled, dying and becoming part of the void.

Midian stepped back and looked down. He turned his head this way and that, watching as the grass receded. Panic flowed through the connection between us, and for a moment I felt something toward him I never expected to feel.

Pity.

He jerked his head up. "Savor it," he said. "It's the last emotion you'll ever feel."

I held my arms away from my sides. "Go ahead. Try to force me out so you can steal my body."

"I will," he promised. "Avenor couldn't stop me from taking him over. You think you have a chance?"

"He kept a demon within him for too long. He was weakened." I braced myself for Midian to enter me, but he didn't. He stayed back, and I got the impression the flames in his eye sockets peered at me. He was afraid.

The sky dimmed, the blue sliding into gray. "I'm not afraid. You're Avenor's descendant. You'll try to trick me like he did."

"No tricks," I said. "You've seen my mind." I stared into the flames that danced in his face. "I'm your only chance. You have nowhere else to go."

The flames flared higher. He dropped his crude form, becoming a seething black shadow of malice and rage. It poised in the air, seething and twisting around itself. Then it shot forward and slammed into my chest.

He filled me. Flooded my mind and immediately took over, shoving me out of the way. In my head, he spun around. In the Middling, my body spun, too, whirling as he took in the fading remnants of the things I'd made. Without me, the Shade couldn't sustain them.

"I don't need you," he growled. He closed my eyes and slammed into me, shoving me hard and almost knocking me from my body. If he succeeded, I'd never get back in again.

He reached for the Making. As he felt its power, satisfaction swelled in my chest. He could make anything. He could make a whole new world.

"You can't," I told him, speaking in our shared mind because I couldn't control my voice. He'd stolen it.

He growled and slammed into me again.

I hung on, clinging by fingertips I no longer possessed in a mind I no longer controlled. Sharing my body with him was like wading neck-deep through water fully clothed. Everything was a fight. Every movement an effort.

In my head, he wheeled around and slammed into me again. The Middling slid across my vision, nothingness descending before sliding back. I couldn't take much more. He was simply too strong. But I had to keep trying. This was a fight I couldn't afford to lose.

"You've already lost," he said. "The Making is mine. Avenor was a fool to give it up,

and Fate an even bigger fool to give it to you.”

“Maybe,” I conceded, “but Fate gave me other gifts. Like fire in my hand.” I felt Avenor’s sword fill my palm.

Midian tried to open my hand but couldn’t.

“Those who read closely enough,” I told him, “know the sword of the Kings of Eldenvalla didn’t always stay in its scabbard. It appears for those who need it...and I guess it stays there until the need passes.”

Panic flared. In my head, I got a split second warning before Midian jerked away—

“RICTI.”

—and froze inside my head. My control flooded back. I lifted the sword.

“What game is this?” he demanded, his panic rising. “What are you doing?”

I turned the sword around and placed the tip against my stomach. A tear streaked down my cheek as I said, “You forgot something important, Midian. I’m part demon. That makes me a liar.”

I thrust the sword into my gut.

Fiery pain.

Nothing like Lega’s bly’ad. She’d given me another gift and I hadn’t even realized it. Death wasn’t a stranger. I’d already died under her lips. I had nothing to fear.

I sank to my knees. Warmth spread down my front, flowing from my stomach to my

thighs. My lungs rattled. I leaned forward and braced a palm in the dying grass.

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Midian screamed in my head. “You said you had no plan! You lied!”

My arm gave out, and I collapsed on my side. “Yes,” I said weakly. I opened my mind to him fully, allowing him to see the lie I’d woven into the Middling from the moment I started making it. I’d concealed my plan, ensuring he wouldn’t find it until it was too late.

His panic exploded. Trapped in a dying body. There was nowhere to go.

“You’ll die, too,” he said. “You’ll be nothing.”

My heart slowed, the beats growing irregular. I stared as the last white flower drifted to the nothingness and disappeared. “Maybe.”

But I’d left something behind.

Love.

So simple. But it was everything.

It was worth dying for.

Midian screamed. Locked in my head, he wailed his anguish.

The grass receded quickly. The sunlight faded and disappeared, plunging me into darkness. Into the void. Midian faded too. Unable to return to the Shade, he receded into my dying brain, his last thought little more than a whisper.

“Now I am nothing too.”

My heart stopped.

I finished it, Avenor.

I was strong enough.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

VARICK

As the Thicket fell, the knights tried to run. Then the ground began to buckle and roll again.

I stayed on my feet through sheer stubbornness, and I shouted at Jordan over the roar of the giant trees coming down. “How do we stop them?” I bellowed. We couldn’t fight the demons with swords. But he was the Archmage. He claimed he’d seen every possibility. I’d felt the power he wielded. If we had any hope of surviving, it had to come from him.

Jordan ignored me. As knights scrambled to their feet and staggered toward the horses, he turned and ran toward the Rift.

“Jordan!”

He ran faster, his brown cloak flying out behind him. He ran away.

Shock gripped me.

He ran away.

The ground heaved. As I struggled to keep my balance, anger and confusion replaced my shock. What was he doing, running toward the Rift?

My stomach twisted. Jordan had seen everything. He knew what the demons would do once the trees stopped falling. He knew—and he'd decided a plunge into the Rift was preferable to waiting for the Thicket to collapse.

The ground in front of me exploded. Rocks pelted my face, knocking me backward. My heel caught something hard, and I went down. Pain exploded in my head.

Everything went blurry. Black huddled at the edges of my vision, threatening to swallow me up. I couldn't let it. With waves of nausea sloshing in my gut, I forced my eyes open and blinked at the night sky.

Laurent appeared above me, his pale face streaked with dirt and blood. "Come on," he gasped, gripping my forearm and hauling me up. The ground continued to shudder, throwing me into him so we ended up clinging to each other as we tried to stay upright.

"Are you hurt?" I yelled, trying to get a good look at him.

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“Don’t worry about me! We have to get away from the Rift!” The ground rolled under our feet, sending us both careening sideways. For a moment, I lost track of him as dust descended. Something slammed into me, and hands caught at my shoulders.

“General!” Captain Drago’s terror-stricken face filled my vision. “What does it mean?”

The end of everything. If Midian and the demons were coming, it was over. And as I’d always suspected, the prophecy was a cruel joke. Fate had played all of us for fools, and we’d played along, letting it move us about like the markers on Laurent’s table map. We hadn’t stopped Midian. Given had sacrificed herself for nothing. And now the demons would reign.

What does it mean?

Nothing. Nothing at all. There was no point. That was the punchline. Fate’s last laugh. You fought and you suffered. You endured and dared to hope. Against all odds, you found love that made all the suffering worthwhile.

And in the end, you lost it all anyway.

The ground heaved. A low thrum filled the air like something big picking up speed. The temperature dropped. My eardrums ached, pressure and sound swelling.

Drago waited for me to tell him what to do.

“Get to the palace!” I yelled, shoving him toward the horses. “Get to the city and

prepare for a siege!” He stumbled off, and I swung around, searching for Laurent among the dust and shifting earth.

A flash of black. I followed it, leaping over a widening crack in the ground. Dust parted, and relief pounded through me as I saw him getting to his feet. He was moving before I reached him, his mouth open on a shout I couldn’t hear. The ground heaved again, sending me stumbling forward so quickly I slammed into him.

I seized his shoulders and bellowed above the noise. “We have to get out of here!”

“Jordan!” he yelled, turning and pointing.

I looked and saw Jordan staggering toward the Rift. Ahead of him, the sides of the chasm rose up and down. Boulders tumbled. Sheets of rock separated from the walls and slid into the void.

The thrumming noise grew louder. The air shifted, the energy of a thousand storms building. Pain sliced through my skull as the pressure in the air grew unbearable, making my head feel like a grape ready to burst.

Jordan continued toward the Rift.

The ground cracked open, fissures zigzagging over the dirt.

Jordan staggered and fell, then crawled forward on his hands and knees.

Energy. Pressure. So much pressure. A high-pitched whine split the air.

BOOM.

There was a rippling, sizzling sound, and then a beam of green light shot from the

Thicket into the air. It spread, rolling and rolling and growing into a cloud.

Evil. The Thicket had fallen. The demons were free.

The green cloud filled the sky. Then it streaked toward us.

Laurent gripped my arm.

Behind me, knights screamed in terror.

This is how it ends. I wrapped my arm around Laurent.

At the Rift, Jordan stood. He braced his legs wide and lifted his hands. Twin balls of light formed on his palms. He held them aloft. The light grew, forming two blazing, boiling suns.

The demons aimed straight for him.

He raised his arms higher, his brown cloak flapping wildly around his legs. He gritted his teeth, his boyish persona replaced with something so powerful and ancient it stole my breath.

The air crackled.

The demons sped toward Jordan. I waited for him to fling the light and throw the demons back. But he just stood there.

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Waiting.

No.

NO.

I opened my mouth—

The demons slammed into him. A shockwave burst from the collision, rippling out in all directions and knocking everyone to the ground.

Jordan held. Jaw clenched, he kept his hands aloft as the demons swirled around him in a giant green sphere. Lightning flashed within it, forking out and licking over Jordan's skin.

Still, he held.

The green turned black, the energy growing so dense it almost obscured him. Within the sphere, his palms blazed and his mouth stretched on an agonized yell. The tendons in his neck pulled so taut I worried they would snap.

But he held.

Voices filled the air, and I recognized them as demons. They spoke in Midian's tongue, thousands upon thousands of voices that lifted in high-pitched shrieks before dipping to feral growls that shook the ground.

Jordan held.

The light in his palms flared brighter. His voice grew hoarse as he threw his head back and roared. Slowly, he lifted his hands higher.

The sphere of demons lifted too.

He kept going, raising the black, seething sphere higher and higher until he balanced it above his head.

Then he threw it into the Rift.

Light.

Everywhere. The night turned to day. It blinded me, forcing me to my knees and bowing my head. The light blazed, but it didn't burn. It filled the air, and it filled me up. Filled me with joy that took me by surprise and made a laugh catch in my throat.

As quickly as it came, it was gone.

Everything was still.

I lifted my head. Jordan lay on his back at the edge of the Rift.

With a cry, I scrambled to my feet and ran to him, crashing to my knees at his side. He was covered in blood. It seeped from his clothes and puddled around him. He rolled his head toward me and smiled weakly.

“Varick.”

My throat burned. “Why?” I rasped. “Why didn't you throw the light at them?”

“I couldn’t banish them,” he said, his voice so faint I had to bend to hear him. “The Thicket fell. There was no place left to banish them to.”

“You threw them into the Rift,” I argued gruffly. “I saw you.”

His smile spread to his eyes. “You are such a grump.”

A tear splashed from my chin to his face. It ran down his cheek as if it were his own. “You sent them into the Rift,” I rasped.

“Into the Shade,” he corrected softly. “Given opened it when she bound Midian.”

My breath hitched. “Is she...” My throat closed, and I couldn’t finish the question.

“I don’t know. But your voice is loud.”

I frowned. “What—?”

“I have to go, Varick.” He coughed. His eyelids drooped.

“No,” I said, fumbling for his hand. When I squeezed it, he opened his eyes and smiled again, the dimple in his cheek appearing. More tears splashed on his face as I asked, “Why did you hold them? Why not just send them to the Shade? ” Anger flared. “You let them do this to you.”

Steady, blue eyes held mine. “I see possibilities and certainties. My path has always been certain. Given banished Midian to the Shade. I banished the rest.”

Thousands. He’d banished thousands of demons. This whole time, he’d known he was destined to die.

The pain of knowing.

“I have to go,” he said, his voice suddenly sharper. “I have to see what comes after.”

“Don’t,” I croaked. I gripped his hand and held it to my chest. “I’m so sorry.”

“Will you...?” His eyelids drooped again.

“What?” I asked, tears flowing faster. I shook his shoulder until he roused. “Will I what?”

For a minute, I didn’t think he’d answer. But then his brows drew together, and he

whispered, “Will you kiss me before I go?”

A sob warbled in my throat. “Yes,” I whispered, and as I lowered my head, I saw him as he’d been in the library that day in the Midnight Palace, when he’d blushed and stammered and then swore a blood oath to serve me.

He’d never lied to me.

I kissed him gently, tasting my tears and his blood that sang with power and the terrible knowledge of everything that was possible. I kissed him.

I kissed him goodbye.

He sighed.

Something clamped hard on my tongue.

Startled, I pulled back.

Jordan was dead.

Laurent knelt on his other side, his dark head bent and his hands folded in his lap. Slowly, I became aware of several things. The ground was still. The knights stood around us, Igrith weeping quietly in their midst. The Thicket was gone.

So was Given.

Laurent reached out and traced a glyph on Jordan’s forehead. Gently, he closed Jordan’s eyes.

I stood and faced the Rift.

What does it mean?

My chest tightened. I stared into the chasm and wanted to scream.

What does it mean?

“I don’t know. But your voice is loud.”

I lifted my head, tingling awareness spreading through me. Heart thumping, I stepped back from the Rift. I closed my eyes and grabbed hold of my gift.

My Voice.

And I screamed.

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“GIVEN!” I bellowed her name, beckoning her through time and space. Calling her back to me the way I had the night I found her freezing on her balcony.

“GIVEN!”

I reached for her. Commanded her. “GIVEN, COME BACK TO ME. I LOVE YOU. COME BACK TO ME.”

When I opened my eyes, I saw her.

Gasps behind me.

Laurent at my side.

Given floated up from the Rift, her black gown fluttering in an invisible current. Blood covered her from hip to ankle. She was pale and still, her eyes closed like she was sleeping.

Laurent and I held out our arms at the same time.

“Given,” he rasped.

“Given.”

She came to us, flowing with the invisible current. We lay her on the ground and knelt beside her. Her heart was silent. She’d been gone a long time.

“I don’t know what to do,” Laurent whispered, tears running down his face.

I did. Jordan had put the knowledge on my tongue.

Sliding a hand under her head, I leaned down and kissed her.

The knowledge—and the magic it contained—leapt from my tongue to hers.

She sucked in a deep breath. When I pulled back, her eyes were open.

Around us, knights fell to their knees. Heads bowed.

Given reached up and touched my face. She turned her head to Laurent. He captured her other hand and pressed it against his lips.

“The savior of the realm,” I murmured. “Bound in blood and reborn from the Rift.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

GIVEN

“Are there other worlds besides ours, Helen?”

“Probably, child. But maybe we only see them in our dreams.”

I thought of Helen as I joined hands with Varick and Laurent and stepped across the border between Wesyfedd and Eldenvalla.

Warrior. Priest. Queen.

Three in one and one in three.

We walked across the wasteland, green grass spreading under our feet. I spoke it into being, remaking everything that had been ruined.

We walked, and I thought of Rhys. I filled Eldenvalla with forests and a network of caves. Fields of wildflowers and babbling streams.

We walked, and I thought of the mages who died protecting Varick and me. I whispered their names into the ground and watched them flow away on new rivers that washed the evil from the land.

We walked, and I thought of Jordan. I turned my face up to the sky and wept, and my tears soaked the land.

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Varick's hand filled mine.

Laurent's squeezed the other.

I turned the tears into tiny white blossoms. Jordan's Flower. Fields of it spread across Eldenvalla.

We didn't walk forever. The kingdom couldn't be remade in a day.

And anyway, I wasn't sure it belonged to me. I had another to rule. Another to remake.

I closed the Rift, healing the gouge in the land and sealing the wound between North and South. The Thicket rose within me, growing from the spell Jordan had given Varick to place on my tongue.

But it wasn't a barrier. It was a promise. I wove it into the land, vowing that none of Avenor's descendants would ever summon demons from the Shade again.

And then I took my husbands' hands and returned to Nor Doru.

Laurent trembled and choked back tears when I pulled the Deepnight over Lar Katerin. My king knelt at my feet, his dark head bowed and his forehead pressed to the back of my hand.

I pulled him up and kissed him. "You don't kneel to me, Laurent," I murmured against his lips.

Silver eyes smiled into mine. “Oh, princess, you’ve forgotten how good I am on my knees.” He sank back down. “Maybe I should remind you.”

A soft chuckle tickled my ear from behind, and a warm palm covered my throat. “Watch him, halfling,” Varick whispered in my ear. “If you come like a good girl, I’ll let you watch me fuck him.”

And that was the end. The moment I knew my journey over the Rift was finished at last.

“Is the story over, Helen?”

I’d never wanted it to end. I’d always been so afraid of my dreams.

“All stories end, my princess. But do you want to know a secret?”

I nodded.

Helen smiled.

“We can write a new one.”

Epilogue

GIVEN

There was nothing more breathtaking than Varick of Lar Keiren with his children.

I watched him from my seat at the high table, love and desire twining through me. He balanced a baby in each arm—Violeta on his left and Viktor on his right—as he chatted with Captain Radu.

Laurent leaned over and propped his elbow on the arm of my chair. He toyed with a grape between two beringed fingers and kept his eyes on Varick as he said, “You know, princess, it’s really not fair of you to give Varick two children. If you keep this up, you’re going to make me think you’re playing favorites.”

I smiled. “It’s not favoritism, my lord. I was just trying to fill up his hands.”

Laurent looked at me and popped the grape in his mouth. He raised his eyebrows, his silver eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Don’t,” I said, giving him a stern look. “You’re the king. You’re supposed to set a good example, especially at dinner.”

He swallowed. “It’s not dinner, it’s a feast.” His gaze dropped to my breasts, and he groaned deep in his throat. “And I’m starving, sweetheart.” He leaned closer and slid his finger under my bodice, teasing my nipple. “When we go upstairs, I’m going to suck on your pretty tits while Varick eats your cunt. Then we’re going to switch.”

I swallowed, my nipple hardening under his skilled, wicked fingers.

“And then,” he murmured, his voice like smoke, “we’re going to switch again. But we won’t let you come, darling.” He tugged my bodice dangerously low. The edge of the fabric scraped my nipple, which threatened to pop into the open. “Varick and I are going to strip you naked and spread you open and keep you on edge until you plead for mercy. It could take hours.”

“Hours?” I whimpered.

“Mmm. How wet are you right now?” He tugged my bodice lower.

“Laurent,” I breathed. “You shouldn’t...”

“I know. But I’m not very well-behaved, my lady. You knew that when you married me.”

Commotion exploded near the double doors—and then an explosion in the form of a six-year-old skidded into the hall.

Laurent yanked my bodice up and straightened. Instantly, his expression went from wicked to proud—with a hint of exasperation.

The six-year-old explosion bounced between the tables and landed before us. Bright silver eyes gave us a hopeful look. “Can I have a tart before bed?”

“May I,” Laurent corrected, “and not when you neglect to greet your lady mother when you approach her table.”

My son’s gaze fixed on me. He flashed a grin he’d inherited from his father and dipped a courtly bow. “Sorry, Mother.” He rose, grin in place. “May I have a tart?”

“No,” Laurent said firmly. “I have it on good authority you’ve had twelve today.”

Sorin’s eyebrows lifted. “Who slanders me this way?”

“Me,” his father said. “I overheard you boasting about it when you were supposed to be doing your lessons.”

Sorin’s face fell. “Are you sure I said twelve?”

Laurent snorted and pointed to the doors. “Go to bed.”

My son looked at me. “You look beautiful tonight, Mama.”

I shook my head, a smile pulling at my lips. “It won’t work.”

He grinned, offered another bow, then made his way back through the tables. Halfway to the door, he stopped at Varick’s side.

Without pausing his conversation, Varick shifted one of the babies to his other arm, reached behind him, and plucked a tart from a serving platter. He handed it to Sorin and tousled the prince’s hair.

“That devious little shit,” Laurent murmured.

I put a hand over my mouth to muffle my laughter. “He’s exactly like you.”

“He’s rotten.”

“That’s what I just said.”

Laurent shook his head, but he smiled as he watched his heir skip from the Hall. Surprisingly, he was the disciplinarian when it came to parenting. Firm but loving, he was no-nonsense about things like baths and bedtime.

Varick was an absolute pushover. If Sorin slept late, it was almost certainly because

Varick let him stay up and stuff himself with sweets.

Violeta chose that moment to let out a disgruntled wail. Without missing a beat, Varick handed Viktor to Captain Radu and cuddled Violeta in both arms. He brought her close to his face and cooed at her, the tips of his fangs showing as he said nonsense words. A second later, the baby let out a happy gurgle.

“I’ll take this one, thank you very much,” Igrith said, striding up to Radu and extending her arms. Lidia was behind her, and she peeked over Igrith’s shoulder and made a funny face at the baby.

Radu surrendered Viktor like he couldn’t believe his good fortune, then shot from the Hall at an impressive rate of speed.

Laurent chuckled. “Radu would rather fight an entire regiment with his hands tied behind his back than change a diaper.”

Baby in hand, Igrith strolled to us with Lidia at her side. They’d wed on the first day of spring in Aberwas five years prior, Laurent and a mage co-officiating. And Laurent had been right: Lidia drove Igrith crazy.

But in the best way possible.

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“Chieftain,” Laurent said, inclining his head to Igrith. “Looks like you have your hands full.”

She gave him a sardonic look. “You’re the one with three children.” She looked at me. “Or are there more coming?”

Laurent stiffened. “Igrith,” he said carefully, “I have two six-month-olds. Are you saying this as a Seer, or are you making a jest? Before you answer, recall that I do possess a dungeon.”

Lidia burst out laughing. Igrith bounced Viktor on her shoulder and winked at me.

As the feast wound down, Varick returned to the table.

“Did I miss anything?” he asked as he sat next to me with a sleeping Violeta in his arms.

Laurent smiled lazily at him. “Yes, we have plans to eat Given’s pussy later.”

Varick’s eyes lit up. “Is that right, halfling?” Violeta began to fuss. “Aww, little love,” he murmured, stroking the pale blond curls that peeked from her cap. He handed her to me. “I think she wants mama.”

I took my daughter, my heart swelling with so much love I wasn’t sure I could hold it all. I pushed her cap back, exposing the curved tip of her ear. “Hello, there, little elven queen,” I murmured.

Cheers went up on the other side of the Hall, and I looked up to see a red-faced Sergiu of Lar Bassa being toasted by a rowdy group of knights.

“What’s that about?” I asked Varick under my breath.

He grinned. “Sergiu’s husband just returned from a trip to Vollefort. He was gone for six months, so Radu’s knights got them a few evenings at an inn in the city.”

I cuddled the baby to my breast. “Like a second honeymoon? That was sweet of them.”

The knights hoisted Sergiu onto their shoulders and launched into a song with lyrics that made my ears burn.

Laurent laughed. “I don’t think sweet is what they had in mind.”

The evening grew late, and the three of us made our way to our bedchamber. I’d long since knocked down the wall Laurent’s mother had built, and now my old bedchamber served as a nursery for the children.

“I’ll take her, Your Grace,” Mira said, bustling from the room. She gazed lovingly at Violeta as I handed her over. She and Henrik had married shortly after I sealed the Rift. They’d chosen to stay in Nor Doru, and Mira had sobbed when I told her I’d given Violeta the middle name “Mira” in her honor.

Nor Doru no longer had thralls. According to King Edwin, Sithistra had a waiting list for people—lowborn and highborn alike—anxious to spend time in Lar Katerin.

“They want to speak to you, Your Grace,” he’d said. “To thank you for saving the realm.”

I accepted those kinds of compliments with as much grace as I could muster. But I

never failed to feel like a fraud. Because I hadn't saved anything on my own. I'd banished Midian. And I'd lived.

Jordan had not.

But as Varick often reminded me, Jordan had carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. He'd seen all the thousands of rivers flowing. Had lived his whole life knowing he walked toward death.

I was forever grateful he'd walked with me to mine.

Every summer, Eldenvalla was carpeted in the flowers that bore his name. And when I handed Varick his son for the first time, my warrior husband had looked up with tears in his eyes and said, "I'd like his middle name to be Jordan."

I'd nodded, my own eyes burning. "I'd like that too."

"What are you thinking about?" Laurent asked, coming up behind me on my balcony. Varick moved to my other side and placed his hand over mine on the railing.

"How lucky we are," I said. "I don't know if life can get any better."

Laurent smiled against my neck, his fangs gently scraping my skin. "Are you thinking of becoming boring, princess?"

"Not just yet."

"Good, because I have plans for you."

Varick was quiet for a long time, his gaze thoughtful as he looked out over the city. Then he turned to me, his golden eyes soft and earnest. "I never asked you... When you died for that moment in the Shade, what did you see?"

I turned in Laurent's arms and looked toward the nursery where our children slept. When I turned back, I let my head rest against Laurent's shoulder and reached a hand up and cupped Varick's cheek.

"Everything."

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